
Research Methodology for Public Policy

Lecture 3 — Research Questions and Literature Reviews: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Dr. Colin Kuehl

2026-07-08



Welcome Back & Agenda

Quick Recap: Lecture 2

- Causal inference is hard because we never observe the counterfactual — the fundamental problem of causal inference

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(QRM Ch. 4)

From Topic to Question

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Theory Explains — It Doesn't Just Predict or Describe

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(EMPS Ch. 3)

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Elements that social scientists broadly agree mark a well-crafted theory:

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- Many/most of your substantive courses will be teaching theories of public policy - ie advocacy coalition framework, etc.

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Two Modes of Research

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Theory-building (inductive)

- Start from observations or cases
- Look for patterns
- Generate new theory
- Common in qualitative & exploratory work

(EMPS Ch. 3.5)

Theory-testing (deductive)

- Start from existing theory
- Derive a hypothesis
- Confront it with data
- Common in most quantitative work

Theory-Testing: Easier, but Still Demanding

- Theory testing asks: is there evidence that supports — or fails to support — an existing theory? *(EMPS Ch. 3)*
- It's generally a more approachable task than building a new theory from scratch,

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From Literature to Hypotheses

Turning a Gap Into a Hypothesis

1. Identify the gap or unresolved debate in the literature

What Is a Hypothesis?

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Key Terms & Looking Ahead

Key Terms from Today

- Research question

(EMPS Ch. 3, Key Terms)

Before Next Session

Lecture 4: Measurement 1 — Concepts and Variables

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Key Terms from Today

- Research question
- Concept

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- Read: EMPS, Ch. 4 (*Data*)

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- Read: QUANT, Ch. 3 (*Exploring and Visualizing Data*)

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Before Next Session

Lecture 4: Measurement 1 — Concepts and Variables

- Read: EMPS, Ch. 4 (*Data*)
- Read: QUANT, Ch. 3 (*Exploring and Visualizing Data*)
- Bring your own emerging research question — we'll workshop turning its key concepts into measurable variables