

the thesis question in close sync with your research answers and appropriately managing readers' expectations. Your theoretical exposition should always be proportional to the value-added that you can credibly claim for your research. Nothing disrupts the fit between question and answer in a thesis more effectively than a theoretical framework which functions only as a heteronomous cog, a part of the analysis that turns and turns but never engages with anything else.

'It is relatively easy to build up a theory of the world', remarked the theologian Teilhard de Chardin.³³ But perhaps he was in an unusual category of persons. Doing genuinely new theory at PhD level is now very difficult in all of the humanities and social science disciplines. Their intellectual apparatuses have grown and extended a great deal in the last half century. The large empty spaces and opportunities for making major intellectual advances available earlier on have tended to be colonized. So relying on doing original theorizing should only form an integral part of your doctoral planning if you have very many confirming signals from your supervisors and colleagues that this is an area where you have some strong comparative advantage.

Still it is important to balance a reasoned scepticism about your ability to transcend some established limitations with the need to be a little bit ambitious, to stretch and push your capabilities in empirical analysis, or methodological work, or theoretical or thematic efforts. Until you try to do something a bit different or 'out of the box', how can you ever succeed? Unless you push yourself to do a bit more it will be hard to establish your genuine intellectual limits. There is now very good evidence that those people who do the most original work are generally less cautious than the ordinary run of scholars. Creative people tend to be more persistent and dedicated in their efforts, less put off by initial reverses or disappointments. They are also more sanguine or overoptimistic about their prospects of success than perhaps may seem 'rational'. They are more prone to dream of making big advances, which helps them to soldier on rather than be put off by barriers in their way (see Elster below). Creative people also find ways of underestimating the difficulties in their way. As Hirschman says, they mentally scale down the hurdles they need to surmount or the levels of effort

associated with different elements of their work. Perhaps they also compress the time-scales involved.

Creativity always comes as a surprise to us: we can never count on it and we dare not believe in it until it has happened. In other words, we would not consciously engage upon those tasks whose success clearly requires that creativity be forthcoming. Hence, the only way in which we can bring our creative resources into full play is by misjudging the nature of the task, by presenting it to ourselves as more routine, simple and undemanding of creativity than it will turn out to be.

Albert Hirschman ³⁴

In many cases, I submit, the belief that one will achieve much is a causal condition for achieving anything at all.

Jon Elster ³⁵

These attributes of a positive mental outlook are much more characteristic of younger people than those in middle age. Life's disappointments often induce a progressively more cautious outlook in established scholars. They can subconsciously react to possible rejections or failures by renouncing difficult projects in advance. So it is no coincidence that in the most difficult or technically demanding subjects (like mathematics and highly mathematical physical and social sciences) genuine innovations or new insights are most associated with scholars in their twenties or early thirties. And in all disciplines journal articles publishing is most characteristically a young person's game. Older academics often retreat into editing journals or publishing chapters in edited collections put together by colleagues, rather than risk the rough and tumble of having their papers refereed, criticized and possibly rejected. This pattern also underpins the importance of the doctorate still as a key source of ideas and 'new blood' research in all the humanities and social science disciplines. And of course it sheds an interesting side-light on the folly of those governments and educational bureaucrats who in many countries have tried hard to routinize and de-skill the

PhD by making all students do only 'manageable' topics within very tight time limits.

Experience takes more away than it adds: young people are nearer ideas than old men [and women].
Plato 36

For most students it is best to steer a compromise path between biting off more than you can chew in defining your doctorate and never pushing yourself enough to develop your own intellectual potential. You need to strive for a research design which encourages you to try out difficult things but also provides safeguards and insurance solutions if they do not work out. You should recognize also that being original in the modern social sciences and humanities is rarely about coming up with an entirely new way of looking at things. Instead it is mostly a more modest activity. Here originality involves encountering an established idea or viewpoint or method in one part of your discipline (or in a neighbouring discipline) and then taking that idea for a walk and putting it down somewhere else, applying it in a different context or for a different purpose. This characteristic also explains why the fringes of disciplines are often the most productive areas for new approaches. It is here that scholars are often most actively borrowing or adapting ideas developed in one discipline to do work in another.

Someone accused him of stealing an idea from another composer and he shrugged and said, 'Yes, but what did he do with it?'
An anecdote about George Friedrich Handel, told by Robertson Davies 37

Originality should also be seen as most commonly a cumulative achievement. It rarely arises from a single-shot flash of insight or the Archimedean 'stroke of genius' of popular imagination. New ideas most often reflect the patient accumulation of layers of small insights and intuitions that only taken together allow an alternative view of a problem to crystallize. Sustained attention to a problem is almost always useful.

My strength lies solely in my tenacity.
Louis Pasteur 38

Creativity takes time.
T. Z. Tardif and Robert Sternberg 39

It may help your thinking also to formalize and even verbalize alternative interpretations of your problems and findings, and to express them as a debate between different positions. Lewis Minkin recommends adopting different roles or voices for short times as a useful device in interpretative writing. For instance, at different times you could try acting as 'detective' ferreting out hidden information, or 'pattern-maker' trying to systematize the information discovered, or 'juggler' trying to make apparently conflicting patterns fit together. The idea here is not to let your inner tensions and contradictions about your progress remain latent.⁴⁰ Instead try to surface explanatory problems more explicitly and it may help you to decide what weight to put on each interpretation. Minkin also mentions other possible positions. For instance, a fatalistic or 'awkward sod' view might be that events cannot be satisfactorily or plausibly explained. This position can function a little like a null hypothesis position ('there's nothing to find out here, only random connections'), and it may serve as a corrective to overelaborate explanation in some circumstances.

The depth to which a sense of the difficulty, of the problem, sinks, determines the quality of the thinking which follows. Sometimes slowness and depth of response are connected [in] getting to the roots of the matter.
John Dewey 41

Being puzzled, being unsure, being mistaken, and changing tack through trial and error, seem to be both integral and conducive to creative research.
Lewis Minkin 42

As your writings grow so many new issues will automatically arise. How can my theme or my findings in this chapter be dovetailed with those of another? If they seem distinct, can they be

connected more strongly? Are they consistent, or conflicting, or simply at a tangent from each other? If they seem inconsistent, can they be reconciled? Academic value-added is mostly generated by two factors here. The first is being able to see clearly that these questions have arisen, which is determined partly by your own skill as a writer, codifier and communicator of ideas (to yourself as well as to everyone else). The second influence is your having the psychological courage and ingenuity to try and answer questions or tackle conflicts, rather than following a natural initial instinct to evade, suppress or disguise problems from readers. The most original people 'keep the faith' with uncomfortable research findings or disconcerting implications of their arguments, rather than just backing off from them or concluding that they must be wrong. Then they try to work these troubling findings back into a revised or adjusted framework of their intellectual commitments in some satisfactory way.

Conclusions

Karl Marx once remarked, 'Beginnings are difficult in all the sciences'.⁴³ For PhD students your first year or 18 months is always an acutely taxing time, involving multiple decisions and transitions. You are simultaneously setting out on an extended life-project, choosing and committing to an intellectual topic and an approach, which you then have to live with, and upgrading your normal work outputs to doctoral level. But the problems of defining what your dissertation argument is centrally about, and doing original and substantive work, are not just evanescent 'first-year PhD blues'. They are instead permanent aspects of becoming and remaining an independent and committed intellectual, someone who can effectively communicate her thoughts, and thus do more in the world than cause a library shelf to bend a little over a period of years.

Things do generally get easier though, as your materials accumulate and chunks of work get completed. How far and how fast you become more sanguine or assured depends on two things: on the one hand, the strength and clarity of your central research questions; and on the other, your ability to structure and organize the thesis materials as an effective whole, to which I now turn.

3

Planning an Integrated Thesis: the Macro-Structure

The pattern of the thing precedes the thing.
*Vladimir Nabokov*¹

Any large text has to be broken up and arranged into a set of chapters. This task may seem unproblematic. First think about how many thousand words you want to write, and then how many chunks of text you need to split up this total effectively. Next settle on what topics to begin with, and where you want to end up. Then fix on some way to get from alpha to omega. So far, so straightforward. But there is a bit more to it than that. One of Neil Young's ironic songs has a record producer telling a rock artist that they have a 'perfect track', although they don't yet have either a vocal or a song. 'If we could get these things accomplished,' he says, 'nothin' else could go wrong.'² Planning a thesis from a blank-canvas requires a similar heroic optimism and there are multiple considerations to keep in mind.

Your structure has to be accessible for readers. They must see the sequence of chapters as logical, well organized and cumulative. At the same time, if you are to understand what you are about, the overall thesis plan has to sustain your progress as an author and researcher. It must keep your argument on track, motivate you to move on, and facilitate the development of your methods and approach. The succession of chapters has to be related in some definite and planned way to the timetable for your research. The vast majority of PhD students (around four-fifths at a guess) are 'serial' authors. They find it easiest to write chapters in a single sequence, starting chapter 5 only

