

Developing a research question in International Relations



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Introduction

Research questions represent a key starting point when conducting research and they often vary according to the kinds of research inquiry chosen. One important distinction is between 'positivist' and 'interpretivist' approaches in the discipline. Positivist research focuses on explaining a phenomenon. They are often interested in establishing causal relationships – for instance, why did x happen? They incline towards using and analysing quantitative data and testing hypotheses to establish 'facts' through which we can understand, and perhaps predict, the social world.

Interpretivist (or 'critical', or 'post-positivist') research focuses on understanding social phenomena. Such questions ask how a certain understanding of the world, set of social relations or array of practices comes to be. Implicit here is the sense that other ways of understanding and arranging the social world are possible, and perhaps desirable, even if something appears to be fixed and timeless. Such work often utilises more qualitative data, exploring how meanings are produced and shared through discourses and practices.



This OpenLearn course will guide through the different types of research questions in international relations (IR), and it will help you develop the skills necessary to develop your own. Through a series of activities, including a bespoke Masterclass, you will have the opportunity to reflect on what makes a good research question and to consider the types of questions that one might ask when doing a research project in international relations.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [D828 MA International relations part 2](#). You might also be interested in studying the sister OpenLearn course [International relations: exploring territorial divisions](#) which is an adapted extract from the Open University course D818 [MA International relations part 1](#)

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand what makes a good research question
- reflect on and apply positivist and interpretivist approaches in international relations
- identify different types of questions and how to use them

1 Masterclass: research questions in International Relations

In this masterclass, you will hear from Professor Jamie Gaskarth about the types of research question that inform scholarly inquiry into international relations (IR).

Activity 1 What makes a good research question in IR?

 approximately 20 minutes

Watch the following video and, as you watch, take notes on the two approaches to research questions identified by Gaskarth: 'how' questions and 'why' questions.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1: What makes a good research question in IR?



Provide your answer...

2 Positivist and interpretivist approaches

Having watched the masterclass and taken notes on the use of 'how' and 'why' questions, this activity is an opportunity to apply your understanding of the differences between positivist and interpretivist research questions.

Activity 2 Positivist and interpretivist approaches in practice

 approximately 20 minutes

Take a look at the following two abstracts for journal articles by scholars researching different aspects of international relations. Can you identify which research project takes a positivist approach, and which research adopts an interpretivist approach? Make notes in the text box below. To distinguish between the positivist and the interpretivist approaches, you might wish to consider what question is being asked by each abstract, what sort of claims are being made about the phenomena they are interested in and what data they are drawing on to make these claims.

Abstract 1

This article addresses the puzzle of why, and under what conditions, international organisations cease to exist. International Relations literature offers rich explanations for the creation, design and effectiveness of international institutions and their organisational embodiments, international organizations (IOs), but surprisingly little effort has gone into studying the dynamics of IO termination. Yet if we want to understand the conditions under which international organisations endure, we must also explain why they frequently fail to do so. The article formulates and tests a theory of 'IO death' using a combination of population-wide statistical analysis and detailed historical case studies. My analysis is based on an original dataset covering the period 1815–2016. I find that exogenous shocks are a leading proximate cause of IO terminations since 1815 and that organisations that are newly created, have small memberships, and/or lack centralised structures are most likely to succumb. My analysis leads me to suggest a number of extensions and refinements to existing institutionalist theories.

Source: Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M. (2021) 'What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations terminate', *European Journal of International Relations*, 27(1), pp. 281–310.

Abstract 2

Post World War I, Marcus Garvey's Pan-African movement managed to coalesce, however briefly and imperfectly, an extra-territorial sovereign authority in the form of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Through the recollection of this project the article seeks to disturb the predominant uni-linear narrative in IR debates of the transformation of sovereignty that posit a recent shift from territorial exclusivity to multi-level governance encapsulated in the emergence of the European Union. By narrating a string of transformations of sovereignty that led to Garvey's UNIA the case is made that such transformations have not directly followed one universal logic but have been multi-linear in character, and further, extra-territoriality has been a defining principle of sovereignty in the modern epoch and by no means peculiar to the contemporary European milieu. Through

exploring the generative relationship between capitalist, nationalist and racialist forms of sovereignty the article contributes theoretically and empirically to a historical sociology adequate to capture the multiple, yet related, transformations of sovereignty in the modern epoch.

Source: Shilliam, R. (2006) 'What about Marcus Garvey? Race and the transformation of sovereignty debate', *Review of International Studies*, 32(3), pp. 379–400.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In Abstract 1, Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni undertakes positivist research. She presents a clear hypothesis and a 'why' question, using quantitative data to answer her research question: 'Why, and under what conditions, [do] international organisations cease to exist?' Her conclusions are based on findings drawn from her analysis of a dataset she created, which lists all instances between 1815 and 2016 of international organisation termination.

In Abstract 2, Robbie Shilliam uses an interpretivist approach to present an alternative to existing narratives about sovereignty in mainstream International Relations (IR) theory. This is a 'how' question, asking how particular narratives of sovereignty have come to be seen as authoritative in IR, and showing how they might be understood differently. To do so, Shilliam examines different extraterritorial sovereign actors (such as Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey's pan-African movement and the European Union) as well as different, intersecting power logics (capitalism, nationalism and racism). Shilliam backs up his interpretive scholarly claims by using qualitative data (a discourse analysis of policies and historical texts).

2.1 Positivism and interpretivism revisited

As you can see, positivist and interpretivist approaches to research pose quite different questions of international relations. The former tend to seek causal explanations, while the latter aim to understand how the world has been socially constituted.

But one should be careful not to see the distinction between the two approaches as binary, or as mutually exclusive. Indeed, research might draw on aspects of both frameworks, adopting more 'middle-ground' approaches. Scholars adopting neoclassical realism, Critical Theory, or constructivism, for instance, might draw on both positivist traditions that emphasise the material and the causal, while also allowing – to a greater or lesser extent – for the importance of norms, ideas and the construction of meaning within international relations.



To summarise, there is no easy or singular answer to the approach that you should take in your research – there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. What matters is that you are clear about what you are trying to achieve and say with your research; that you think carefully about the conceptual, theoretical and methodological assumptions you are making in the research design; and that these are appropriate together.

3 Types of research questions

While developing a research question, it is also worth considering what it is that the research is trying to achieve. Depending on the goal of the research, you might design and frame your research question differently.



The following table gives a (non-exhaustive) list of types of research question that further specify the objective of the research.

Table 1 Types of research questions

Research question type	Purpose	Example question
Descriptive	To describe the features, dynamics, or processes of a phenomenon	What are the properties of A?
Comparative	To compare two or more cases to assess similarities and differences	What are the similarities and differences between case B and case C?
Exploratory	To gain a better understanding of a topic, often where existing research is limited	What factors might be important in understanding political problem D?
Explanatory	To understand the cause(s) or dynamics of a specific issue or relationship	What are the causes of political issue E?
Evaluative	To assess the effectiveness of an intervention or explanation	What is the impact of an international policy on political issue F?

These formulations don't neatly map onto the distinction between 'how' and 'why' questions outlined previously. Rather, they give texture and purpose to the research being conducted. Indeed, within each of these 'types', one could articulate both positivist and interpretivist questions. Take a 'comparative' question, for instance; one could adopt a positivist framework to compare causes of war using large datasets, but one could also compare the emergence of nationalist discourses within an interpretivist framework.

Activity 3 Types of research question

 *approximately 10 minutes*

Look at the following research questions. Can you identify what type of research question they might be?

1. How do different states use soft power?

- ☐ Descriptive
 - ☐ Comparative
 - ☐ Exploratory
 - ☐ Evaluative
 - ☐ Explanatory
-

Answer

This is a 'comparative' question. It invites a comparison between one or more different states to assess the (likely) different ways in which they use soft power.

2. What is the role of ambassadors in advancing a state's foreign policy?

- ☐ Descriptive
 - ☐ Comparative
 - ☐ Exploratory
 - ☐ Evaluative
 - ☐ Explanatory
-

Answer

This is an 'exploratory' question. It seeks to explore the role of ambassadors in foreign policy. In not giving specific variables or aspects to be assessed, the question is open to exploring the dynamics that might be important in this process.

3. What are the core responsibilities of the UN?

- ☐ Descriptive
 - ☐ Comparative
 - ☐ Exploratory
 - ☐ Evaluative
 - ☐ Explanatory
-

Answer

This is a 'descriptive' question. It looks to describe the responsibilities of the UN.

4. To what extent can neorealist theory account for the behaviour of states in international relations?

- Descriptive
 - Comparative
 - Exploratory
 - Evaluative
 - Explanatory
-

Answer

This is an 'evaluative' question. It looks to evaluate the utility of an IR theory – in this case, whether neorealism can theoretically account for state behaviour.

5. How do international norms influence state behaviour?

- Descriptive
 - Comparative
 - Exploratory
 - Evaluative
 - Explanatory
-

Answer

This is an 'explanatory' question. It seeks to identify and explain the specific ways in which one variable (international norms) influences a specific outcome (state behaviour).

4 Descriptive versus analytical questions

At some point in your academic study, you may have been asked to be more analytical and less descriptive. However, it can be difficult to understand exactly what is being requested when a tutor or a marker encourages you to be 'less descriptive'. So, let's break down the distinction.

Descriptive questions ask about the properties of a phenomenon; for example, what are the properties of A? What does it look like? What does it contain? What processes does it involve? Descriptive questions can be useful when starting to think about a topic of interest.

- What are the key aspects of your topic of interest that are discussed in the literature?
- What theories or methods are commonly used to study your topic of interest?



However, these questions don't get us very far in terms of explaining or understanding the social world. They might describe how the world is, but they do not help us in understanding how the world came to be. They might describe a political process, but not why a process produces particular outcomes.

Answering these questions requires analysis, demanding, for instance, that we explain, explore, evaluate or compare. What explains why A happens? What factors are important in producing B? What is the impact of policy C? What does comparing two cases tell us about D?

As you can see, these analytical questions allow you to engage much more deeply with your chosen subject, moving beyond surface description to investigating the how and why of such things. In doing so, you will find that you naturally begin to develop an argument, evidence critical thinking and analysis, and demonstrate how your answer is a contribution to an academic debate.

Thus, when developing your research question, your ambition should be to do so in a way that promotes analysis of the topic you have chosen. For your research question, you want to avoid descriptive questions and to avoid research that merely describes a phenomenon, as opposed to exploring, evaluating, explaining or comparing it.

5 Developing a good research question

You have now spent some time thinking through both what makes a good research question, and the types of research question you might ask. Now you will bring all this together with an activity that asks you to assess the quality of some example questions.

Before moving onto the following activity, you might want to think back to Jamie Gaskarth's masterclass, where he discussed two pieces of quite different research that both represented excellent research questions. First, Roxanne Lyn Doty's explanatory research was formulated as a 'how' question. She then undertook archival research in order to analyse the power structures and knowledge claims that served to legitimise military intervention by the United States in the Philippines. Second, Virginia Page Fortna also asked an explanatory question, but did so with a positivist, hypothesis-testing approach. She achieved this by setting out clear parameters for the research and defining her cases carefully. In doing so, she was able to provide stronger evidence that UN peacekeeping is effective.

Activity 4 Formulating good research questions in IR

 approximately 1 hour

Take a look at the following six research questions. Spend around ten minutes on each one, thinking about the following questions:

- Does it imply a positivist or interpretivist approach?
- What type of question is it? (i.e. descriptive, comparative, exploratory, explanatory, evaluative.)
- Is it a 'good' research question? Why/why not?

1. How successful has NATO's response to the Russia–Ukraine War been?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a fairly good research question. It implies a positivist approach to the research and poses an evaluative question (in this case, assessing the impact of NATO support for the outcomes of the Russia–Ukraine War). The question is specific and focused, and clearly sets out the key actors to be studied – NATO – and the political event (the Russia–Ukraine War). The answerability of the project would depend on the kinds of primary and secondary data available. It might also be strengthened by further narrowing down the focus. One option would be by identifying a timeframe, for example, to examine NATO activities following the Russian invasion of 2022. Without a timeframe, the research project could potentially become very large and unmanageable. The question would also need to specify what it means by 'success' and with which NATO 'responses' it is concerned, but these could be achieved through sub-questions and discussed in the introduction.

2. What is the role of soft power in international diplomacy? A comparative study of the United States and China.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a good research question. Its purpose is both explanatory and comparative (explaining how soft power functions through a clear comparison of important states) and it could invite either a positivist or interpretivist response, depending on how one conceptualises and measures 'soft power'. The question has a clear focus, with the researcher choosing two actors (the US and China) and one political phenomenon (the use of soft power in international diplomacy) to investigate. The researcher would need to conceptualise both 'soft power' and 'international diplomacy' in this study and could draw on large bodies of literature that explain and debate the two concepts. This research question could have been made stronger by including a timeframe, and it could also have identified a specific area or dynamic of soft power to focus on. The researcher will also need to ensure that they are able to access and gather enough primary and secondary data to ensure that the project is answerable.

3. What is the use of social media in diplomacy? An exploration of its efficacy and challenges.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a weak research question. The question is exploratory, and it could be addressed through either a positivist or interpretivist prism. The researcher has chosen one political phenomenon – the use of social media in diplomacy. However, they have not chosen any cases to study (such as the US and China in Question 2 above) and there is no timeframe. It is not clear what 'efficacy and challenges' in this context mean and both terms would be difficult to conceptualise and qualify meaningfully in a way that adds to our understanding of international relations. As a result, the research question is vague, unfocused and the project is in danger of becoming too descriptive and generalised, poorly structured and unmanageable for the researcher.

4. To what extent do NGOs shape global governance regimes? An analysis of norm-building in successful arms control regimes.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a good research question. It is framed within an interpretivist approach to international relations. The question is exploratory yet opens the door to explanation, too. The research question is likely answerable because while primary

research might be possible, albeit potentially bringing challenges of access, the researcher could nevertheless draw on significant bodies of academic literature related to NGOs, global governance and arms control regimes. The research will need to consider what, exactly, it is referring to by 'successful arms control regimes' and make this clear to the reader. It will also likely need to identify key cases to analyse, and the question might be stronger were these indicated in the core research question.

5. Human security as power/knowledge: an analysis of biopolitics.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a weak research question. It adopts an interpretivist framework, centred on ideas of power/knowledge, but it is not clear what the purpose of the research question is. Although undertaking a research project on human security and biopolitics would be feasible given the large bodies of scholarly research on the subject, the current research question is too vague. Stating the actors and political event to be studied and providing a timeframe would strengthen the research question, making the research project more feasible and manageable. Further exploration of the existing literature to identify areas of neglect could help to narrow down the research question.

6. Compare and contrast the foreign policies of Russia and India.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a weak research question. The question is clearly comparative, but it is also descriptive. It is not clear whether foreign policy would be approached here through a positivist or interpretivist framework. Although the question identifies two actors (Russia and India), it is not clear why these cases have been chosen, or what value their comparison will bring. Moreover, researching 'foreign policies' is too vague and needs to be further specified, likely in terms of timeframe and empirical focus. This project could become too large for a dissertation project and potentially unmanageable in the time allocated for completing the project. The lack of focus could also mean that the researcher is in danger of providing quite generalised and descriptive answers.

Conclusion

As the activities in this course have shown, writing a good research question is not easy, and even good research questions can still be improved. You have now spent a fair amount of time thinking about research questions, reflecting on both what makes a good research question, and the types of research question one might ask. Writing a good question is a real skill, and it takes time to practise and develop. Just bear in mind that a good research question should be clear and answerable, it should indicate to the reader that the topic under consideration is significant, and that the topic is being approached in an appropriate and coherent way.

Please also remember that this is a reflexive process. It can take time to narrow and clarify the exact scope of a piece of research. As Activity 4 showed, being specific about the cases and timeframe of the research can really help clarify what it is the research will do, as well as ensure that it is based on an answerable research question.



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Acknowledgements

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Conclusion: A group of students sit around a table discussing their research. Photo: SolStock/Getty Images

Text

Abstract 1: Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M. (2021) 'What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations terminate', 27(1), pp. 281–310, *European Journal of International Relations*.

Abstract 2: Shilliam, R. (2006) 'What about Marcus Garvey? Race and the transformation of sovereignty debate', 32:3, July 2006, pp. 379–400. *International Review of International Studies*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www-cambridge-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/what-about-marcus-garvey-race-and-the-transformation-of-sovereignty-debate/82EB0F78BD1970612442A8079DE4C510>

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