

## **Research Statement**

### **Simon J. Purdy**

The approach I take to research is best summarized by Angus MacGyver, the iconic 1980s television character, who said that “with a little bit of imagination, anything is possible.” I embrace this notion by staying curious in the topics and questions that I choose to research, and in the methods that I use to collect and analyze data toward these ends. My training in research methods has been extensive, with courses in both data collection and analysis, including advanced statistical modeling (non-linear, multi-level and path analysis/structural equation modeling), qualitative comparative analysis, and ethnographic methods, along with general topics courses in qualitative and quantitative data collection. Along with these courses, I have specialized in research methods as part of my doctoral degree, focusing on evaluation research, mixed methods and statistical analysis for my area examination. All of this training has put me in a position of being able to utilize a broad range of methodological approaches, and to incorporate students into my research efforts.

My current research interests and projects cover a variety of social phenomena and relationships. The main topic that has been driving my interest is the impact of modern digital communication technology (cell phones, the Internet, social media, etc.) on our social world. My dissertation took an experimental approach in order to examine the causal effects of cell phone use on the formation of social capital. This project illustrates my interest in examining those factors of social life which are not often critically questioned or assessed, as well as applying new methodological approaches to issues that have been studied in limited form. My dissertation research was recently selected as the nominee for WMU, from all of the social science dissertations over the past two years, for the national CGS/ProQuest Distinguished Dissertation Award. It is my intention to conduct research into technology and other areas that is of the same high quality as I move forward in my career. I have also conducted research into the relationship between Internet use and civic engagement, with results suggesting that although new technologies offer great opportunities for civic action and involvement, they do not appear to be as effective in this regard as one might expect from an examination of existing literature. In this ever expanding aspect of society, the possibilities for new research are nearly limitless. And indeed, I have interests in studying the role of surveillance technologies, such as aerial drones and CCTV cameras, in power structures and institutions such as prisons, police forces and the military, as well as continuing my research into the everyday impacts of digital technology.

My interest in technology research expands beyond these areas as well, as I don't desire to become a specialist in just one area of social research and theory development. It is my hope to conduct research that bridges the study of technology with broader areas of social interest, such as inequality and power. I am currently conducting research which applies the criminological labeling theory to recent unrest and rioting in communities across the country, with the hope of learning more about the effects of police militarization and mass media as they play into the current dialog on race and inequality in the U.S. This project highlights my interest in conducting research that explores current social developments, especially those which are controversial and poorly understood. Issues of inequality and power were also central to my involvement in a qualitative analysis of OECD countries, under the instruction of Dr. Susan Carlson, focusing on the decline in workfare and subsequent increase in prisonfare (prison expansion) as a means of controlling surplus populations.

Looking to the future, my active approach to research will not be slowing anytime soon. I plan to continue my research into the social impacts of technology, and expanding the scope of this research along with this increasingly important field. I plan on continuing my work on cell phones and social

capital formation, building a longitudinal research design/lab that would allow for the examination of multiple imputations and hypotheses. This research will involve student researchers in an ongoing project, creating opportunities for original research at the graduate and undergraduate levels. My future plans also include looking at the effects of technology on education, such as one-to-one computing programs (for which I have already built a longitudinal dataset), or even workplaces, where research findings would be applicable when it comes to effects on socialization and networking. I also plan to continue conducting research on issues of technology, power and inequality, especially within the criminal-legal system, as this is an issue that will be increasingly important as public perceptions of policing change, prisons fill beyond capacity and tensions mount between social class and racial groups within our society. For example, I have a current project that applies labeling theory to instances of modern riots, to better understand the intersection of police militarization, media portrayal and public reaction as potential causes for these events. As with my research up to this point, I also hope to explore new interests and methodological approaches as they arise in my life. For instance, my training in anthropological methods has raised an interest in conducting ethnographic research of subcultural groups and hope to expand this research to areas such as computer hacking, protest movements and Internet trolling in the future.

Although an academic pursuit of knowledge for the development of social theory is a central aspect of my research and training up to this point, I also have a great interest in (and considerable experience with) research that has applications outside of academia. Since 2012, I have been working with the Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan (GSHOM) as an evaluation researcher and manager, actively building, conducting and improving evaluation methods for an organization with over 20,000 child and adult members across the state of Michigan. In this position, I have had the ability to conduct research that makes a difference, informing policy decisions by assessing the effectiveness of Girl Scout programs as they relate to organizational outcomes. For instance, I conducted a recent study looking at recruitment efforts in hundreds of schools across the GSHOM, with a hierarchical linear modeling analysis suggesting that certain efforts were more effective in increasing girl recruitment than others. These suggestions have been worked into the recruitment strategy of the organization, and have been shared with other Girl Scout councils across the country. A recent promotion allows me to assist in executive level decision making and gain experience in non-profit management. I have also been involved in several community related research projects since moving to Kalamazoo at the beginning of my graduate education. I was recruited as a surveyor for a study which looked at racial profiling in the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety, the results of which have had impacts on public opinion and local policing policy, and worked on data collection and reporting for an evaluation of the citizens' use and perceptions of drinking water in Kalamazoo.

These efforts outside of academia illustrate my belief that social research is best learned “hands-on,” and that putting research to work on issues affecting the larger social picture (be it local policy or national events) is important for the advancement of the social sciences. And in this regard, my future research efforts will involve students, as researchers and active participants, to develop their research skills through firsthand experience. In my research on the effects of cellular phones for instance, a longitudinal experimental design will incorporate student participation (graduate and undergraduate) as assistant researchers at all stages, from subject recruitment to data collection and even analysis. My work on riots in the U.S. will involve students in helping to development a final QCA database of social protests. Other projects that arise will be brought to bear in the classroom, with research examples being used to illustrate concepts, and bringing students into the field to help with data collection, analysis and reporting. This will also involve connecting students with research opportunities in the community, and ongoing evaluation projects, that hold the prospect of external funding and the establishment of ties with community agencies.

With all of my research projects, I will develop sociological knowledge by publishing my findings and presenting at multiple academic conferences. I have been presenting at academic conferences since I was an undergraduate, and feel that such presentations are an arena for sharing findings and developing approaches to research methodologies and theoretical construction. I have two papers published in a peer reviewed journals, *Computers in Human Behavior* and *The Hilltop Review* (a theoretical look at power and surveillance technologies, and a structural analysis of Internet use and civic engagement). I also have one manuscript currently under review (revise and resubmit) in *Sociological Research Online*. I plan on continuing to publish my dissertation research as a series of articles focusing on theoretical and methodological contributions to our understanding of cell phones as a social force. I also plan on building my dissertation research into anthology chapters about the effects of technology on society. With my future research, I will strive to publish in top-tier academic journals in a timely fashion, in order to advance our understanding of the social world in modern times.

I desire to continue with research that affects the community as well, and applying my developing research methods repertoire to these efforts along the way. This applied research also has the potential to generate funded research opportunities, and my experience with such research (and the funding process that goes along with it) should help in pursuing these opportunities as they arise. Whatever research opportunities or challenges face me in the future, I am sure that with my diversity of training and experiences up to this point, I will be able to approach them systematically; and with a little bit of imagination and adventure in the application of method, these challenges should prove to be fruitful endeavors for both scientific knowledge and real world applications.