EXPLORING POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Finding your question is the hardest part, even if you know your topic.

   Earlier training doesn't prepare you for leap into unknown.

   Follow your interests, they will guide you.

   Keep a journal or file folder with ideas (and dates) and review periodically for common themes.

2. Structure your question by defining the dependent variable.

   Why the dependent variable? Because it is limited, narrower, the real object of your interest.

   Seek a comparative structure with two contrasting outcomes. like an experimental design, comparative method helps you think about critical "causal" factors, and most important "control" factors. Talk with others to hammer out the question.

   Test the question by asking whether we already know the answer. Or do we just think we know, and do you have a surprising but promising new hunch?

   Simplicity will yield more powerful results than complexity.

   Be particularly careful about "circularity," the tendency to try to explain a thing by itself. This happens when the measurement of the dependent variable is too closely intertwined with the definition or measurement of the independent variables.

3. Trust your instincts and your experience.

   Pick a topic you like and that excites you. Otherwise you won't have the motivation to sustain you. But be cautious about topics that are "too close," where you have a very heavy emotional investment or about which you have unresolved feelings or anxieties.

   Your question should be answerable with a method and data that you
enjoy using. Library research, quantitative analysis, interviews, history, or whatever.

Don't be misled by getting tired of what you know most about and abandoning it. You have a major investment. Instead of veering off into a new field, look for a novel and exciting angle on what is already familiar.

Use "avoidance" creatively. [I learned to play the recorder while doing my dissertation.] Spell off yourself when tired of one kind of work with doing another kind that needs to be done. Reading-writing. Library work, data cleaning. Interviews, note-taking, etc. Make time for exercise and reading for fun. Keep your life in balance.