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Finding Your Social Science Project

The most important step in social science research is the first step – finding a topic. Unfortunately, little guidance on this crucial and difficult challenge is available. Methodological studies and courses tend to focus on theory testing rather than theory generation. This book aims to redress that imbalance. The first part of the book offers an overview of the book's central concerns. How do social scientists arrive at ideas for their work? What are the different ways in which a study can contribute to knowledge in a field? The second part of the book offers suggestions about how to think creatively, including general strategies for finding a topic and heuristics for discovery. The third part of the book shows how data exploration may assist in generating theories and hypotheses. The fourth part of the book offers suggestions about how to fashion disparate ideas into a theory.

John Gerring is Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of several books, most recently: *The Production of Knowledge: Enhancing Progress in Social Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2020; with Colin Elman & James Mahoney), and *Population and Politics: The Impact of Scale* (Cambridge University Press, 2020; with Wouter Veenendaal), along with numerous articles. He is co-editor of *Strategies for Social Inquiry*, a book series at Cambridge University Press.

Jason Seawright is Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Party-System Collapse: The Roots of Crisis in Peru and Venezuela* (2012), *Multi-Method Social Science: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Tools* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), and *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (2019, with Benjamin I. Page and Matthew Lacombe), along with numerous articles.

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Strategies for Social Inquiry

Finding Your Social Science Project

The Research Sandbox

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Glossary

This short lexicon is limited to terms used repeatedly in the book. Other specialized terms are defined in the text, with chapters of special relevance noted in the final column.

		Chap.
CAUSALITY		
Outcome (*Y*)	The phenomenon to be explained. Synonyms: dependent variable, explanandum.	*1*
Causal factor (*X*)	Hypothesized to affect *Y*. Synonyms: treatment, independent variable.	*1*
Antecedent cause (*A*)	Affects *X* and may serve as an instrument in a two-stage analysis.	*1*
Common-cause confounder (*C*)	Affects both *X* and *Y*, and thus potentially confounds the relationship.	*1*
Mechanism (*M*)	Conduit through which *X* affects *Y*. Synonyms: pathway, intermediate variable, mediator.	*1*
Noise (*B*)	Cause of *Y* uncorrelated with *X*.	*1*
Moderator (*D*)	Moderates the relationship between *X* and *Y*.	*1*
Background factor (*Z*)	A factor of no theoretical interest, e.g., *A*, *C*, *B*, or *D*.	*1*
RESEARCH DESIGNS		
Data generating process (DGP)	How the data under investigation was produced.	
Experiment	Where the treatment of theoretical interest is randomized by the researcher across two or more groups.	*2*
Natural experiment	Where the treatment of theoretical interest is assigned in an as-if random fashion, but not by the researcher. Variants include regression discontinuity and instrumental variables.	*2*
Observational	Nonexperimental.	*2*
Case study	One or several cases form the basis for an argument about a larger population.	*4*
Case selection	Methods of selecting cases for case study research, e.g., extreme, index, deviant, most-similar, diverse.	*4*

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ARGUMENTS		
Theoretical framework	The broadest sort of theory, diffuse to the point of unfalsifiability.	*9*
Theory	Explanation for an outcome or set of outcomes (if causal).	*10*
Hypothesis	Observable, and hence testable, implication of a theory.	*10*
RESEARCH STAGES		
Exploratory	Prior to the identification of a research question, theory, and hypothesis. Synonyms: discovery, theory generation.	*11*
Confirmatory	After a research question, theory, and hypothesis have been identified. Synonyms: appraisal, confirmation, falsification, justification, testing, verification.	*11*

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