

# Social Scientific Research

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Dawn Brancati



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## From Topic to Question to Puzzle

After settling on a research topic, the next step is to transform this topic into a research question and ideally, a research puzzle. A research question is much more specific than a research topic. It relates to a particular aspect of the broader topic that a researcher seeks to understand. A research question, for example, on the topic of immigration might ask ‘Under what conditions does a massive influx of refugees into a country provoke a rise in nationalist (anti-immigrant) parties at the polls?’ Another important aspect of the topic of immigration is the trafficking of women. A research question about it might ask ‘What is the relationship between the trafficking of women and China’s one-child policy?’

Social science research questions should not be normative even though social scientists may be driven to study a particular topic for normative reasons or values, such as freedom, equality, or dignity. Normative questions ask questions about what should be rather than what is, and are not falsifiable. A normative question on the subject of refugees might ask ‘Whether or not states have a responsibility to protect refugees’. A normative question on China’s one-child policy might ask, meanwhile, whether or not it is appropriate for governments to restrict the rights of individuals to protect the common good.

Social science questions do not try to predict the future either. ‘Will China democratize?’ and ‘Will North Korea and South Korea reunite?’ are both examples of questions that try to predict the future. The findings of social science research may have implications for future events, but they do not try to predict whether specific events will occur or not. Instead of asking whether China will democratize or the two Koreas reunite, a social science question might ask ‘What are the conditions that make one-party states likely to democratize’ or ‘What are the long-term effects of partitions’.

Social science research questions should address an important aspect of the larger phenomena that are being studied. A research question itself is not important simply by virtue of being on an important topic. International trade is an important topic. However, a research question about the effectiveness of environment standards in free trade agreements is not especially important since few trade agreements include provisions about the environment. Environmental protection is also an important issue but research on the trafficking of wildlife by rebel groups to finance civil wars is not. At least, it is not as important as research on other resources to finance these wars, such as oil and diamonds, which provide a much more profitable source of funding for rebels than wildlife trafficking.

Ideally, a research question should also constitute a puzzle. A puzzle is a question for which the answer is not immediately obvious. Puzzles are derived from unexpected or surprising phenomena, like a man biting a dog as opposed to a dog biting a man. Table 3.1 illustrates the differences between research questions versus research puzzles

Research questions that constitute puzzles often challenge conventional views. These views are frequently derived from historical trends, expert opinion, common assumptions about human behavior, and so forth. Alternatively, research questions that constitute a puzzle may involve a debate between two opposing viewpoints, one of which may represent the conventional view on a subject.

A question about what the health effects of civil wars are is not a puzzle since very few people would be surprised to learn that civil wars have detrimental effects on local populations. Nor is a question about why couples that are unhappy in their marriages are more likely to divorce than couples that are happy in their marriages. However, a question about why adults, who are unhappily married, are not necessarily happier after divorce than before is a puzzle (Amato 2000; Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007).

Contentious divorce negotiations can be one source of this unhappiness. In general, negotiations are believed to be more successful when handled by a mediator that is neutral to both parties. That is why a proposition that biased mediators who favor one side in an international conflict are more effective in ending militarized conflicts than unbiased mediators is an excellent puzzle (Kydd 2003). In this case, the puzzle is derived from a historical trend in the behavior and beliefs of political actors about mediators.

In some cases, the puzzle lies in the fact that a historical trend is not as striking because a given outcome is different in one set of cases than in another very similar set of cases. Why, for example, decentralization reduces intrastate conflict in some countries, such as Spain, and not in others, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, is a puzzle for this reason (Brancati 2006, 2009). So is a question about why rape is more prevalent during violent conflicts in some states, such as Rwanda (1994), and not in others, including Sri Lanka (1983–2009) and Peru (1982–2010) (Wood 2006).

Question	Puzzle
What are the effects of divorce on the psychological wellbeing of divorcees?	Why are adults who are unhappily married not happier after divorce (Amato 2000; Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007)?
What characteristics make for the best mediators?	Why are biased mediators more effective in ending militarized conflicts than unbiased mediators (Kydd 2003)?
What is the best political system to prevent intrastate conflict?	Why does decentralization reduce intrastate conflict in some countries and not in others (Brancati 2006)?
What strategies do rebel groups use against their opponents to achieve their goals?	Why is rape prevalent during violent conflicts in some states and not in others (Wood 2006)?
What effect, if any, do regime changes have on the propensity of states to go to war?	Why are democratizing states more war-prone when democracies are more pacific, at least towards each other (Mansfield and Snyder 2007)?
What are the characteristics of countries that determine trade flows?	Why do countries with similar capital-to-labor ratios commonly trade in contrast to expectations regarding comparative advantage (Krugman 1979)?
How do people make decisions on important issues?	Why do people make decisions that do not maximize their utility (Tversky and Kahneman 1981)?

**Table 3.1** Research questions versus research puzzles

perspectives, which supplant or reduce the influence of religion on their thinking about political, social and economic issues.

At a theoretical level, reciprocal or two-way causation is not in-and-of-itself a problem; only the failure to specify a reciprocal relationship where one exists is. At the empirical level, however, it can be very difficult to disentangle the causal effects of the explanatory and outcomes variables from each other depending on the method employed.

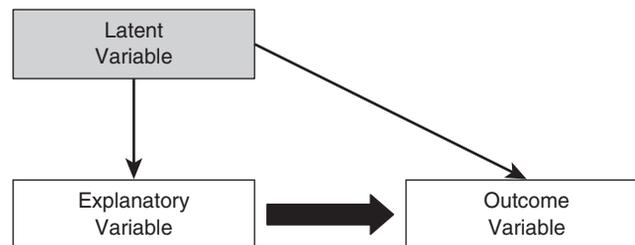
## Problems in Causal Arguments

Arguments, even if the causal direction is well specified, can be invalid for many reasons. They can be based on incorrect assumptions about human behavior. They can be internally inconsistent, or in other words, contradictory. And they can be incomplete. That is, they can fail to identify key factors that are necessary for an explanatory factor to result in a given outcome. It is impossible to specify all the reasons why arguments can be inaccurate. However, there are a few common types of errors in argumentation that researchers make that require further elaboration.

### Spuriousness

A *spurious argument* is one in which the hypothesized relationship between the explanatory factor and the outcome variable is false because of the presence of another latent (or confounding) factor that causes both the explanatory factor and the outcome variable. Figure 6.9 illustrates the structure of a spurious argument.

Have you ever heard someone say that they do not want to get a flu shot because whenever they do, they get the flu? This is an example of a spurious argument. A flu vaccine contains the flu virus, but it does not cause someone to contract the flu since the cells in the vaccine are inactivated. If a person tends to get the flu whenever s/he gets a flu shot, it may be because this person only gets the flu shot when there is a flu epidemic and there is a greater risk of getting the flu in the first place. In this scenario, the flu epidemic is the latent or confounding factor that leads a person to get the flu vaccine and to also get the flu.



**Figure 6.9** Spuriousness

## Further Reading

The first and third readings discuss practical issues around designing, conducting and analyzing interviews, as well as epistemological and ethical issues involved in interviewing. The second reading provides a concise introduction to a non-positive, interpretive approach to interviewing.

Brinkmann, Svend and Steinar Kvale. 2014. *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2017. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. New York: Routledge.

Galletta, Anne and William E. Cross. 2013. *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication*. New York: New York University Press.

### EXERCISE 10.1



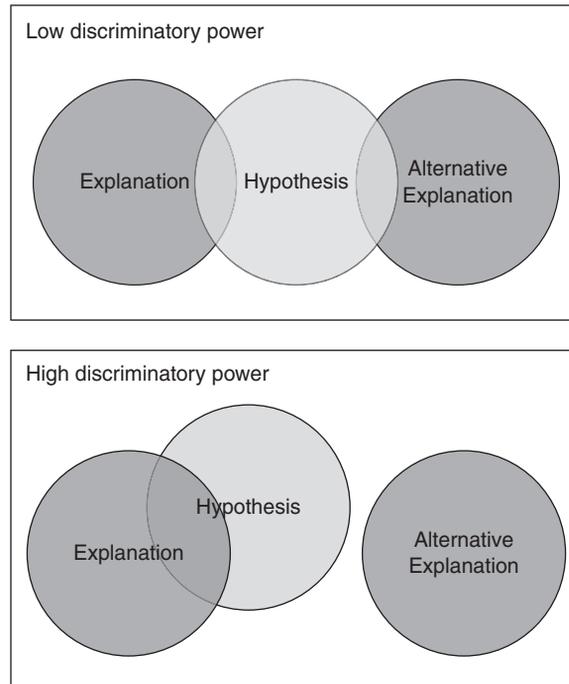
Read the excerpt below from an interview with Evelyn Amony. Evelyn was abducted when she was 12 years old by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which perpetrated a war in Uganda for almost 30 years, and was forcibly married to Joseph Kony. The goal of this interview is to shed light on the experiences of women in war, the unique struggles women face in their communities after wars have ended, as well as the resilience and innovativeness of women in overcoming these struggles.

Read the interview below and answer the following questions.

First, did the interview achieve all its stated goals? Which goals did it achieve and why? Second, analyze the structure and order of the questions. In what ways are they effective, and in what ways could they be improved? Third, this interview was conducted via email. Discuss the tradeoffs of an in-person, phone, and email interview in this case. What interview mode do you think is best? Fourth, what research questions might you devise regarding the experiences of women in post-conflict countries based on this interview?

**[Q1] Interviewer:** Evelyn, tell me about what you are doing now?

**[A1] Amony:** I wrote a book not too long ago called, *I am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord's Resistance Army*<sup>3</sup>, about my experience, so that the world knows that war is bad and has very negative consequences for women and children. I also helped found the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN). It lobbies for women's issues in Uganda, trains women in leadership, and helps them heal through storytelling, poems, memory quilts, etc. Right now, I am involved in the reintegration of children born of war – to reunite children born into the LRA captivity with their families for family support and a sense of identity, a move that has proved to bring healing to the families that lost their children during the war. In most instances, these children are seen as a replacement for their parents.



**Figure 13.3** Hypothesis discriminatory power

to the global financial crisis. The United States is not alone in its failure to put its bankers behind bars. In fact, Iceland and Ireland are the only countries to have jailed bankers in relation to the financial crisis. The explanation for this puzzle, which is evaluated below through process tracing, is the following:

There are no bankers imprisoned in the US for actions resulting in the global financial crisis, because the US government feared that bringing charges against the bankers would have a further negative impact on the global economy.

There are many hypotheses that one might derive that are consistent with this argument. Below are four hypotheses that vary in the extent to which they are high in validity and discriminatory power. If no bankers were imprisoned in the US for the reason hypothesized above, then ...

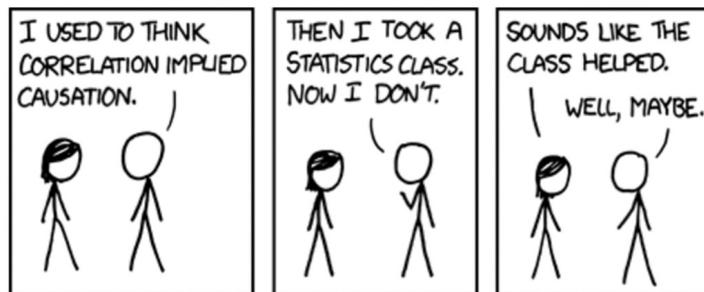
**Hypothesis 1:** ... US bankers would have made reckless and unwise investment decisions that caused the global financial crisis.

Hypothesis 1 has low validity and low discriminatory power because it does not indicate that the bankers' actions were illegal and prosecutable in court, or that the government

contain makes it more likely that findings from them are characteristic or typical of the larger population that they claim to represent. That said, every observation in an observational study may be related to a single case, as in a study analyzing incidences of electoral violence across districts of a single country. In this example, there is only one case – an election within a particular country – but many observations -- the individual districts of the country. When every observation is related to a single case, the results are only generalizable to that case. In other observational studies, the observations may represent distinct cases, as in a study of electoral violence where each observation represents an election in a different country. In this example, the results may be generalizable to all elections.

## Causal Inference

A few of the shortcomings of observational studies were mentioned in the previous section regarding their simplification of relationships due to broad measures and inability to measure all theoretically relevant factors. However, the primary shortcoming of observational studies is the difficulty they present for causal inference. Most observational studies, with the exception of natural experiments, can only effectively establish a correlation between an explanatory variable and outcome variable, a fact which has given rise to the well-known mantra that ‘[c]orrelation does not make causation.’



**Cartoon 20.1**

Source: <https://xkcd.com/552/>

In a statistical analysis of an observational study, a causal effect can never be observed directly due to the *fundamental problem of causal inference*, which states that for any given observation, it is impossible to observe the outcome under both treatment and control conditions. For example, it is impossible to know if the UK would have voted to leave the European Union in 2016 were it not for the European refugee crises, because one cannot observe how Brits would have voted in the referendum were there

However, the experimental manipulation in a survey experiment is abstract and artificial, as in the case of laboratory experiments.

Typically, in survey experiments, the experimental manipulation or treatment is a vignette, but it can also be an image or video. In these experiments, participants are asked to read the vignette, view an image, or watch a video and then answer questions related to their outcome of interest. Only one aspect of the treatment – either the vignette, image, or video – is different between the treatment and control conditions so that it is possible for researchers to evaluate the effect of this one aspect on the given outcome.

An example of a basic survey experiment about the effect of CEO apologies on the reputations of corporations is presented in Box 19.1.

### Box 19.1 Survey Experiment on Corporate Apologies

In the experiment, the participants, who are divided equally into two groups, read one of the following vignettes:

Vignette 1: After a video of a CEO – who heads a major corporation whose products and services you use and like – surfaced in which the CEO made sexual comments about the appearance of one of his female employees, the CEO immediately issued a public statement saying that he regretted the incident.

Vignette 2: After a video of a CEO – who heads a major corporation whose products and services you use and like – surfaced in which the CEO made sexual comments about the appearance of one of his female employees, the CEO immediately issued a public statement saying that he regretted the incident, and made a lengthy and thoughtful apology for his behavior.

After reading the vignette, the respondents are asked the following questions:

[Vignettes 1 and 2]: How, if at all, does the CEO's sexual comments about his employee affect your opinion of the corporation?

1. lowers it a lot
2. lowers it somewhat
3. has no effect on it at all
4. raises it somewhat
5. raises it a lot
6. do not know

[Vignettes 1 and 2]: How, if at all, does the CEO's comments affect your willingness to use the company's products and services?

1. reduces it a lot
2. reduces it somewhat

**Manipulation check:** a test included in the experiment, generally in the form of a question, to determine if the participants received the treatment.

**Margin of sampling error:** indicates how much the results of a survey question may differ due to chance compared to what would have been found if the entire population was surveyed.

**Mean (arithmetic):** the average of a set of numbers.

**Measures:** quantitative representations of concepts used as a basis or standard of comparison.

**Measurement error:** the difference between the true value and the observed value.

**Median (arithmetic):** the middle value of an odd number of numbers listed in numeric order or the average of the two middle values of an even number of numbers listed in numeric order.

**Method:** the specific process used to collect and analyze information.

**Method of agreement:** a qualitative research method based on case comparisons in which the outcome is the same in the cases compared while the values of the explanatory variables are different, except for the factor believed to cause the outcome.

**Method of difference:** a qualitative research method based on case comparisons in which the outcome is different in the cases compared while the values of the explanatory variables are the same, except for the variable believed to cause the outcome.

**Mixed methods research:** the collection, analysis and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies examining the same phenomenon.

**Mode (arithmetic) mode:** the value that appears most often in a set of numbers.

**Most-likely case:** a case that should fit an existing theory but does not.

**Natural experiments:** observational studies in which the assignment to treatment and control groups is random or 'as if' random.

**Necessary and sufficient condition:** an explanatory factor that is required for an outcome to be produced and alone is enough to produce the outcome.

**Necessary condition:** an explanatory factor that must be present for an outcome to be produced.

**Neither necessary nor sufficient condition:** an explanatory factor that is not required for an outcome to be produced and alone is not enough to produce the outcome.

**Nested case design:** a qualitative research approach in which the cases analyzed are categories of another case.

**Nominal measures:** discrete measures in which there is no order or hierarchy among categories. The categories are also mutually exclusive (i.e., no observation may belong to more than one category) and exhaustive (i.e., all observations must belong to one of the categories).

**Non-expert surveys:** surveys of individuals that do not have specialized knowledge on a particular subject.

**Non-observational data:** data collected through researchers interacting with their subjects or intervening in their subjects' environments.

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