# Research Question

Irene Wieczorek and Piergiuseppe Parisi

---

This entry focuses on research questions. It provides a definition of the concept, distinguishing it from closely related ones; it identifies a number of desirable characteristics for valid research questions; it highlights the tight links between the latter and research methodology; finally, it outlines different kinds of questions.

Research questions identify what the researcher wants to find out or understand. They are a crucial component of any study and are connected to all parts thereof. Depending on the type of study that one seeks to carry out, research questions may be either the starting point of the entire research or both determinant of and *responsive to* the research design.

Research questions should be distinguished from research objectives, which is what a researcher aims to deliver at the end of the research process. The latter can be for instance policy recommendations. Research questions should also be distinguished from research hypothesis **[REFERENCE TO HYPOTHESIS ENTRY 31]**. A research question should naturally be formulated in an interrogative manner, and should be a query whose answer is not known at the outset of the research process. A research hypothesis conversely is a tentative answer to a research question, which the author postulates at the beginning of the process, and which he or she tries to demonstrate throughout the research. Notably, depending on the course of the research, research hypothesis can also be disproved at the end of the process.

Research questions have a twofold *purpose*. First, they define the boundaries of a research project thus guiding the investigation (Watts 2001; Maxwell 2009: 229; George and Bennett 2004: 74). Second, they are meant to spark the interest of the reader or reviewer.

Michael Watts (Watts 2001) has identified four desirable key *characteristics* of research questions in the field of social sciences (although these may be broadly applicable to legal research as well): they should be **evocative**, **relevant**, **clear**, and **researchable**.
*Evocative* questions should capture the reader's interest by posing 'innovative approaches to the exploration of problems'. More concretely, evocative questions are those that aim to fill a gap in the knowledge of a specific problem. A question which is formulated in terms of 'what is the state of the discussion/literature on the principle of proportionality in EU law?' is not evocative, as it only envisages an exercise of knowledge gathering, rather than knowledge seeking. This gap-filling exercise can be achieved by either addressing puzzling and new dilemmas, or by seeking to untangle old problems in new unexplored ways.
However, gap-filling *per se* is not sufficient. The problem which has not yet been explored, the gap the research intends to fill, must be of a certain relevance. In other terms, there need be specific reasons supporting the need to carry out such exercise. *Relevant questions* are those for instance which spark the interest of society in general or of a targeted community in particular, by addressing a specific topic and making connection with broader trends or contexts. Thus, it is commonly argued that answering a sound research question should entail broader implications for the researcher's field of expertise (Turabian 2013: 13). In order to be relevant, a research question must also be consequential. That is to say, its relevance must not depend on the nature of the results. For instance, a good research question which postulates a positive or a negative answer must lead to a relevant research, regardless of the nature, positive or negative, of the answer itself. If in one of the two cases, positive or negative answer to the research question, the findings would not add anything to the existing knowledge, then the research question cannot be considered relevant.

Lastly, one should note that research questions may also arise from the researcher's genuine curiosity to investigate a seemingly trivial phenomenon or puzzle (Turabian 2013: 13). In this case, the relevance of such a question may only become apparent once it has been investigated.

*Clear* research questions are easily understandable and straightforward. Too abstract or obscure questions should be avoided and so should be questions that combine too many variables [**REFERENCE TO VARIABLES ENTRY 68**].

Finally, research questions should be clearly '*researchable*' (Salter and Mason 2007: 12). Watts frames this last attribute in terms of resources and constraints. While formulating a research question, one should be aware of how much time and resources they have to carry out the research. A less ambitious research question that can be answered thoroughly is certainly more valuable than a question that cannot be answered comprehensively within the available timeframe and resource constraints.

A tight relation exists between *research questions* and *research methodology*. Differently framed research questions warrant different methods of inquiry (Yin 2009: 8; Van Hoecke 2011: viii). This is not to say that a research question can *only* be answered by recourse to one method only, but in some cases a specific method of inquiry may be *more suited* to answer to a certain question. In the domain of empirical studies, Robert K Yin, for instance, makes a case for employing case studies [**REFERENCE TO CASE STUDY ENTRY 9**] when *why* or *how* questions are asked (Yin 2009: 8). Differently, variance questions (such as *is there a difference between* X and Y? Or, *is there a relationship* between X and Y?) may be better answered by using quantitative approaches (Maxwell 2009: 232).

Specific issues concerning the interaction between research question and research methodology may arise in connection with the type of research being conducted. Qualitative research requires, at least in its initial phase, a continuous interaction between the research design and the research question, the latter being subject to a meticulous process of redefinition and refinement (Maxwell 2009: 229-233). For instance, the redefinition of research project may be dependent on the clarification of preliminary assumptions hidden in the research question or on the 'operationalisation' [**REFERENCE TO OPERATIONALIZATION ENTRY 44**] of a question formulated in general and abstract terms. If, for example, the researcher, at some point during the research process, decides to answer the question 'how do concluding observations of UN human rights monitoring bodies influence state practice?' with a comparative case study [**REFERENCE TO QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ENTRY 51**], they will probably want to revisit the initial formulation of the question, and specify the case studies selected and the time frame considered. A similar study was in fact conducted by Krommendijk who considered the impact and effectiveness of UN reporting mechanisms at the domestic level in three states (Krommendijk 2014).

Finally, there can be different *kinds of research questions* depending on the nature of the project. In particular, one can distinguish between mono-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research questions [**REFERENCE TO INTEDISCIPLINARY ENTRY 33**]. For instance, one can distinguish between monodisciplinary *law projects* – which inquire on the state of the law on a certain subject – and *projects about the law* – which aim to provide an analysis and a comment on existing law and which can have an interdisciplinary dimension. In the first case, the questions concern the state of the law. They can be 'does the crime definition of money laundering also applies to self-laundering?'. Specific law projects are doctrinal positive law projects, which include a normative dimension, asking how the law can be applied. Questions can be such as 'can the norms on the use of force in international law be used to regulate cyber-attacks?'. In the second case, projects about the law which include an interdisciplinary dimension, questions concern the qualities of the law. They can be such as 'are blacklisting and asset-freezing administrative sanctions *effective* in preventing terrorist financing?" (law and economics), or 'do European norms on the ban of full veil show a *gender bias*?' (law and

gender studies), 'what does the current definition of human trafficking tells us about the weight of patriarchal values in western democracies?' (law and cultural studies).

**<u>List of References:</u>**

George, Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press.

Krommendijk, Jasper. 2014. *The Domestic Impact and Effectiveness of the Process of State Reporting under UN Human Rights Treaties in the Netherlands, New Zealand and Finland: Paper-pushing or policy prompting?* Intersentia.

Maxwell, Joseph A. Designing a Qualitative Study. In Bickman, Leonard and Debra J. Rog. Eds. 2009. *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*. 2nd ed. SAGE Publications.

Salter, Michael and Julie Mason. 2007. *Writing Law Dissertations: An Introduction and Guide to the Conduct of Legal Research*. Pearson Education.

Turabian, Kate, Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, and the University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff. 2013. *A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations*. 8th ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Van Hoecke, Mark. Ed. 2011. *Methodologies of Legal Research: Which Kind of Method for What Kind of Discipline?* Oxford and Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishing.

Watts, Michael. 2001. The Holy Grail: In Pursuit of the Dissertation Proposal. *Regents of the University of California*. Also available online at <http://iis.berkeley.edu/node/424>.

Yin, Robert K. 2009. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th ed. SAGE Publications.