Sociology Thesis Guide

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Developing a Research Question

Developing Qualitative Research Questions Workshop
Professor Vanessa Lopes Muñoz
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Part 1: Qualitative Research Questions aim to explain:

1. How does (did) something happen (social processes) – for example, you may take a quantitative study (nurse midwives have high rates of burn-out) and decide to try to explain the underlying social processes qualitatively
2. What was the meaning to participants (meaning making)
3. What happened over time (changing social processes)

Part 2: Questions to consider when developing a research question

1. Can my question be studied qualitatively? (see part 1)
2. Is there available data that can be readily converted into rich descriptive text (field notes, interview transcripts, documents) or images?
3. Do I have easy access to the group of people, setting, or documents that will provide me with this textual data?

Part 3: Ways to think about your "case" study

1. Ask: What is this a case of? (i.e.; nurse midwives may be a case of carework, health occupations, fields with high burnout rates, gendered occupations, birth, alternative medicine, work-family balance). You may generate questions based on these different sociological areas of inquiry
2. Ask: Are th ere any unique elements of this particular case that I can use to contribute to the existing literature?
3. Ask: Would a comparison be helpful here? (Be careful because comparisons can sometimes introduce too many variables, and not allow you to obtain depth; helpful for content analysis, may be overkill for data creation, such as interviews or observations)

Be Nimble – begin literature searching early and read broadly. Having already taken courses that cover the conceptual topics related to your interests is very helpful. After you collect data, be prepared to return to the literature and possibly shift the framing of your paper depending on what you find in your data.

Quantitative Research Question Formulation

Professor Wade Roberts

The enterprise of sociology revolves heavily around the idea that social life is *patterned*. Outcomes of concern (e.g., trust, income, life expectancy, identity, creativity, religiosity, economic development, poverty, etc.) all *vary* – over time (or not), across place, and across populations (or some combination of these three dimensions – e.g., the social reproduction of racial wealth inequality over time). Think for a moment – sociology often concerns itself with questions of social change or social reproduction (temporal (in)variation); spatial inequality and/or regional (policy-based) variation; and/or social differences/inequities across socially meaningful/consequential groupings or categories. We develop and draw on theories to highlight patterned outcomes and identify associated causal conditions, factors, and processes that account for those outcomes. Causal factors (e.g., race, class, gender) must *co-vary* with the outcome in some systematic way if they are to find support as causal factors. Thus, variation and co-variation are at the core of quantitative sociological investigations, where we test hypotheses by assessing co-variation among independent and dependent *vari*ables.

The Process

1. I often start by contemplating possible outcomes (dependent variable(s)). This requires being familiar with the topic/literature (think back on the courses you've taken). I also keep in mind the possible levels of analysis at which I might approach the topic (see next section).
2. I then draw on the literature to identify causal factors that might help account for variation in the dependent variable(s).
3. During this process, I also search for existing data on which I might test my hypotheses. I do this by keeping an eye on the literature I'm reading (what data do they use? Is it accessible?), searching ICPSR, searching the internet for data sources, or determining whether I could survey a population to which I have access.
4. I arrive at a feasible project based on a somewhat iterative process – letting the literature inform/hone my question(s), but also balancing that against the reality of feasibility. Put simply, many great projects never get done because the data just don't exist or would be too arduous/expensive to collect. Going back and forth between the literature and knowing the existing data helps you arrive at an interesting, yet feasible research project.

Level of Analysis

Keep in mind that you can approach quantitative theses at a number of levels and your research question(s) would reflect this. Which level you choose depends in large part on your question(s), but also the availability of data (see feasibility/adaptation below). Common levels of analysis include:

- Cross-national
- State-level
- County-level
- Tract-level (common to GIS-based projects)

- Individual-level (common to survey-based projects, either collected on your own or using an ICPSR data set).

You'll often find that for any topic of interest, one can tackle one's interest at more than one of these levels. It typically just requires a tweak of the question.

<u>Kinds of Quantitative Questions/Design</u>

Quantitative research questions tend to focus on causal relationships among variables across a large number of cases. While we can use quantitative methods to test hypotheses about mediating variables (mechanisms), the approach is not well suited to unpacking *process* (e.g., the unfolding of interactions) or complex meaning-making. Those concerns are better left to qualitative approaches. Some examples of quantitative research question(s) (as always, analyses should be informed by theory):

- **Standard:** Do X1, X2…X4 help account for variation in Y?
- **Standard + effect size/explanatory power:** Which factors matter? Matter the most (account for more of the variance in Y)?
- **Standard + emphasis on unique effects:** Does X1 have an effect on Y, even after controlling for X2? (e.g., is there an independent race effect, even after controlling for SES?)
- **Mediation and structural equation modeling:** Does X1 account for variation in Y? Does X2? Does X2 *mediate* the relationship between X1 and Y (i.e., is it a mediating variable)?
- **Interaction effect:** Does the impact of X1 on Y differ depending on the value of X2? In other words, is X1's effect contingent on X2?

<u>Feasibility and Adaptation of Qs/Interests</u>

Feasibility: This has to be an over-riding concern when considering thesis topics and questions. Quite simply, do you have access to the data you would need to address your question(s)? That might mean having access to a population you can survey, data from existing sources (e.g., Census data; state-level data), or existing secondary data sets (e.g., ICPSR data sets).

Adaption: Ultimately, you may need to adapt your interests/questions in light of feasibility and/or availability of data.

In practice: What does this mean in practice? As you read the literature, keep an eye on the data used in studies. Is this data publicly available? Could you replicate that data through a survey of CC students/faculty/staff? It also means you will need to spend time perusing data sets to see what is out there. What data sets seem promising, topically-speaking? What variables do they offer? Do they capture your concepts of interest (either through existing variables or possible composite variables)? Will the data be adequate to address your questions? Keep in mind that it is rare to find the perfect data set. Compromise/adaptation is almost always necessary.

Recent Examples of Quantitative Theses

- Alina Drufovka – digital/usage divide; Current Population Survey Supplement
- Chandler Hartnett – mortgage lending discrimination (race); redlining (neighborhood composition); Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data
- McKenna Asakawa – Sense of belonging at CC; in various domains; race/class; CC survey
- Nicole Hansen – Sexual assault rates across campuses; % frat, FBS school, inst. support score; Sexual assault survey data; other data sources
- Ann Fenley – organizational dimension of urban inequality – payday lenders; ACS data
- Hannah Wear – Social Disparities in Blood Lead Levels: Biologically Embedded and Spatially Patterned; NHANES
- Jordan Savold – The effects of social context and demographics on Behavior and Performance at a Charter Middle School (honors program); charter scho

How to Have a Good Idea: Some Ideas from the Research on Ideas

Professor Kathy Giuffre

Work from your area of expertise

Keith Sawyer. 2012. *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*, 2nd edition, p.88:

> "Acquire knowledge relevant to the problem. Creativity is always based on mastery, practice, and expertise."

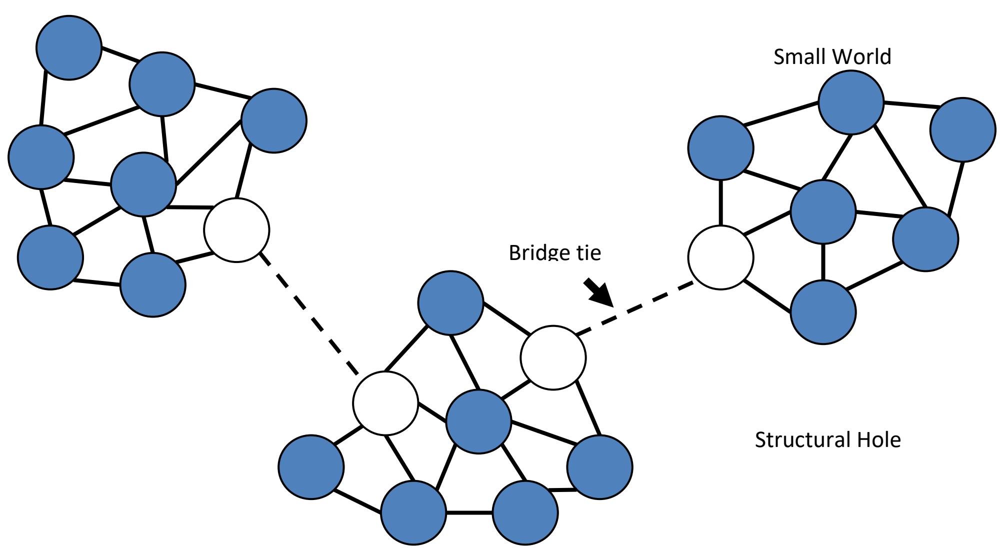
Think about classes that you have had, ideas in those classes that excited you, readings that intrigued you, volunteer work you have done, areas of interest in which you have a long-standing involvement and commitment – and go more deeply into those areas.

For example: If there was a reading from a class that you really liked, look at its bibliography and start reading those sources

Great theses based on long-standing areas of interest and commitment:
Helen Feldman, "A Movement Divided: Implications of Opposing Discourses in the Anti-Human Trafficking Movement"
Madeline Frost, "Speaking of Women: Gendered language and Discursive Struggle in Domestic Violence Work"

Think about making connections between different intellectual areas

Ronald Burt, "Structural Holes and Good Ideas", *American Journal of Sociology* 2004 (110), 349-99.



Small worlds are worlds of people, but more importantly, they are worlds of ideas. Make connections between different classes, areas of interest, etc.

Great thesis that drew from making connections between two different intellectual areas:
Rebecca Celli, "Both Feminine and Authoritative: Gender Biases in Professional Film Criticism"

Brainstorm lots of ideas

Dean Keith Simonton. 1988. *Scientific Genius: A Psychology of Science*

The Constant Probability of Success Model:

> "Geniuses are wrong in a similar proportion to everyone else; they generate more wrong ideas than average folks simply because they generate more ideas overall."

Keep and "I wonder" file on your computer: "I wonder why…", "I wonder how…" etc. Don't worry about whether all the ideas are good – they won't be. Most of them will not be very good at all. But the more ideas you have, the more likely you are to have a great one.

So:

1. Think more deeply about what you know.
2. Think about connections between lots of things you know.
3. Think lots.

Finding Past Sociology Theses

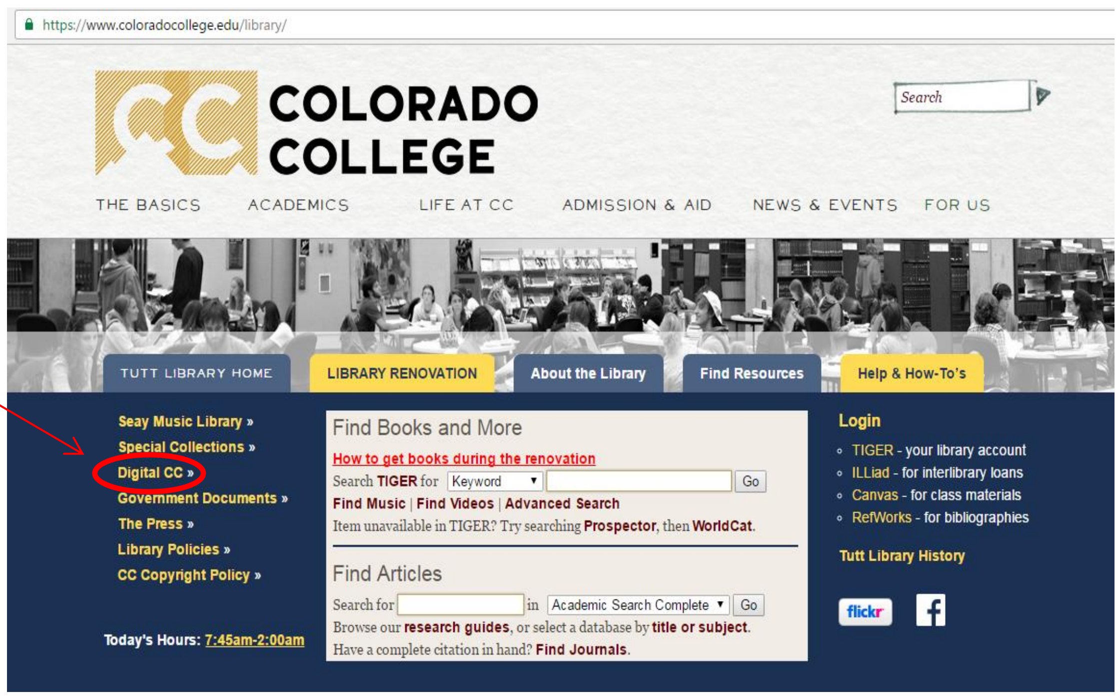
Looking at sociology theses from previous years can be very helpful for developing a research question, honing your methods and data, structuring your lit review, and more. There are two main ways to look at past theses. Hard copy theses are in the Sociology Seminar Room next to Lisa's office. Ask Lisa for access to this room and talk to her to check out a thesis.

You can also look at past theses on Digital CC. See below for information about accessing previous theses on Digital CC. Not all theses are available in the seminar room or on Digital CC – students have to submit their thesis to the library and to the department in order for it to be available, so be sure to submit your thesis when you're done!

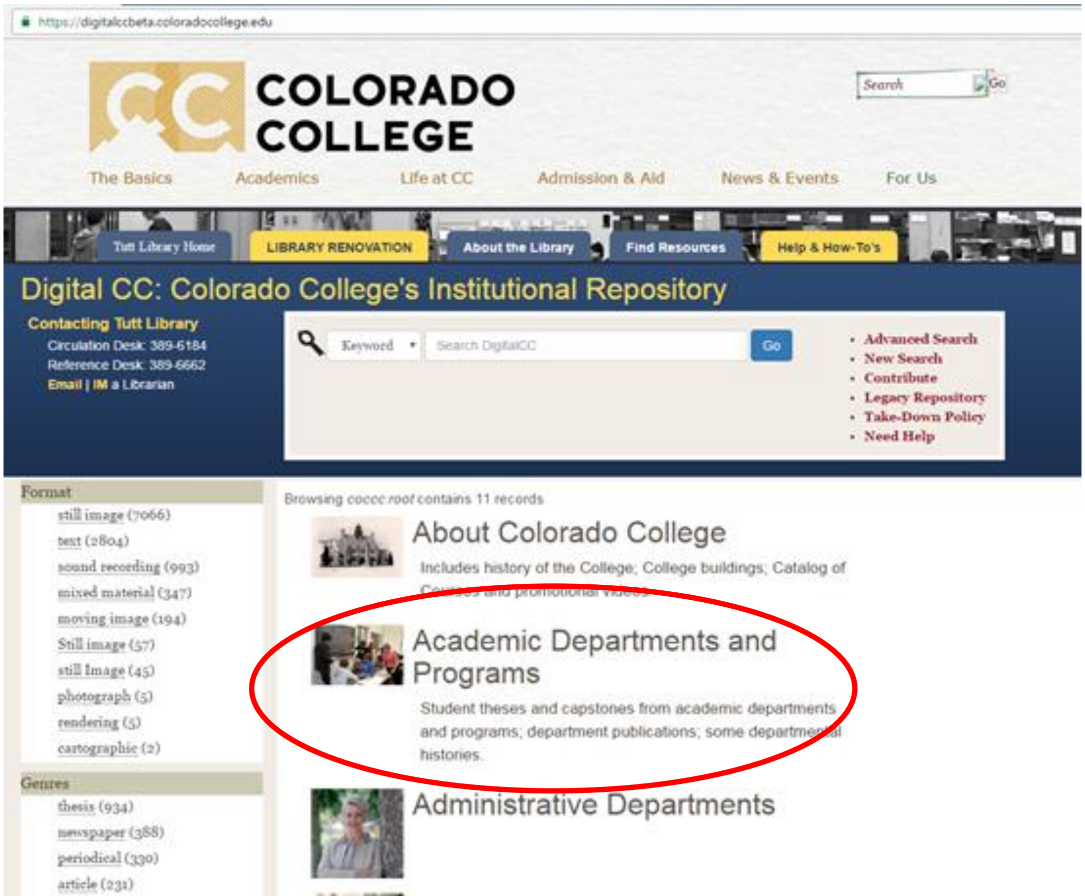
ACCESSING DIGITAL CC

To access past theses Digital CC, go to the Tutt Library homepage.

Click on "Digital CC"



Next, click on “Academic Departments and Programs.”



Next, scroll down to “Sociology.” Click on this button. Then click on “Student Senior Theses.” There, you will find folders with student theses from 2011-2016.

Thesis Process and Timeline

There is a meeting first block each year for all senior sociology majors. All of the professors advising theses will attend the meeting and discuss their research areas and the methodologies they typically use. Students will receive a form where they will write their intended research areas and methodologies and rank their top three advisor preferences. These forms are due third week of Block 1.

Students will also receive an add/drop slip for their thesis blocks, which are also due by third week of block 1. The thesis blocks you select during block 1 are not set in stone, but you will need to consult with your advisor before changing them.

You should meet with your advisor before your thesis block. You should also begin looking for literature before your thesis block begins. Create a full, ASA-format citation for each article you read when you read it and put it in a separate works cited document – this will make your life significantly easier at the end of your thesis. If you need IRB approval for your thesis, you should also work on that before your first thesis block begins.

All theses are due at **5pm on 4th Wednesday of your second thesis block**. After you have received your graded thesis back from your advisor and made edits, you should submit your thesis to the sociology department and to Tutt Library (see the "Submission" section for more information).

Thesis Funding

If there are any costs associated with your thesis, the department expects you to cover the first $100 on your own. If your thesis incurs costs greater than $100, the department can provide funding. Talk to your advisor and the department chair if you need thesis funding.

Additionally, the **O'Connor Grant** can provide up to $500 for social justice work. If your thesis research includes direct involvement in social justice work, talk to your advisor, the department chair, and the staff assistant about applying for O'Connor funding. You will need to write a proposal that includes a detailed description of your proposed project, an explanation of its link to issues of social justices, a budget outlining the uses to which the funds will be put, a copy of your transcript, and a supporting letter from your advisor. There are four opportunites to apply for the O'Connor Grant throughout the year: first Mondays of blocks 2, 4, 5, and 8.

There are also several funding options through the Office of the Dean. There is the **Academic Opportunities Grant**, which provides up to $500for students enrolled in thesis, capstone, or an independent study. There is also the **Keller Family Venture Grant** which provides up to $1000 for an individual student. More information about these funding opportunities is available on the website of the Office of the Dean.

Formatting and Technical Details

Senior theses are modeled after sociological journal articles. They are limited to 35 double-spaced pages of text, using a 10-12 point font. This page limit does not include front matter, abstract, tables, graphs, appendices, or works cited. All other pages should be numbered. Note that, in order to accommodate binding, margins must be **one inch** on the top, right, and bottom, and **1 ½ inches** on the left side.

Your thesis must include:

- A title page (see example below).
- An honor code statement page (see example below).
- An abstract page. An abstract is a brief summary (150-300 words) of your research question, the methodologies you used, and your main findings. It is a single-spaced paragraph.

Most theses also include a Table of Contents. Additionally, although not required, most students choose to include an Acknowledgments page, where they thank their advisors, other faculty, and anyone else who has assisted them with their theses.

Sample Title Page

AN ANALYSIS OF
DECLINING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the
Department of Sociology
The Colorado College
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

Jane Doe
Spring 2017

Sample Honor Code Page

On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

____
Jane Doe
Spring 2017

ASA Formatting and References

Theses must follow ASA Formatting. See the "Reference Format" page under "Student Resources" on the Sociology web page for details about references. Purdue OWL also has very helpful information about ASA Formatting.

Headings and subheadings should be used to organize your thesis. Most theses use three levels of headings. Information about headings is also available in the "Reference Format" document.

Submission

After you have edited your thesis, you should submit it both to Digital CC and to the sociology department. Email a final draft of your thesis (with one inch margins on top, bottom, and right and a 1 ½ inch margin on the left) to the staff assistant. The staff assistant will have the copy bound and put it in the department library in the seminar room. The staff assistant can also arrange for additional copies if you would like a bound copy of your thesis – each of these additional copies is $10.

You should also submit your thesis to Digital CC. Instructions for submitting your thesis to Digital CC are available on the Tutt Library website – these can be found at www.coloradocollege.libguides.com/DigitalArchivesSubmission.