

Starting a Research Project



Methodological Questions of Chinese Economic Research

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Agenda

Research Question	Research Questions and Problems Contributions
Theory	Theories and the Role of Theory Research Paradigms
Research Design	Variables and Measures Data Collection and Analysis

The Process of Starting a Research Project



Topic



Research
Question



Literature
Review



Theory



Research
Design



The Process of Starting a Research Project



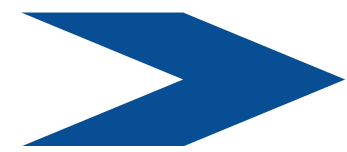
The Process of Starting a Research Project



Finding a Research Question



Finding a Research Question



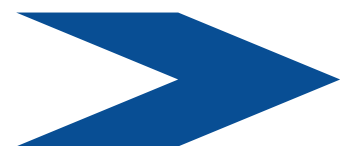
What do you want to research?

Sounds easy, but many students and academics struggle to find a worthwhile question or topic.

You need a sound idea of what to research before taking any further steps.

Can we help you to solve the dilemma? No, but we can try.

Finding a Research Question

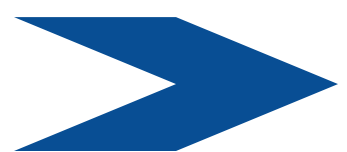


What is self-centered research?

Good research arises from genuine interest. Self-centered research is good research. What do we mean by that?

We follow Mullaney and Rae (2022) and define self-centered research as...





What is self-centered research?

“A *practice* of research that emphasizes the importance of starting the research journey from exactly where you are *right now*, and maintaining close contact with yourself—your instincts, your curiosity, and your biases—throughout the process.” (p.4)

“An *ethic* of research that involves consciously acknowledging and assessing your abilities and your limitations as a researcher.” (p.4-5)

“A *state of mind* that affirms the value of your ideas, assumptions, and concerns in shaping your agenda and the direction of your research.” (p.5)

Finding a Research Question

General recommendations

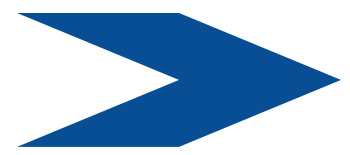
Reading is a prerequisite for research (and finding a topic).

Note-taking is at the heart of any research process (→ next slide).

Talk to people and hear your thoughts spoken out:

- Talk to yourself before you talk to others.
- Don't just follow your supervisors' proposals mindlessly.

Source: see Mullaney and Rea (2022)



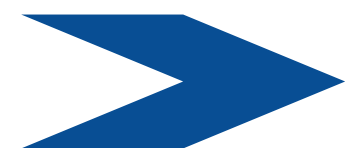
General recommendations

Note-taking is at the heart of any research process:

- Thoughts are fleeting; write them down as they occur.
- We take notes on literature and in the field. Similarly, we should take notes on our thoughts and responses to materials as ‘self-evidence’.
- Be honest with yourself. Overcome the ‘internal editor’ and write down unfinished thoughts to create the basis for deep insights.
- Writing is (critical) thinking!

Source: see Mullaney and Rea (2022)

Finding a Research Question



General recommendations

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before

Finding a Research Question

you need to think about

„finding a topic“

Finding a topic

Pick a topic you feel **passionate** about. 



Pick a topic you feel **capable** of tackling.

Pick a topic with **sufficient available sources**. 



Talk to people (yourself, your friends, or (if necessary) your supervisor).

Don't get bogged down on finding the 'right' topic. 

➤ How to find one's passion?

What classes have you taken so far? What topics have you read about?

What sparked interest in you? What tickled your brain?

Review old class materials.

Use handbooks on exciting topics to get an overview of the discourse.

Read the news and follow trends.

Exercise:

Exploring a topic

Search for a topic in a database.

Click on a few results that interest you.

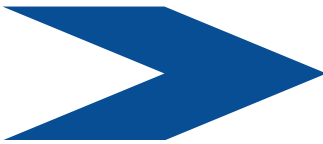
Scan the results and abstracts.

Observe yourself and your reactions.

Write down a couple of interesting entries and answer these questions:

- **Why did it interest you?**
- **What does this make me think of?**
- **What questions come to mind?**

Finding a Research Question

Topic  Question

Congrats, you've found a topic that interests you!

The inconvenient truth is that you'll have to read far and wide to develop a question, and not everything will eventually be useful.

BUT: the process will refine your thinking and ideas.

Note down all sorts of questions that cross your mind while reading.

Finding a Research Question

Question  Research Question

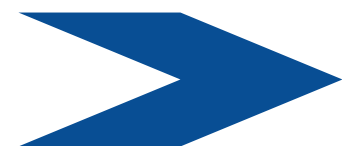
Now you've got a lot of questions, but they need to be developed further.

Try to combine questions into bigger questions.

For a question to become a research question, it needs to be **significant, i.e., it needs to make a contribution.**

How do we know whether a question is **significant?**

Finding a Research Question



Contribution: 'so what?'

Practical: findings can be applied to the real world.

Theoretical (Conceptual): findings enhance our understanding of issues.

Methodological: findings contribute to our understanding of doing research.

Social: findings have a positive impact on society.

Dimensions of Research Problems

Types of → research problems	Practical	Conceptual
Condition	Phenomenon in the real world	Not knowing something
Consequence	Tangible effect that manifests as a cost	Keeps us from understanding something of importance

Source: based on Booth et al. (2016), chapter 4. and Turabian (2018), p.18.

Exercise:

Identifying a problem

Lay out your questions in front of you.

Don't answer them, but ask yourself: What are shared concerns that connect these questions?

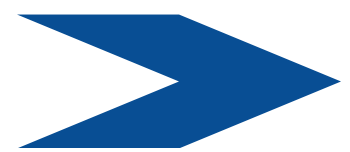
Take on another person's perspective and speculate about the deeper questions that connect them.

Write down those deeper questions.

Prioritize if necessary:

- degree of specificity/generality.
 - medium- or high-level questions.
- these questions should be more general than the specific factual questions you generated earlier.**

Finding a Research Question

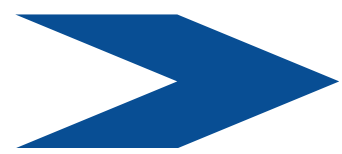


Using research problems

The research problem is something that should be resolved. By solving the problem, you provide the reader with something valuable.

Note that:

- the research question focuses on the condition.
- the contribution focuses on the consequence.



Using research problems

I am working on X [topic]

because I want to find out Y [question]

so that we can better Z [contribution]



Finding a Research Question

Research questions

Research questions are a **clear statement** of what it is that you want to find out.

Use **‘how’** and **‘why’** questions because they ask for the interpretation of facts, not just their discovery.

Research questions

Do **not** ask descriptive questions.

Do **not** ask yes/no questions.

Do **not** ask ‘to what extent’ or ‘how successful’ something is because you are probably not able to measure that.

You **don’t** need a research question for every part of your paper. Instead, you can define research objectives that provide a more straightforward path to answering your research question.

Finding a Research Question

Put time and effort into finding a good research question.

Research something you enjoy; it does make a difference.

Read, take notes, and talk to people.

Develop single ideas into a bigger research question.

Your research question should be a 'how' or 'why' question.

Make up your mind about the 'so what?' to ensure your question's significance.



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Theory	Theories and the Role of Theory Research Paradigms
Research Design	Variables and Measures Data Collection and Analysis

Choosing a Theory



Choosing a Theory

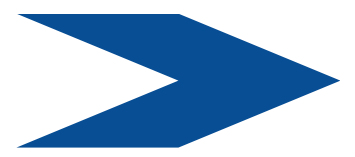
There's no easy, infallible guide to finding a theory.

No single 'correct' theory exists because each research possesses individual characteristics.

Your choice of theory depends on the type of research, your motivation, and your interpretation of reality.

Theories can inform the reader of the researcher's perception of reality.

Provides context for your data.



What even is theory?

A theory is a ‘way of explaining observed patterns of associations between phenomena’ (Bell et al., 2019: 19).

Theories should be testable and falsifiable.

Middle-range theories are theories based on empirical data.

Empirical knowledge is knowledge gained from experiences and/or senses.

Grand theories are abstract, high-level theoretical perspectives on the world.

‘Theory’ can also refer to the ‘background literature’ on any given topic.

Choosing a Theory

What even is theory?

A good theory:

- offers conceptual **definitions** and defines variables.
- it **limits** the domain of your research.
- **builds relationships** between concepts.
- allows for and makes **predictions**.



Choosing a Theory

Why do we need theory?

Data without theory cannot really tell us anything.

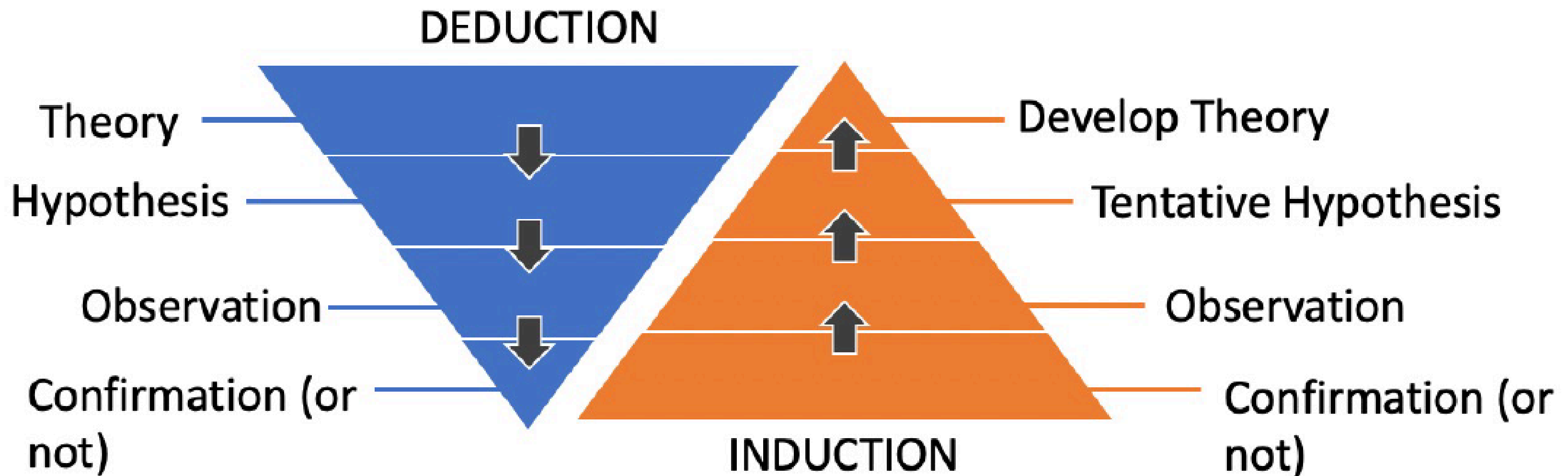
Social sciences are often dismissive of research not based on theory.

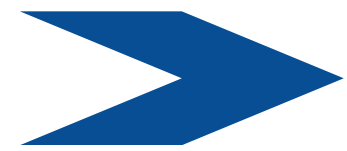
Theories help us frame, interpret, and conceptualize observed phenomena.

A theory is like a lens through which you view a phenomenon (different glasses, different interpretations of phenomena).

Choosing a Theory

The role of theory



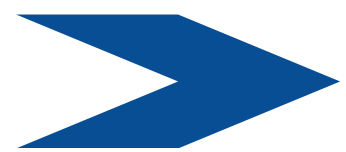


Theories and research paradigms

	Positivism	Interpretivism	Critical realism
<i>Ontology</i>	Independent and objective reality with constant causality	Socially constructed reality (multiple realities possible)	Objective reality with observable surface-level events
<i>Epistemology</i>	Knowledge generated by discovering general laws and relationships with predictive power	Knowledge generated by interpreting subjective meanings and actions of subjects	Knowledge generated by process of 'retroduction' that is used to create theories that explain observable events
<i>Methodology</i>	Specific, deductive, hypothesis-testing with emphasis on generalisability	Exploratory, inductive, theory-generating with emphasis on depth	No preference for particular method, choice depends on research question

Source: based on Sovacool et al. (2018), p.15.

Choosing a Theory



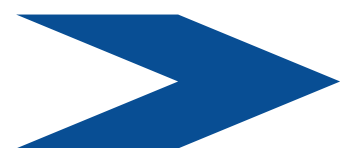
How to choose a theory?

Your preliminary literature search will inform your understanding of the use of theory in your topic area. Moreover, your research question and choice of theory (and methods) will need to reinforce each other.

When choosing a theory, you should consider:

- the appropriateness of the theory for your research project.
- the ease of application.
- its explanatory power.

Choosing a Theory



Stages of finding a theory

Look at class materials and see how the topic was looked at in class.

Look at journal articles on the same topic and read their theory section.

Do a literature search with the key variables of your research and try to identify theories in the search results.

Starting a Research Project

Questions?



Starting a Research Project

Homework

Work out a more detailed research question for the next session with Ilker

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