

## **Step 1: Identifying Your Topic and Ensuring it is a Researchable Idea**

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### **Topical Discussion: Identifying Your Topic and Ensure it is a Researchable Idea**

Your research idea or topic was probably derived from an experience, an interest, or some form of knowledge that you gained during studying. You probably had a moment in which you pondered, “I wonder if...?”

I (Amanda) used to work as a child and family therapist. While counseling clients, I noticed that a child’s behavioral problems in school increased as the verbal communication among the family tended to deteriorate. I wondered if there was a relationship between quality of a family’s verbal communication and number of behavior incidents that a child had in school.

This inquiry is practical in nature. Researching children’s behavioral problems and family’s communication as a practitioner would give me worthwhile knowledge that I could use for practice. However, Kerlinger and Lee (1999) stated that the primary purpose of empirical research is theory. Solving an applied problem is not a sufficient or an appropriate reason to conduct empirical research. Empirical research needs to contribute to building a theory; that is, significantly contribute to scholarly literature to the field. This is especially true when writing a thesis or dissertation. An “I wonder if...?” is a good place to start when proposing empirical research or developing an empirical research plan, but that is simply what it is, a place to start. This starting place is necessary, but not sufficient.

Once you identify a practical inquiry, you need to immerse yourself in the literature related to your topic of interest in order to:

- 1) Place your study within the scholarly literature to show how your research fits into what is already known; that is, to demonstrate the relationship of your research to existing theory and research, and
- 2) Shows how your research makes a contribution on the topic to the field; that is, to fill a “gap” in the literature that needs to be filled.

What gap have you identified in the literature?

That is, to make is an empirically significant researchable idea

**Research Tip:** To identify researchable ideas in the literature, pay attention to the sections at the end of the article, especially, the limitations and the recommendations for future research. Read the study limitations and ask yourself, can I modify this study to minimize or eliminate these limitations? Or, perhaps one of the suggestions for future research that extend the study is of interest to you and a study you could conduct. Remember that the literature in which you are examining for this purpose should be no more than 5 years old. It is ideal if it is only 1-2 years old. This is important, because if we use older research articles the gaps may have been filled more recently and this information may be included in more current peer-reviewed literature.

Let's go back and consider my practical inquiry about the quality of family communication and a child's behavioral problems in school. Let's say that after reviewing the literature on this topic, I find that several studies have been completed and the research literature revealed a conclusion that there is a relationship between these two factors. I might notice that the research that has been completed has examined middle and high school students and not elementary students. I may also note that several studies suggest that further investigation is needed to determine if a child's attitude toward authority is a mediating factor in the relationship between these two variables. Thus, I identify empirical problems, research questions, that have yet to be answered:

- Is there a relationship between the quality of the family's verbal communication and number of behavior incidents that a child has in elementary school while controlling for the child's attitude toward authority?

This topic is worth pursuing; that is, has the potential to make an original contribution to the field. It is empirically significant. However, Rudestam and Newton (2007) suggest that there are two more questions I need to ask myself before determining if this question truly is a researchable idea, especially if I am going to pursue it for the purpose of a dissertation or thesis:

- Is the above research question a topic that is not too emotionally charged so it makes the research difficult to complete and remain objective, yet still interesting to me? Will it sustain my interest?
- Is the topic simple and not overly challenging or ambiguous? Am I attempting to take a snap shot or am I planning to film a documentary? If my answer is the latter, then I need to narrow the topic. This is referred to as the funnel effect. Imagine putting research question through a funnel to streamline the question so that it becomes a "snap shot" research question

### **The Case of Charlie**

Charlie is getting ready to begin his dissertation research; he has an interest in anxiety and how it influences a person going through the transition from high school to college. He is interested in this topic because his younger cousin, Mikey, was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) last year. Mikey really struggled in school with academics and social interactions until he started receiving treatment. Now that Mikey is getting ready to go to college, his parents are concerned that the transition will be traumatic and result in Mikey not being able to finish. In addition, due to Mikey's awkwardness in social situations, his parents are concerned that he may not be able to establish friendships and may become isolated during college.

Knowing that an idea needs to be researchable (in order to simplify the ideas communicated in the text when the authors will use the term "researchable" rather than saying "an idea that can be researched"), Charlie, conducts a search of the literature and realizes that many studies have been conducted on therapies and medications that can treat generalized anxiety disorder, so he determines that there is no need for more research in these areas at this point in time.

As Charlie digs deeper into the literature, he discovers that individuals who are diagnosed with anxiety often experience interpersonal and academic problems in school. A growing body of

evidence suggests that a transition from high school to college often is traumatic and; thus, problematic (Eccles, 2008). Many students do not adapt well to college life and experience academic difficulties during their first year of school, which can eventually lead to dropping out (Tinto, 2006).. In addition to academic challenges, there are also interpersonal adjustments, such as living on his own, making friends, and navigating the college campus, that individuals with anxiety disorders have great difficulty with. Throughout the reviewed articles, there is a call for research to identify interventions for students diagnosed with anxiety disorders to assist with the adjustment process that takes place when students transition from high school to college.

In his research, Charlie also begins to notice the construct of emotional intelligence, a set of skills or a set of characteristics that may impact a person's ability to relate to others. He even found an article that suggests that Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a predictor of interpersonal adjustment (Summerfeldt, Kloosterman, Antony, & Parker, 2006) and achievement (Hassan, Sulaiman, & Ishak., 2009); thus, he wonders if an intervention that increases students' emotional intelligence could improve adjustment to college.

Charlie combed through the literature published in peer-reviewed journals on the constructs of "group treatment," "anxiety," "emotional intelligence," "emotional intelligence interventions," and "transition into college." He used the library databases such as "Academic Search Complete" to search for more articles related to his variables of interest. He focused his attention on articles published in the last five years as he looked to see if there was a gap in the literature pertaining to his area of interest.

Charlie found several publications related to promoting emotional intelligence in elementary school students through the process of creating real life opportunities for them to interact with others. Charlie also found that emotional intelligence is a construct that is being emphasized in business management programs. And, similar to the elementary studies, research in higher education business classes demonstrated that service learning projects are used as an intervention in business classes to improve student's emotional intelligence (Manring, 2012). Charlie wondered if a curriculum had been established to put together a group for helping high school seniors or college freshman to regulate anxiety and develop emotional intelligence, and ultimately succeed academically and relationally in college.

The more Charlie read through the peer-reviewed literature, the more he was convinced that emotional intelligence could play a key role in college students' interpersonal adjustment and achievement; however, he could not find literature on emotional intelligence interventions for college students who were diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. He did however find that clinical trials have found cognitive behavioral therapy to be effective to treat generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), especially when compared to other psychotherapies. Cognitive behavioral therapy was identified as a therapy to effectively assist individuals with GAD regulate their anxiety, and thus, perform more effectively in various aspects of life.

Article after article suggested that there was a relationships between emotional intelligence, academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, and performance, and several articles suggested that the relationship among emotional intelligence, anxiety, and academic achievement (Hassan, Sulaiman, & Ishak., 2009) Many article also called for interventions to be established

that assisted college students with generalized anxiety disorder to help them transition successfully into college and, ultimately, successfully complete college. Charlie found a gap in the literature.

Charlie wrote in his proposal, “Hassan, Sulaiman, and Ishak (2009) found that a relationship exists between emotional intelligence and academic achievement, and a negative relationship exists between anxiety and academic achievement. They suggest future studies focus on the relationship between the variables: emotional intelligence, anxiety, and academic achievement. Additional research calls for effective interventions that assisted college students with GAD transition successfully into college. Cognitive behavioral therapy is identified as a therapy to effectively assist individuals with GAD regulate their anxiety, and thus, perform more effectively in various aspects of life. Literature also suggests that emotional intelligence leads to better performance, academically and interpersonally. Thus, this research will examine how a cognitive behavioral, emotional intelligence intervention will effect the anxiety level, interpersonal relationship skills, and academic achievement of freshman college students diagnosed with GAD.

Charlie concluded that his topic now filled a gap in the literature and was researchable. Now, let’s turn to your research proposal.

### **Application: Developing My Research Plan**

Answer the following questions in regard to your topic:

What is my topic?

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Where did I derive the idea?

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Is my topic worth pursuing; that is, does my idea have the potential to make an original contribution to the field? Is it empirically significant?

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Is my topic a topic that is not too emotionally charged (so it would make the research difficult to complete), yet still interesting to me? Will my topic sustain my interest?

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Is my topic simple and not overly challenging or ambiguous? Am I attempting to take a snap shot or am I planning to film a documentary?

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Does my topic need to be revised?

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If, yes, how does it need to be revised?

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What steps do I still need to take to revise my topic?

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