



## **Finding the Right Fit in Your Dissertation**

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For those of us pursuing doctorates in gerontology-related fields, one of the most critical milestones is the dissertation, yet the process of selecting a dissertation topic is often overlooked as an area of mentorship and guidance. So, how do you find the right dissertation project?

First and foremost, your dissertation has to be a project that you care about. This is likely your biggest and most independent research project to date, and you will spend a substantial amount of time on it. If your professional interests do not align with the topic, you may be in for a long and unhappy dissertation. Think about the areas in which you have enjoyed working or that make you feel like you are contributing to the field. This passion should align with the intended direction of your work, whether it serves as the foundation for your program of research, provides insights into the clinical population with which you intend to work, or develops your expertise to share with students through teaching. Your dissertation data may serve as pilot data for funding applications and, if you choose to publish your dissertation, can begin to position you as an expert in the topic. Thus, your dissertation should be focused on a topic you are passionate about and serve as the basis for your career trajectory.

There are also a number of practical issues that need to be considered when selecting a dissertation topic. Often the most pressing for students is the issue of time. Consider your career and when you would like to finish your dissertation when selecting not only your topic, but also your research design. Your dissertation may not be the time to do original longitudinal data collection for a randomized controlled trial if you are hoping to collect data quickly. Find an area in which a question that has not yet been answered and could contribute to the extant knowledge but also is feasible to answer in a reasonable amount of time. There may also be an opportunity to conduct secondary data analysis on pre-existing data or add a component to an ongoing study. Publicly available datasets (e.g., the Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiology Surveys) may also be good for this purpose. You may also want to check with your department and advisor about the possibility of publishing several manuscripts on a theme (usually three) instead of completing one large dissertation project.

In the same vein, practical issues such as funding and potential recruitment sites or populations are also important to consider. If you are able to secure funding, you may have more options for measures or methods that are costly. Funding may also make recruitment easier, as incentives may increase recruitment rates. Without funding, you may want to consider populations in which you can offer other incentives (e.g., college students who can be offered course credit) or designs that increase the likelihood of participation (e.g., brief surveys completed while waiting for a doctor's appointment).



It is also important to consider your advisor's expertise and mentorship when choosing your dissertation. Though you do not want to simply replicate your advisor's work, you also do not want to choose a topic so far outside his or her area of expertise that he or she cannot provide strong mentorship. Finding a niche within his or her program of research can be key to finding the best topic for your dissertation. In addition to the expertise of your advisor, it is also important to think about your own knowledge and expertise. Is there additional coursework in statistical techniques or specific data collection methods that you need in order to successfully complete the proposed work?

In sum, when selecting your dissertation topic, you should think about a topic that you are passionate about, that will provide a basis for your career, and that fits with the practical limitations you are facing (e.g., time, funding). If your program allows it, consider options like secondary data analysis for your dissertation project or publishing manuscripts in lieu of a formal dissertation.