

Cracking the 'So What' Code by Facing Anxiety in Research

Written by Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson

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LINUS HAGSTRÖM AND KARL GUSTAFSSON, OCT 17 2023

Even after a combined 40+ years of doing research, this endeavour still makes us feel insecure in ways that we are now able to anticipate. We struggle most regularly and persistently with the question of how our research is or can be made meaningful. We get our share of the kinds of questions that scholars ask one another at conferences, workshops or in peer reviews: 'So what?' 'What's the point of your research?' or 'What is your research problem?' We, too, have posed similar queries on numerous occasions. Surprisingly, despite the focus on the meaning of research, we have noticed that researchers sometimes find each other's research quite meaningless.

A few years back, when examining the most popular methods textbooks in political science and international relations, we were struck by the scant guidance on addressing the 'so what-question'. It mostly boiled down to emphasizing the existence of gaps and/or tackling pressing real-world issues. However, gap-arguments often neglect to explain why these gaps are crucial to fill. Maybe the gap exists for a good reason! A focus on real-world problems, moreover, does not inherently differentiate scholarly work from that of public officials, journalists, or analysts. Other methods textbooks did not touch on the 'so what-question' at all, seemingly implying that rigorous methodology alone bestows meaning upon research.

Consequently, a few years ago we published an article with the aim of aiding graduate students in addressing the meaning of their research through the development of puzzles. Many scholars and students seemed to appreciate it and it has been accessed more than 85,000 times on the journal website. However, some graduate students and colleagues voiced their frustration with and criticism of the advice offered in the article. Some remarked that we conceptualized research problems too restrictively, and that the advice was too technical. Others criticized the paper for enforcing a specific methodology for constructing puzzles and for insinuating that supervisors and faculty members could develop puzzles with relative ease, while it might be more challenging for graduate students.

Despite being professors, we began to feel anxious about the guidance we sought to offer in the article and the meaning of our own argument. Similarly, we continued to grapple with the meaning of our research in a broader sense, struggling to formulate the kind of sharp research puzzles that we had advocated. However, over time we began to confront and eventually embrace our anxiety and tried to figure out what it was telling us. We started asking ourselves and each other more seriously why some people were critical of or frustrated with the article. We realized that for some graduate students, crafting a compelling research problem might be challenging, not only despite but also because of our advice. Perhaps our somewhat technical guidance inadvertently made it seem as if devising a research problem was a straightforward task, especially for students fortunate enough to have a particularly astute supervisor. Perhaps it contributed to, rather than alleviated, their anxiety.

This anxiety, doubt, self-reflection and questioning eventually led us to conceive a new idea: that the process of developing a research problem is fraught with complex emotions, particularly anxiety. At this juncture, we tentatively formulated a new research problem: 'Why is it so challenging to construct a compelling research problem, despite the existing guidance on the topic?' We posited a tentative answer: that emotional dimensions are entwined with the construction of a research problem, yet have not received sufficient attention. Most significantly, we came to acknowledge that anxiety is a natural and normal feature of the research process. Once we had come up with this

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idea, we set about developing it further, consulting various literatures.

As a product of our own anxious struggles, we recently published an article. Within it, we draw on Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory to elucidate the resistance toward research problems – the inclination to either mask anxieties or downplay them—but also to advocate for a continuous and thorough examination of established truths, as well as one’s own assumptions, concepts, theories, and assertions. In essence, we believe that graduate students and researchers should accept anxiety as a companion that can foster creativity, rather than viewing it as an obstacle to be avoided at all costs.

In the article, we also advise graduate students and researchers to seek out situations or phenomena that defy conventional expectations or possess counterintuitive, puzzling, or inadequately explained elements, and to employ narrative approaches to formulate research problems around them. However, since such a narrative may not materialize on the first attempt, graduate students and scholars should be prepared to revise and refine their research problems throughout each project, in light of new observations and questions from themselves and others. They must thus embrace the evolving nature of their research narrative. The final version of the narrative, which appears in the publication, can only be formulated *ex post facto*.

Our article does not claim to offer the definitive solution on how to generate research problems. Instead, it acknowledges the inherent incompleteness and insecurity of knowledge. However, this does not imply that we should relinquish the pursuit for new knowledge, but rather engage in it more deeply by confronting our anxiety.

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Their joint article ‘The insecurity of doing research and the “so what question” in political science: how to develop more compelling research problems by facing anxiety’ (2023) was published in *European Political Science*.