

Theory, Concepts, Methods and Research Design (= The Method of Your Research)

Chapter 9 from the book:
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with contributions by Signe Skov

The Good Paper - A Handbook for Writing Papers in Higher Education

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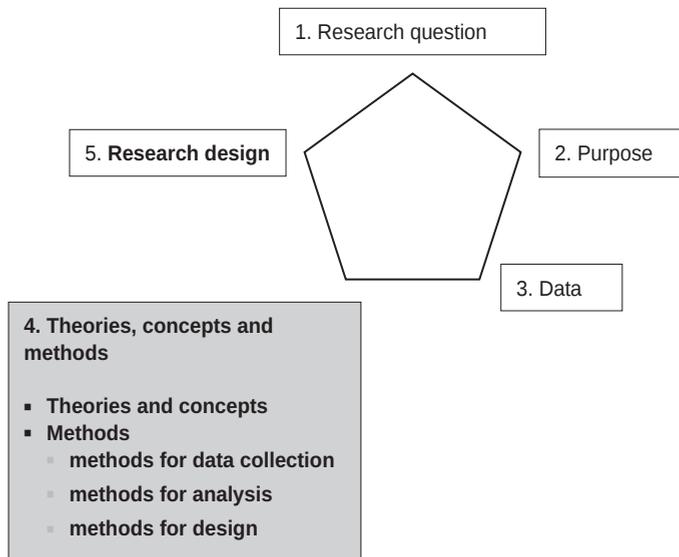
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9. Theory, concepts, methods and research design (= the method of your research)

First of all: Note that the title of this chapter mentions “method” twice. We distinguish decidedly between a paper’s *research design* and its *research methods*. The research design is principally unique to the paper in question. With each new research question, the student constructs a new research design, i.e. procedure for examining the material that is the object/data of the paper. We will return to this later in this chapter.

In the pentagon, the methods of different fields and the paper’s research design are placed in each their corners: 4 and 5 respectively:



Definitions

Theory and research methods are the fields’ tools for examining material (data) or discussing with. This is why curriculums often make demands on theory and research methods. In this chapter we describe how to meet these demands in papers.

In the good paper it is crucial to include the field's concepts, theories and methods because by using the field's tools:

- you demonstrate the ability to analyse and use the knowledge of the field
- you relate the field's tradition and foundation to the data that theories and methods are applied to
- argumentation becomes academic trustworthy – because theories and methods are crucial to a paper's argumentation (see chapter 11).

Theory and method do not have to be included in first year practice papers. However, in later years of study, the curriculum usually requires that research papers and theses include and explicitly treat either theories or research methods – possibly both. Simply storing them at the back of your mind or drawing on them implicitly is not enough.

Theory, concepts, methods, data – definition

Theory

System of ideas (or assumptions) within a field which describe, analyse, explain and predict the phenomena of the field and which establishes frameworks of understanding for the field.

Concepts

The keywords (often drawn from theory) used to analyse and organise your information.

Methods

The methods of the field are specific or general (=used in a number of fields), are often theory based and constitute tools for concrete tasks, e.g. collection, categorisation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation of data, design (construction, processing, etc.).

Research design

The research design is the problem-based procedures accepted in the field used to research a disciplinary problem.

Data

The object of study and the material you can refer to (observations, data, statements, texts, sources, but also theories and concepts that are analysed and/or discussed by means of other theories). See chapter 8 on data.

Some disciplines include many concepts and theories. This is especially true of the soft/dry disciplines. However, in these disciplines papers will not always include method sections and students will often look nonplussed when asked about their methods. Other disciplines include numerous methods, but less theory. This especially applies to the hard/wet disciplines. Here researching, among other things, consists of using systematic methods for collecting, classifying and evaluating data. Other disciplines are rich on both theories and methods, e.g. Social and Medical Sciences, Pedagogy, Psychology and many others.

Theories in your paper

Theories can serve different functions in your paper:

Possible functions of theories in your paper

- As the foundation for method (analysis, categorisation, evaluation)
- As the explanation of research results (interpretation, validation)
- As background, set of values (a theoretical current or school of thought)
- As data (object of study)
- As discussion, comparison, contrast
- As a separate authority (supportive argument).

Theories generalise and encompass many, sometimes all, phenomena of the same type. If you are interested in a theoretical question or a general description of a phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself, you can decide to write a purely theoretical paper. If you want to know something about special, individual phenomena and individual manifestations of phenomena, you can choose specific examples and apply theories to them.

Concepts are often drawn from theories

Commonly, only parts of theories, rather than entire theories, are used. E.g. you draw out key concepts and models representing important categories in the theory and apply these to your analysis. So “theories in paper” will often mean “selected concepts from theories”.