

An Exercise in the Philosophy of Science

The class Method and Theory in Socio-Cultural Anthropology requires that each student pick a “slice” of anthropology and examine the history of ideas and the philosophy of science of that sub-domain in the form of an extended literature review. I knew that the next semester I would begin working on my honors thesis, which requires a thorough literature review as part of the proposal. As such I decided to research the economic side of the thesis topic I intended to propose the following semester: how economic models apply to the black market in antiquities. To begin the research I performed some basic queries (e.g., Economic Anthropology + Bibliography) on Google to look for bibliographies on economic anthropology as well as on economic models. I cross referenced the UMD Library Catalog and Research Port with the bibliographies to find as many of the articles and books as possible. While at the library I would scan the section around the book that I was getting to determine whether or not there were other useful ones that my search did not turn up. I did the same on Research Port.

The most basic criteria for selecting articles and books was whether or not it fit into one of the three basic parts of the paper: the history of ideas for the domain (early and recent), the philosophy of science for the domain (early and recent including methodology, epistemology, ontology, and examples), and one subtopic or issue to be expanded on (in this case an economic model). From there I looked for specific quotes or information that would be helpful in the paper. If the article or book only discussed the categories above generally, it was not of much use. The most useful sources were those that not only gave an in depth analysis of one or more of the categories, but also gave well cited examples that I could then go look up.

Once I had done the preliminary research, I sorted the sources first by early vs. recent history of ideas and philosophy of science of the whole domain vs. the early vs. recent history of ideas and philosophy of science of the specific economic models I had found. Each of these two broad categories was then divided by the approach the source dealt with (either by exemplifying one or criticizing one). Such an organization allowed me to focus in on what additional information was needed. Often the best sources came from looking at the bibliographies of the articles and books I had. Whenever I found one that was particularly relevant I would look for it on the Catalog or Research Port.

While my research methods worked well, they were not very efficient and I discovered that I spent more time researching and finding nothing than I did synthesizing and analyzing what I had found. I spoke with my professor about how to be more efficient while researching. He suggested three methods to improve efficiency of my research. First, that I try to refine my searches based on the number of results I got back. The fewer the results the more accurate the search term is, ideally a good search term will return 100-200 results, which is a manageable number to go through quickly. Second, he suggested that I keep track of what search terms worked and what didn't. These records can be very useful if someone were to question how you found a source. Finally, he suggested that it might be beneficial to talk with someone in the economics field to clarify some of the points I could not tease out myself.

All three of these methods have dramatically improved the efficiency of my research and my ability to tease out the most important information. The last suggestion has been especially useful in my work on my senior thesis. My discussions with other academics in economics have helped me narrow the focus of the study before I start the research process, which makes it more efficient. These discussions also help me to gain valuable contacts in the field into which I intend to go.