

Research proposals in ethnomusicology

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The research proposal is used:

- (1) to obtain funding
- (2) to obtain approval (supervisory, departmental, ethics, governmental, etc.)
- (3) to define and plan your work.

The following sections should be included (length and format will naturally vary depending on use). Consider the research proposal an evolving document, written and rewritten in dialog with the ethnographic process itself.

I. Title: Research topic

Length: one phrase.

Research topic = research area + basic research issue

(e.g. Media transformations in the Sufi music of Egypt)

Your topic should center on documenting musical practices in a particular social, historical, discursive, and geocultural area, with a view towards addressing a particular issue concerning these practices. This documentation is to be both descriptive, and (via problematization) theoretical. The issue should be compelling, at least for you, because it will provide the primary motivation for your research.

II. Research aim, research value

Length: one paragraph.

In this opening paragraph, state your research purpose. Expand the research topic: elucidate the aim of your research, by listing the general question(s) you'll address, while motivating and justifying your project by explaining the importance of this research in the larger scheme of things (often including the assertion that you're treading new research ground, and filling knowledge lacunae, but also the assertion that your research is important for what it may contribute to broader research programs, in music studies, and beyond to cognate disciplines in humanities and social sciences).

III. Research area and scope

Length: variable.

Research area = intersection of {fields}

Research scope = focused area

A. Research area

The research area (e.g. Sufi music in Egypt) sits at the intersection of a number of research *fields*, where the word "field" can be interpreted in either a general sociological sense (a social system of positions, e.g. the legal field, the religious field), or in a more specific sociological sense (an arena of academic practice, e.g. legal studies). Such fields might include geocultural fields (e.g. Middle East, Egypt, Islam, popular culture), as well as disciplinary fields and issues (sociology, religious studies, performance theory, gender)

Present general background information about the research area enabling the non-specialist to understand and appreciate your research topic. Define unfamiliar terms; describe and define the area generally, situating the area in broader historical and socio-cultural context. Elaborate on why this area is important, by relation to existing research, or broader concerns. Cite references as needed. You may also wish to define area-related theoretical terms used in the definitions of aim or topic as you understand them, and cite theoretical works for this purpose.

B. Research scope

Define the more limited area that you will actually be studying. You can't go everywhere or talk to everyone or study everything equally, so choices are necessary; here you'll present those choices, along with practical or theoretical justifications for making them. What and where are your research sites? What dimensions of the research area will you be examining (or not examining)? What particularly subfields, e.g. of sociology, interest you and why? What is your "sample" (e.g. people, groups, genres, events)? Which issues or theories are of primary concern? With whom will you be working?

What are the specific variables, time periods, cases, and socio-cultural sites you will be observing or comparing? Throughout, justify: Why have you selected this particular scope?

IV. Research paradigm (model): problematization

Length: variable.

Problematization of a topic entails generation of queries and methods via application of a (typically, discipline specific) theoretical perspective, a model¹ or paradigm² (comprising a set of concepts and ontological-epistemological assumptions), which is itself interrogated in the process.

Problematization helps to guide your research, and maintain a critical edge, so as to challenge the truth-value of the received “wisdom” of preceding scholarly discourse. Problematization also automatically connects your research to that of others deploying similar perspectives, making your work more broadly relevant and significant, at least within the paradigm adopted. (When paradigms shift, older work starts to appear stale!)

Briefly, problematize your topic using relevant theoretical paradigms, listing queries and methods generated by each. What sorts of research questions and methods does each paradigm suggest?

WARNING: Is the model or paradigm functioning as a *lens* (to be looked through), or as a *theory* (to be tested)? A true paradigm is not recognized as such (as in Kuhn’s theories about the history of science); the lens gets so large that one forgets it’s there. There’s a danger in this case of paradigm-centrism, and finding the expected is often a self-fulfilling prophecy. Better to adopt an a priori paradigm only *conditionally*. One of EM’s often under-appreciated roles is to *test* social theory, whereas far too much research seems only to *confirm it*. For this reason a powerful paradigm is the non-paradigm of *grounded research*, which insists on a strict inductive relation between theory and practice that is closer to scientific theorizing. But another approach is simply to ensure a plurality of paradigms, avoiding any premature allegiance until you can justify it.

The matter also depends to some extent on the topic at hand, the department or discipline, the researcher’s predispositions, and those of the supervisor(s). As a result of these factors, some research such a priori theorization is more prominent, while other research is more inductive (e.g. grounded theory) and theorization awaits accumulation of experience and data. That’s ok. But you’ll still need to formulate research questions and methods clearly in this portion of your proposal:

A. Research queries

Focus your general research question in light of the paradigm or theoretical perspective you are adopting. Outline issues to be addressed; questions to be answered; relationships, models, or hypotheses to be tested, explaining how these stem from your paradigmatic perspective, if relevant. Questions include the journalist’s usual how-what-why-where-when-who-which, as well as the yes/no variety (“is there a relation between X and Y?”). How do these questions relate to broader lines of theoretical inquiry? How does your research contribute to the understanding of more general problems in music studies, or in the social sciences, arts, and humanities at large? Motivate your questions, explaining why they’re important.

Often the most captivating questions are those arising out of comparative research methods (see below).

Define theoretical terms as you intend to use them, citing relevant sources as needed. Expand your bibliography accordingly.

Note that research questions are entirely different from interview questions; the latter can be outlined under “research methods.”

B. Research methods

1. Method(ology)

Theoretically, and practically, how do you intend to carry out the research, from start to finish? Include discussion of methodological literature as needed. What are the methods, and associated resources (equipment, knowledge, skills, funding) required? Justify the validity of these methods. Why are these methods sufficient to answer your research questions? Why are they necessary? (is there an easier way?) Anticipate possible objections and critiques – how will you cope with obvious difficulties (e.g. language, scarcity of informants)? Think theoretically, as well as practically: for

¹ I now prefer this word, which implies the visibility, awareness, and active selection that tends to pertain in the social sciences.

² This word implies a near-invisible worldview, after Kuhn 1962 (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*).

instance, if you are claiming you need to make video or audio recordings, how will they advance your research? Some of the commonly adopted methods in ethnomusicology include: pure observation, participant observation, action research, informal or formal interview, feedback interview, focus group, musical apprenticeship, musical performance, sponsored performances (“setups”), media studies (radio, TV, cinema), inventorying music shops, AV recording, transcription and analysis, online communities, archival research. Most research is qualitative, but more quantitative methods (e.g. surveys, questionnaires—including in person, telephone, or Internet) are also possible. Include tentative interview question lists here.

2. Comparative and multisited research strategies

Comparison entails evaluating more than one (roughly parallel) “case”, where a case could be as specific as a piece or person, and as broad as an entire musical style or culture. Comparative perspectives are nearly always critical to moving beyond mere description, because (in suggesting possible causal relations between “independent” (manipulated) and “dependent” (observed) variables, while other variables are controlled—held constant) they lead to “why” questions that can be both significant and compelling. Rigorous, balanced comparison in ethnographic research requires a team of researchers. However, unlike quantitative sociology, comparisons in music studies need not invoke rigorous quantitative methods, or balanced treatment of multiple cases. Rather, you may deploy a “low N” (where N is the number of cases). Certain cases may be central (and heavily researched), and others peripheral (and lightly researched), or one can compare a case against its background, an inclusive environment (subculture vs society at large). Cases can be individuals and social groups, or abstract categories (e.g. “the elderly”). Or the comparison can be historical (“the 1960s vs. today”). What are your cases? How many are there? Which variables are independent or dependent? Which variables are controls? Can you hypothesize their relation?

Multisited research entails tracing aspects of your research scope to multiple research “locations”, where a location may be defined by social and cultural as well as geographical coordinates, acknowledging that multiple processes of globalization (e.g. Appadurai’s ethnoscape/mediascape/finanscape/ideoscape/technoscape) are bound to impact research scope, to cause you to define research scope as non-localized, or both. Multisited approaches can be expensive when multiple sites are physically distant from one another (though they need not be far apart, and might even be co-located, differing in social rather than physical space coordinates), and—requiring changes in your social positioning and requisite modes of thinking—potentially pose significant ethical and practical problems. Yet multisited research is increasingly important, in recognition of (1) late 20th century critiques of the limits of traditional geo-localized ethnography that erroneously reifies non-existent cultural boundaries, and (2) the reality of ever-accelerating processes of globalization, particularly since the late 20th century, that have dissolved whatever boundaries once (partially) existed, and strongly connected geographically and socio-culturally disparate sites.

3. Feasibility

Address also the *feasibility* of these methods, given your resources (including your own knowledge and expertise, and the stated timeline and budget - see below – for carrying them out), and possible ethical or practical obstacles, limitations, or objections. What are your qualifications to complete this research successfully? (e.g. degrees, training, language skills, cultural knowledge, prior research and publication) What are the required resources at your disposal? (e.g. advisors, university facilities, archives). Typically a CV is also requested, and if so you can present yourself more fully there. What steps have you taken to mitigate ethical problems in researching human subjects?

V. Output objectives

What do you foresee as the project’s tangible outputs (dissertation, thesis, lecture, film, video, monograph, textbook, article, archive, museum exhibit, social change, etc.)? Why are these the ideal outputs? What do you foresee to be their significance and impact? Outputs are the research results with the direct potential to effect change in the world, and thus assume a particularly weighty importance in applied ethnomusicological research.

VI. Literature review

Length: variable.

The literature review is a critical bibliographic essay or annotated bibliography relating to your research topic. The purpose of preparing this section is three-fold: (1) to learn everything you can about your topic, so as to generate an informed research proposal addressing gaps in the literature, and building on what’s already been accomplished; (2) to prove to the world that you’ve done so, i.e. to demonstrate your expertise and readiness to carry out the research, and to show that your research addresses gaps in the literature and builds on what’s already been done; (3) to conduct your research effectively,

and interpret your results in light of existing scholarship. Often this section is subsumed under III and IV. Items should be critically reviewed, not to be dismissed, but so that their limitations can be exposed.

VII. Workflow and resources

Justify and detail your requests for time and money! Both underestimating and overestimating will undermine your proposal's credibility. Like other sections of the research proposal, this section is useful for your own planning, as well as for obtaining resources and permissions from others.

A. Timelines

B. Budget

VIII. References cited