



Loughborough
University

Thinking with Theory:

Moving Postgraduate Research Beyond Description



About me

Aberystwyth University

- BA Human Geography (2002)
- MA Space, Place and Politics (2003)
- PhD (2006) *Regions in focus: a new regionalist interpretation of England's Northwest*

Loughborough University

- Department of Geography & Environment (2006-)



About me

Loughborough University

- Professor of Urban and Regional Studies
- Associate Dean for Research & Innovation

Regional Studies Association

- RSA Trustee and Board Member (Conference & Events)
- Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Regional Studies





Loughborough
University

Introduction

Aims & Key Objectives



Aim

To help postgraduate students understand the role of theory in framing research problems, guiding analysis and producing scholarly contributions.

Key objectives

1. Understand what theory does in postgraduate research.
2. Distinguish between concepts, frameworks, models and theories.
3. Use theory to frame a research problem and interpret findings
4. Avoid merely decorating your work with theories you do not actually use.

Question: write down the three words in these objectives that you think are the most important?

Key objectives

1. Understand what theory does in postgraduate research.
2. Distinguish between concepts, frameworks, models and theories.
3. **Use** theory to **frame** a research problem and **interpret** findings.
4. Avoid merely decorating your work with theories you do not actually use.

Question: tell me where in your work you use theory to 'frame' and 'interpret'?



Loughborough
University

Can you spot theory?





REGIONS IN FOCUS: A 'NEW REGIONALIST' INTERPRETATION OF ENGLAND'S NORTHWEST

JOHN HARRISON

INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND EARTH SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF WALES, ABERYSTWYTH





REGIONS IN FOCUS: A 'NEW REGIONALIST' INTERPRETATION OF ENGLAND'S NORTHWEST

JOHN HARRISON

INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND EARTH SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF WALES, ABERYSTWYTH



Question: How many times do you think I used the word 'new regionalism' or 'new regionalist' in my PhD?

336

Remember: Use theory to frame a research problem and interpret findings.

Question: How many times do you think I used the word ‘new regionalism’ or ‘new regionalist’ in each PhD chapter?

Chapter 1: Introduction

27

Chapter 2: 1st Literature Review (Theoretical Debates)

Re-reading the new regionalism: a sympathetic critique

117

Chapter 3: 2nd Literature Review (Policy Debates)

The political-economy of Blair’s “new regional policy”

19

Remember: Use theory **to frame a research problem**

Chapter 4: Methodology

54

Chapter 5: Empirical chapter

Chapter 6: Empirical chapter

Chapter 7: Empirical chapter

Chapter 8: Empirical chapter

Chapter 9: Empirical chapter

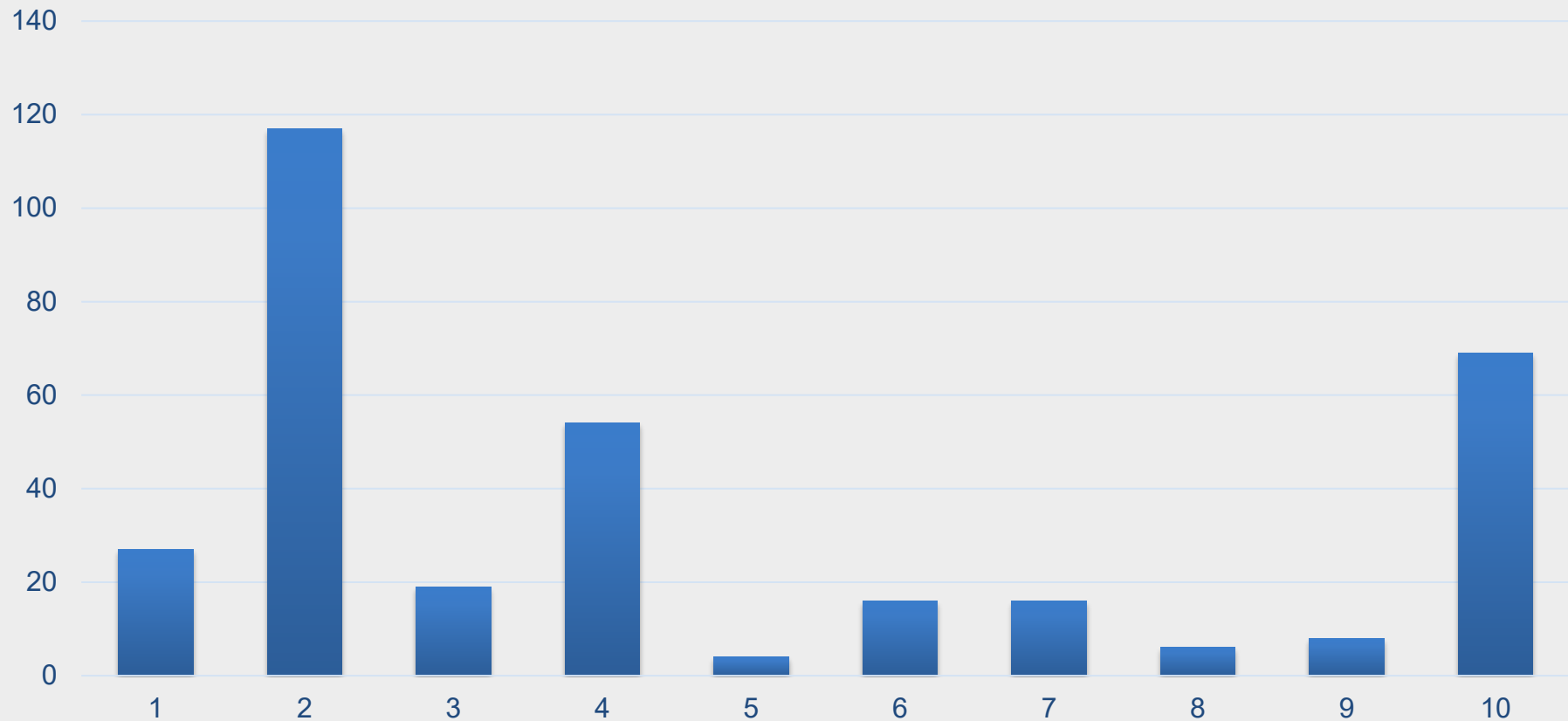
50

Chapter 10: Conclusion

69

Remember: Use theory to frame a research problem and interpret findings





Start as you mean to go on: “*Use theory to frame a research problem ...*”

CHAPTER 2

RE-READING THE NEW REGIONALISM: A SYMPATHETIC CRITIQUE

“[The New Regionalism] is a set of stories about how *parts* of a regional economy *might* work, placed next to a set of policy ideas which *might* just be useful in *some* cases.”

Lovering (1999: 384; original emphasis)



Top and tail

CHAPTER 4

DOING REGIONAL REGULATION THROUGH 'NEW REGIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY'

In both theoretical and political domains, it is something of a truism to declare that regions are on the agenda like never before. Until recently, however, methodological debate has been hiding in the backwaters of debates surrounding the resurgence of the region; specifically, the question of how do we approach such research? In fact, I would argue that many of the weaknesses identified within the 'new regionalism' and approaches to 'regional political economy' discussed in the previous two chapters have been reinforced by the methods deployed, and the lack of rigour in these approaches.

As discussed in Chapters 2 & 3, despite Lovering (1999) and MacLeod (2001b) providing the theoretical impetus for pursuing new avenues of research, through their critiques of the new regionalism, I believe that their papers are insufficiently sensitive to the practicalities of actually *doing* what I would call 'regional regulation'. In the case of Lovering (1999), his paper is an evocative commentary, which explicitly deconstructs the new regionalism, but one that offers little in the way of a framework for rebuilding the component parts of this body of work so as to proffer a way forward. While sympathetic to the general tenor of Lovering's critique, in MacLeod's own words he seeks to offer some "sobering reflections on what might be recovered" in an attempt to rescue the new regionalism (MacLeod, 2001b: 805), with this reconstruction to be achieved through the

CHAPTER 8

TERRITORIAL CONFIGURATION PART I: EXPLORING ENGLAND'S 'FRAGMENTED' NORTHWEST

As I pointed out and discussed at length in Chapter 2, new regionalist orthodoxy is dominated by concern with the territorial configuration of regions. Concepts from 'clustering' to 'institutional thickness' and from 'spatial agglomerations' to 'institutional milieu' are all deeply rooted in concerns for the facilitation of territorial cohesiveness in these new regional spaces of economic development and mobilisation. At the same as new regionalist accounts emphasise the importance of the local, seeking out difference and unique territorial accomplishments in an increasingly homogenised global world, they concomitantly argue that these local factors that are perceived to harbour the capacity to avail competitive advantage, need to be juxtaposed alongside a sense of sociospatial cohesiveness in the territorial confines within which they are located. As

CONCLUSION

REGIONS, REGIONALISM, AND REGIONALISATION: TOWARDS THIRD-PHASE NEW REGIONALISM?

10.1 I Want to Break Free! The New Regionalist 'Lock-In'

Over the past fifteen years, the scholarly writers and political implementers of new regionalist orthodoxy have had a magnetic hold over the way we conceptualise regions, observe regional change, and practice regional studies. Swept along by a wave of mutual reinforcement created in, of, and, between academic and policy communities, the 'new regionalism' was the buzz word for regional enthusiasts in the 1990s, such that the new regionalist was seen to be at the forefront of dynamic research debates on the newly emergent state spaces being produced under contemporary capitalism (Paasi, 2002). From the classical backgrounds of Allen Scott and Michael Storper in North American economic/industrial geography, to the diverse international backgrounds of Paul Krugman (economics), Michael Porter and Kenichi Ohmae (business), and Richard Florida (former economic geographer, now public policy guru), international reputations were developed within, through, and under the banner of the new regionalism.

In academic circles, the claim to orthodoxy is seen as the result of successfully superimposing a new body of thought onto an older, increasingly outdated or discredited system. For the new regionalism, this claim to academic orthodoxy came during the period 1994-1998, with the publication of Storper's *The Regional World* (1997), Scott's *Regions and the World Economy* (1998), Keating's *The New Regionalism in Western Europe* (1998), Porter's *On Competition* (1998), and Cooke and Morgan's *The Associational Economy* (1998). Epitomising the heights to which the new regionalism reached, this period marked what I would identify as new regionalist orthodoxy, or first-phase new regionalism. It is with this claim/suggestion of academic orthodoxy at its heart that Chapter 2 investigated the merits and foundations of new regionalist orthodoxy, bearing in mind how critics were often left perplexed at the level of authority afforded to the new regionalism:

"The dogma that 'regions are resurgent' as a result of global transformation implied by the growth of 'informational economies' has almost reached the status of an orthodoxy. But like the fashion of postfordism which preceded it, this represents the triumph of fashion and the influence of academic authority figures over social science."

Lovering (1999: 386)

"Barring a few exceptions, much New Regionalist research has either disregarded the changing role of the state or implied that, amid the current round of globalisation-regionalisation, it is inevitably in terminal decline. This is both deeply problematic and quite inadequate if we are to fully explore the anatomy of the contemporary regional world."

MacLeod (2001b: 806)

However persuasive the ideals of the new regionalism were in gaining orthodoxy, the period post-1998 has seen critical questioning of the new regionalism, or what I would call second-phase new regionalism. In the wake of both internal and external critique, the identity and image of the new regionalist within the wider academic establishment has become somewhat less appealing, more contested, and rather more 'fuzzy' in recent years (see Lovering, 1999; MacLeod, 2001b; Christopherson, 2003; Jones and MacLeod, 2004; Harrison, 2006). Sympathetic to the new regionalist cause, it is here that I illustrated how there was a shift in the image of the new regionalism between phases one and two. While phase one was characterised by the diversity of approaches engaged with explaining the emergence of new (regional) state spaces under the banner of the new regionalism, phase two identified the new regionalism as a deeply 'chaotic concept' (see Sayer, 1992; Chapter 2).

Remarkably, it is those same factors – intellectual diversity, diverse theoretical backgrounds, the close interaction and engagement with non-academics (from backgrounds in business, economics, management, and so on), and intimate ties with the policy community – that made the new regionalism stand out against the rest in gaining its orthodoxy in the first place, which are the exact same factors that led authors such as Lovering (1999) to be able to make the argument that the new regionalism is this deeply 'chaotic concept' that bundles together too many diverse theories for it to be considered a coherent intellectual project.

Coming at this from another angle, this thesis noted how the shift from phase one to phase two of the new regionalism was also marked by the shift in credence

... and the last word goes to?

10.3 Final Remarks

Charged with investigating the degree to which a *multiscalar* and *multidimensional* **new regionalist** interpretation of a *single* region can offer deeper readings and understandings of the complex processes involved in institutionalising regions, this thesis has sought to challenge the way we conceptualise regions and the processes of regional change. In raising these tensions within the theoretical conceptualisation of regions, the methodological undertaking of regional studies, and the implementation of regional policies, I do not seek to undermine or eradicate the work that has gone before. Instead, I want this thesis to challenge the way we conceptualise and explore regions, such that we can move forward into a dynamic *third phase* **new regionalism**.





Loughborough
University

When is a theory not a theory?

Concepts, frameworks, models, theories



What is a concept?

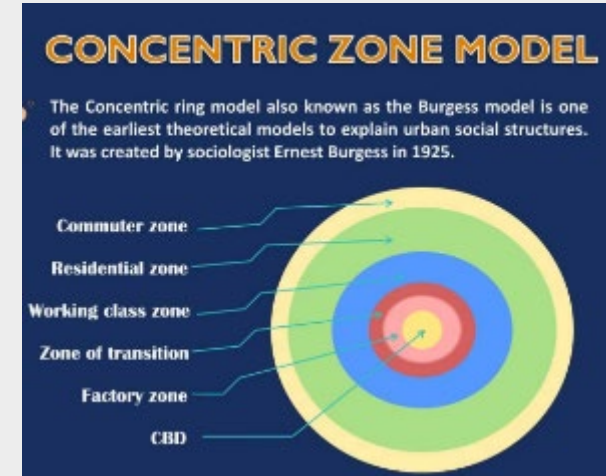
- Concepts are the building blocks of geographical thinking.
- They are abstract ideas used to **describe** and **interpret** the world, but they do not necessarily **explain** causation.
- Examples: ***Territory, Place, Scale, Network***
- A concept helps researchers **identify** and **discuss** something, but by itself it **does not tell us how or why it occurs**. For example, region is a concept. It **identifies** a particular place but does not **explain how** or **why** they exist.

What is a framework?

- Frameworks are **organising devices** that bring multiple concepts together.
- They help researchers **structure** analysis and identify important variables, actors, and relationships.
- Example: **TPSN framework** (Jessop et al., 2008: *Theorising sociospatial relations*)
- Frameworks answer: "*What factors should be considered when studying this phenomenon?*"
- It provides a **lens for analysis** but does not **generate precise predictions**.

What is a model?

- Models are **simplified representations** of reality.
- They are more explicit than frameworks and often **specify relationships** among variables.
- Models answer: *“How does this process operate?”*
- Examples: **Chicago Concentric Zone Model (Burgess)**
- Models often **involve assumptions** that simplify reality for analytical purposes.



What is a theory?

- Theories are the highest level of explanation.
- A theory seeks to **explain the underlying mechanisms** that generate observed patterns.
- Theories answer: *“Why do these patterns occur?”*
- Examples: **Agglomeration Theory** (explains why firms cluster), **Dependency Theory** (explains uneven development through structural dependencies between core and peripheral economies)
- Unlike models, theories usually claim **broader explanatory validity**.

**Can you see a
problem?**



What is a theory?



Look again

- Theories are the highest level of explanation.
- A theory seeks to explain the underlying mechanisms that generate observed patterns.
- Theories answer: “*Why do these patterns occur?*”
- Examples: Agglomeration Theory (explains why firms cluster), Dependency Theory (explains uneven development through structural dependencies between core and peripheral economies)
- Unlike models, theories usually claim broader explanatory validity.

What is a theory?



Look again

- Theories are the highest level of explanation.
- A theory seeks to explain the underlying mechanisms that generate observed patterns.
- Theories **answer**: “*Why do these patterns occur?*”
- Examples: Agglomeration Theory (**explains** why firms cluster), Dependency Theory (**explains** uneven development through structural dependencies between core and peripheral economies)
- Unlike models, theories usually **claim** broader explanatory validity.

REGIONS IN FOCUS
REGIONALIST IDEAS AND POLITICAL
OF ENGLAND AND NORTH WEST

WARNING

DR. JONATHAN J. HARRISON
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND EARTH SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF WALES, ABERYSTWYTH



REGIONS IN FOCUS: A 'NEW REGIONALIST' INTERPRETATION OF ENGLAND'S NORTHWEST

JOHN HARRISON

INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND EARTH SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF WALES, ABERYSTWYTH



4. Avoid merely decorating your work with theories you do not actually use.



Loughborough
University

How to USE theory



- To make an empirical contribution you can use a theory to achieve this.
 - In my case to learn something new about North West England
 - Is this enough?
 - Question: How many people are interested in your case study?
 - Question: How many people are interested in your key concept(s), model(s), framework(s), theory/theories?
- To make a theoretical contribution you cannot just apply a theory

Literature Review

- Don't just summarise or report what each publication says
- Compare, connect, challenge
- What is the debate?
 - Where do different writers agree or disagree?
 - If there is no debate (i.e. it's an orthodoxy) can you create it?
 - Remember: frameworks organise (but are there better frameworks, are obvious things missing e.g. TPSN), models simplify (too simple?) and theories explain/answer (do they?).
 - What is missing?
 - Does the theory apply everywhere?
 - Ask questions: created where, by whom, in what context, for what purpose?

2. RE-READING THE NEW REGIONALISM: A SYMPATHETIC CRITIQUE

30

2.1. Unpacking the New Regionalism	32
2.1.1. The 'Dominant': Economic New Regionalism	32
2.1.2. The 'Other': Alternative New Regionalism	35
2.1.3. <u>Towards a Critique</u>	35
2.2. Regions and Multifaceted Scalar Politics	36
2.2.1. The Region: An Object of Mystery	37
2.2.2. The Absent State	39
2.3. Geographies of State Intervention and Tangled Policy Hierarchies	42
2.3.1. Regions and the State	42
2.3.2. Interregional Competition	44
2.4. Policy Ingredients: A Recipe for Disaster?	45
2.4.1. Path Dependency: An Historical Weakness	46
2.4.2. Social Capital	48
2.4.3. Soft Institutionalism and the Games of Risk	49
2.5. Conclusion: <u>Theoretical Insights</u> and Policy Futures	54

1. What we
know

2.
P
R
O
B
L
E
M
S

3. Theoretical
contribution

Other questions to ask

- What does it help me see?
- What is it blind to? *Could this be your original theoretical contribution?*

Think about this:

Theoretical Contribution flows through into an **Methodological Contribution** because you design it so you address what the theory is currently blind to (i.e. in the questions you ask) and into **Empirical Contribution** because you are writing about what it is blind to and therefore no one else will have written about in that context.





Remember this?

“sustained academic argument off which everything hangs”



Loughborough
University

Link to the next session

Introducing **q-r theory** into your writing



q – r theory *(after Ellison, 2002)*

q : the inherent interest and importance of a manuscript; its originality and significance.

r : the rigour of the work; its methodological competence and the quality of the data, analysis and interpretation.

- To be published a paper must have
 - sufficient **r** (i.e. the findings are justifiable) such that it withstands critique.
 - sufficient **q** (i.e. it is interesting and important) such that others will read and use it.



Loughborough
University



Introduction and possibly also literature review (but use a different name)
- It should be clear what the research question is and why it needs to be answered

Problematisation

*Aim
Justification of aim*

Specific focus

Should demonstrate:
1. what we know,
2. what we don't know
and hence
3. what we should do

Demonstrate the *r*

Literature

Literature

Methodology

*Case study
'Data' sources
'Data' analysis*

Demonstrate the *q*

Literature

Results

Systematic account of findings

Discussion

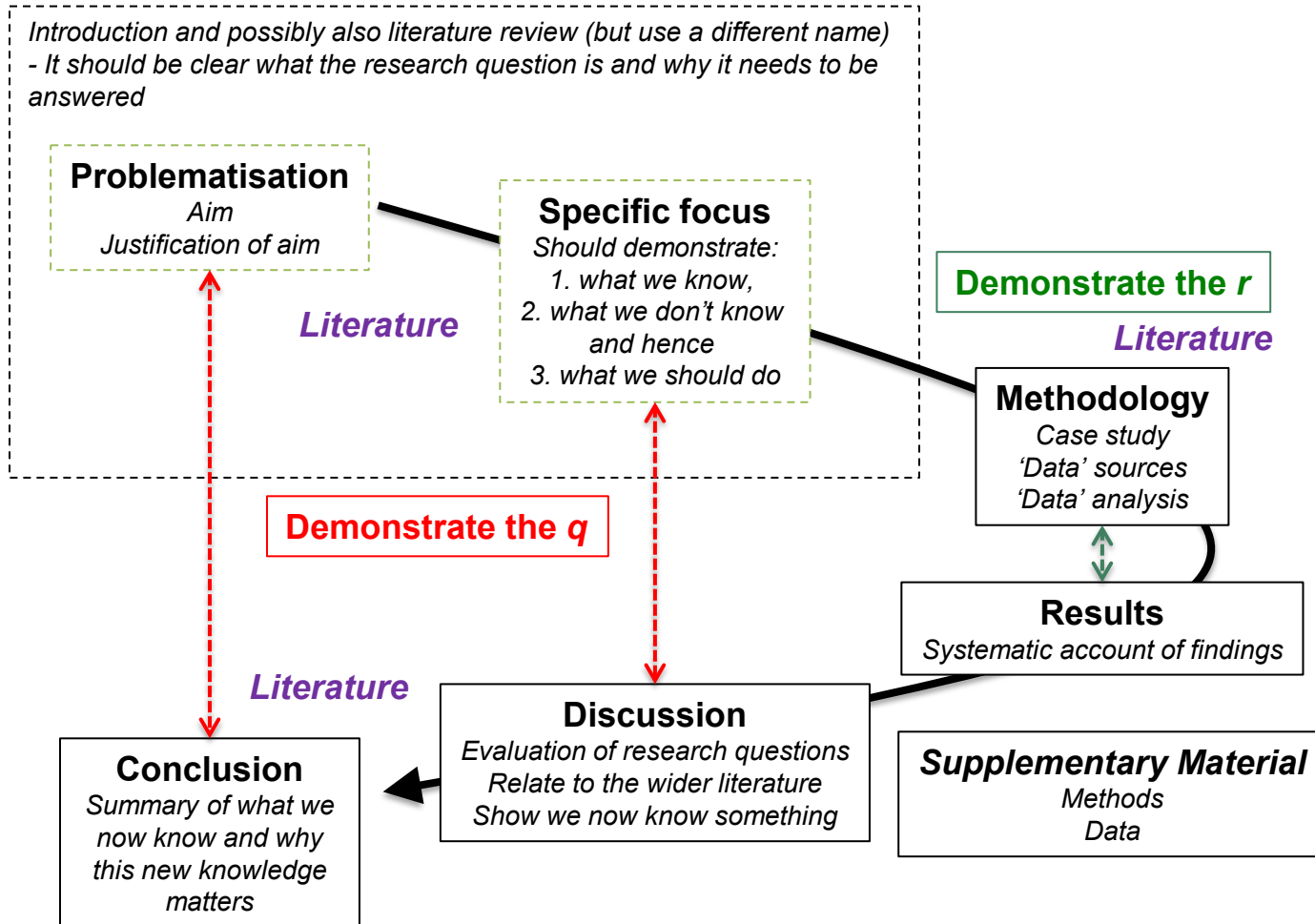
*Evaluation of research questions
Relate to the wider literature
Show we now know something*

Supplementary Material

*Methods
Data*

Conclusion

*Summary of what we
now know and why
this new knowledge
matters*





Loughborough
University

Concluding remarks



Aim

To help postgraduate students understand the role of theory in framing research problems, guiding analysis and producing scholarly contributions.

Key objectives

1. Understand what theory does in postgraduate research.
2. Distinguish between concepts, frameworks, models and theories.
3. Use theory to frame a research problem and interpret findings
4. Avoid merely decorating your work with theories you do not actually use.



Loughborough
University

Thank-you

Any questions?

