

**Addressing the perpetual critique, “You need to refine your research agenda.”**

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## **Addressing the perpetual critique, “You need to refine your research agenda.”**

### **Introduction and Need for Innovation**

Early-career academics frequently set and revise their research agendas to reflect their research interests and identity, while trying to align with the expectations and pressures of the academic “organization” (Santos & Horta, 2018). Within the academic organizational environment, junior scholars are expected to develop research agendas that lead to the contribution and creation of knowledge (Santos & Horta, 2018) and research productivity (Horta & Santos, 2020). Research productivity is the defining metric used to assess academic output (Kyvik & Aksnes, 2015). Thus, it is critical that early-career academics identify and develop an agenda that advances intellectual knowledge in their field and produce deliverables such as peer-reviewed articles and competitive grants. This is particularly important for early-career academics working toward tenure and promotion (Hammarfelt & Rushforth, 2017) in competitive organizational environments (Giroux, 2016). There are numerous challenges involved in developing an individual research agenda, which can lead to anxieties for early-career scholars (Felt et al. 2013; Purvis et al., 2023).

Here, we present a multimodal collaborative research technique as an innovative idea to support early-career researchers in defining their research identities and agendas while finding networks that encourage collaboration and provide support. We tested this framework using a case study of graduate and post-doctoral research fellows in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication PLACE Laboratory, at Texas A&M University.

### **How it Works**

We tested our technique by generating critical reflections using Tripathi et al.’s. (2022) ‘retrospective collaborative autoethnography.’ This method of inquiry requires researchers to collaboratively interrogate their autobiographies. Using the five steps of Kearney’s (2015) Conceptual Content Cognitive Map (3CM), we developed a representation of participants’ mental models. First, participants were presented with a prompt to generate reflections: “Imagine that you are having a night in with your friend who does not work in academia or research. During casual conversation, the topic of research arises. They are interested in knowing more about the career path you want to take. Your friend asks you, ‘Why do you want to be a researcher? What research areas interest you?’ What would you say to them? What would be important for them to know?”

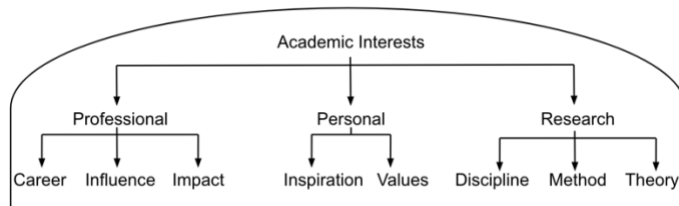
Interviewees’ responses to the prompt were recorded. A series of follow-up questions asked interviewees to expand on their reflections. Jamboard was used to record and organize the participants’ responses on cards. Participants then organized the cards into categories. No guidelines or constraints were given for the organization of the cards to encourage exploration and discovery. Participants labeled each category, indicating why they organized the items as they did. Finally, participants answered a series of reflective questions.

Transcripts and cognitive maps were anonymized and co-coded using AI and manual thematic analysis. Combining AI with qualitative analysis is a novel avenue to enhance thematic analysis and uncover deeper codes (Gamieldien et al., 2023). Each participant received a copy of their cognitive map, the analysis we used, and a set of networking recommendations. These

resources were provided to aid in future revisions of the interviewees’ research agendas and to encourage collaboration and support within the research team.

**Results to Date**

Upon analyzing the 3CMs, 4 main themes and 8 sub-themes emerged. Using the themes, we developed a new framework that captures the structure of the fellows’ research identity and interests (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *Autoethnographic Research Agenda Cognitive Map Framework*

Results suggest this is a novel and valuable mentoring mechanism to help early career scholars define their research agendas and build networks. Through this process, the fellows gained clarity regarding their research foci and used multimodal methods to organize their thoughts and ideas. One interviewee reported, “this interview method is great

for both visual and non-visual persons because it helps crystallize our abstract ideas and order them into a better structure” (Part. 2). Resulting collaborations allowed new perspectives and provided space for interviewees to exchange views, fears, hopes, frustrations, and progress. Congruent with findings from Lee & Bozeman (2005) and Purvis et al. (2023), interviewees identified and developed a support group and vision of opportunities for expanding their network.

**Future Plans and Advice to Others**

Moving forward, we plan to expand this opportunity to include a larger purposive sample. Additionally, we plan to build upon our framework to establish a systematic way of organizing the resulting cognitive maps so that participants can refer to them, edit them, and compare them with others’ maps. Following this, we intend to create a guide for implementing this multimodal framework and disseminating it to other research-focused universities, institutes, and centers. Innovative concepts, networks, and research identities that result from this work will be shared through the OakTrust digital repository and publicly accessible. Furthermore, we intend to continue to connect this effort with extant theory, such as Santo et al.’s work on dimensions, thinking styles, and influences of research agendas. Lastly, we will edit our interview guide to remove items that address the same ideas to avoid repetitiveness.

**Cost and Resources Needed**

There are no monetary expenses required to carry out the first stage of the implementation of our innovative idea. However, it is important to note that this activity takes time to organize and facilitate, both because it relies on interviews and because it takes time to analyze the data and evaluate the learning outcomes of this approach. Interviews require a contact list of potential participants, participant recruitment (via email, telephone, and in-person), interview scheduling, and data analysis. Interviews take 45-60 minutes. Additionally, access to a computer, internet, and MaxQDA or equivalent software is recommended.

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