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Methodological Questions of Chinese Economic Research

Structuring a (Policy) Research Project

Session Agenda

- *Why structure matters*

- *Blueprint: How to structure an empirical research paper/thesis*

- *Treib (2014): An Introduction to the specifics of Policy Research*

- *Exercise: From research idea/question to an outline*

Session Objectives

1. *Understand how to structure a research paper/thesis*

2. *Get familiar with the building blocks of empirical research*

3. *Reflect on the methodological challenges in policy research*

4. *Begin outlining your own term paper project*

Why does **structure** matter in academic research?

Why structure matters in academic research

1. Structure reflects your thinking

A clear structure is not a formality or bureaucratic requirement
→ it's the **visible logic** of your **line of reasoning** (argument)

2. Structure enables orientation

It tells your reader **where** they are in the argument, and **why** something matters at that point

3. Structure creates coherence

It ensures that research aim, theory, method and findings are **logically connected** ("roter Faden")

4. Structure avoids "academic drift"

Unstructured texts often jump between ideas, lack clarity, and lose analytical focus

5. Structure makes your contribution visible

A well-structured paper helps readers grasp what is **new, relevant, and convincing** in your work

How is a **good** research paper/thesis structured?

Blueprint for Empirical Research

- (Abstract)

1. Introduction

2. Literature Review

3. Theoretical Approach

4. Method(ology)

5. Results

6. Discussion

7. Conclusion

How do you **start** your research project?

Blueprint for Empirical Research

- (Abstract)

1. Introduction
2. **Literature Review**
3. Theoretical Framework
4. Method(ology)
5. Results
6. Discussion
7. Conclusion

1. Introduction

1. State importance/relevance of the topic

Introduce the topic and outline why it should be studied

2. Brief literature review

Situate your study within the context of your research field

3. Identify research gap

Provide justification of your study

4. Formulate research aim ("fill the research gap")

Present what your study is about

Optional: Highlight main contribution; Introduce the method; Present structure of your study

1. Introduction: Ask Yourself

Why is this topic important?

What has previous research shown?

What is the gap I am addressing?

What is my (specific) aim?

2. Literature Review

1. Define key concept(s)

Provide necessary definitions of terms important to your research

2. Identify key themes from the literature

Outline the literature on the main topics related to your research

3. Analyze the literature

Analyze previous studies so to reinforce the research gap

4. Repeat research gap + aim

Provide justification of your study

2. Literature Review: Ask Yourself

What do others say about the topic? Who are the key authors?

What concepts and definitions matter?

Where are the blind spots?

→ **You are joining a conversation, know what has been said before you speak!**

3. Theoretical Approach

1. Introduce your theoretical framework

Present the theory (or theories) you drew upon when designing the study and/or analyzing the data

…

→ **Advice to consider: Which specific parts of the theory are particularly important when applying it to your research topic and answering your research question!**

3. Theoretical Approach: Ask Yourself

Which theoretical lens helps you understand your topic/question/case?

What are the concepts or hypothetical (cause & effect) mechanisms you expect?

4. Method(ology)

1. Introduce and justify your research method

Define and outline the method

2. Give background information about the context of your study

Present the context in which your study was conducted (e.g. COVID-19, geography)

3. Present sample and sampling techniques + ethical considerations ("perceived sensitive topics", etc.)

Outline which objects or material you studied, how you got it and any ethical considerations; *why* did you choose them and *how* did you choose them

4. Present your research methods and techniques

Specify which research tools you used and how you conducted your study (e.g. case study, interviews)

5. Introduce data analysis techniques

Present how you analyzed your data and justify your choice

4. Method(ology): Ask Yourself

How will you collect your data?

How will you analyze your data?

Qualitative, Quantitative (or Mixed Method) analysis?

→ **Why are theories and method(ologie)s important?**

Importance of Theories and Method(ologie)s

If the theoretical and method(olog)ical **premises** are false/flawed, then the **conclusions** drawn from them are also wrong, which can have massive (practical) implications/consequences

5. Results

1. Present the main results

Present the (empirical) results you obtained organized by *themes* in a logical order

2. Use clear and meaningful tables, figures or quotes from participants and/or literature

Provide a visual representation of the data and evidence

6. Discussion

1. Briefly restate the result(s) to be discussed

Remind the reader of the result(s)

2. Compare the result(s) with the literature

Relate and situate the result within the literature context (similarities and differences)

3. Explain the findings and/or differences with the literature

Explain the (unusual/unexpected) findings you obtained and possible differences with previous studies (why different results?)

4. Interpret and judge these findings

What do these findings mean and suggest? How can they be understood?
(Theoretical & Practical Implications?)

7. Conclusion

1. Restate the main aim and topic

Remind the reader of the aim and topic of your study
→ Link *Introduction* and *Conclusion* sections → "create a frame"

2. Recap the key findings and contributions + a brief discussion

Restate the main findings & discuss them briefly
→ Main contribution, takeaway message + theoretical & practical implications

3. State limitations

Acknowledge the limitations of your study, *BUT* explain why it is still useful

4. Suggest further research

Make suggestions on what future research should focus on

Results, Discussion, Conclusion: Ask Yourself

What did you find out? (Results)

What does it mean? (Discussion)

Why does it matter? (Conclusion)

→ It's not just a list of results; it's an interpretive analysis and judgement based on the empirical material

What is **Policy Research**?

Definition based on Treib (2014)

*Policy research is a **field of empirical social science** that aims to **understand** and **explain** the formulation, adoption and implementation of public policies - including the objectives of the actors involved, the institutional context and the normative evaluation of (policy) outcomes*

Policy Research is concerned with:

- Public policies (laws, regulations, subsidies, taxes, campaigns, services, etc.)

- Political action, interaction and inaction in specific policy fields/domains

- Actors involved: governments, administrations, corporations, interest groups, experts, etc.

- Decision-making processes and behavioral implementation dynamics

→ **Answer**: **"Why" and/or "How"-Questions**

Two Core Approaches in Qualitative Policy Research

1. Process-Tracing (Prozessanalytische Policy-Forschung)

Goal: Identify *causal mechanisms* in policy decisions/behavior

- Focus on "why" and "how" a decision was made → corresponding behavior

- Assumes that actors' orientations and interpretations are (re)constructable

- Methods & Sources: case-specific procedural "step-by-step" reconstructions of policy outcomes, expert interviews, documents

Example: decisions/behaviors in ministries, implementation of economic policies

Two Core Approaches in Qualitative Policy Research

2. Interpretative Policy Research

Goal: Reconstruct the *meaning-making, worldviews* & *framing* of actors in policymaking

- Focus on "how" actors interpret their environment, roles and policy problems

- Assumes that *reality* is socially constructed → there is no single "truth", but multiple actor perspectives

- Methods & Sources: Participant observation & ethnography; Discourse analysis of speeches, texts, media coverage; In-depth interviews focusing on narratives & frames

Example: how public debates shape economic, environmental or welfare policy

Methodological Challenges in Policy Research

1. Data availability

▪ Much decision-making happens behind closed doors

▪ Reliance on documents and expert interviews

2. Generalizability vs. depth

▪ In-depth case studies = strong explanations of specific policy outcomes, limited transferability

▪ How to balance depth with scope?

3. Method choices and epistemological differences

▪ Interpretative vs. causal-explanatory approaches

▪ No "one-size-fits-all" method

Begin Structuring Your Own Research Project

1. Working Title → What is the topic (policy issue) of your project?

2. Relevance → Why is this important to study?

3. Research Question → Refine your question: Why? How?

4. Research Aim → What do you want to find out?

5. Theoretical Approach → Which theories & concepts might help you answer your question?

6. Method → What type of research design would you choose? (e.g. qualitative vs quantitative?)

7. Empirical Material / Data Sources → What kind of data might be available or needed?

Tasks for next session

Read texts:

1. Mayntz (2022) – Steering

2. Gündoğan (2024) – Political Steering Theory in the Era of 'Top-Level Design': The Unexpected Implications of Campus Football in Xi Jinping's China

Thank you for your attention