Interviewing Informants

Plan for today:

Locating the method in the battlefields of qualitative methodology

Prerequisites for interviewing informants: research questions

Coffee

The right tools for the job: types of questions and how to use them

Lunch

Exercise: formulating questions, identifying questions and their effects

Coffee

What can go wrong and other practical issues

Interviewing Informants

Two general remarks:

We will use the texts as background information rather than explicitly discussing them. However, please ask if you have any specific question about a text.

While there are many things that are definitely wrong in interviewing, there are only very few 'only ways of doing things'. We will often suggest one solution but others might be possible as well.

Locating the method in the battlefields of qualitative methodology

Qualitative interviews:

- Use open questions (control of answers by interviewee);

- Are less than semi-structured (content, sequence, or wording of questions depend on the interview situation).

Advantages	Disadvantages
Maximum informational yield	Questionable comparability
High internal validity (why?)	Unknown external validity
Do not depend on prior knowledge of possible answers	Very low reliability

Not good for establishing causal relationships

One of the few methods for finding causal mechanisms

Can (and often do) make studies purely descriptive

How do academics perceive their changing conditions of work in universities?

How do academics' changing conditions of work affect the relationship between teaching and research in universities?

Respondent

Informant ("Expert")

Explaining a person's perceptions and interpretations

Aim of the investigation

Explaining social (multi-actor) processes

Obtain the interviewee's perceptions and interpretations

Purpose of the interview

Obtain information about social situations and processes

Empirical Object

Role of Interviewee

Data collection tool "Expert"

Need to initiate the 'right' (most suitable) answers

All statements are data

Statements can be irrelevant
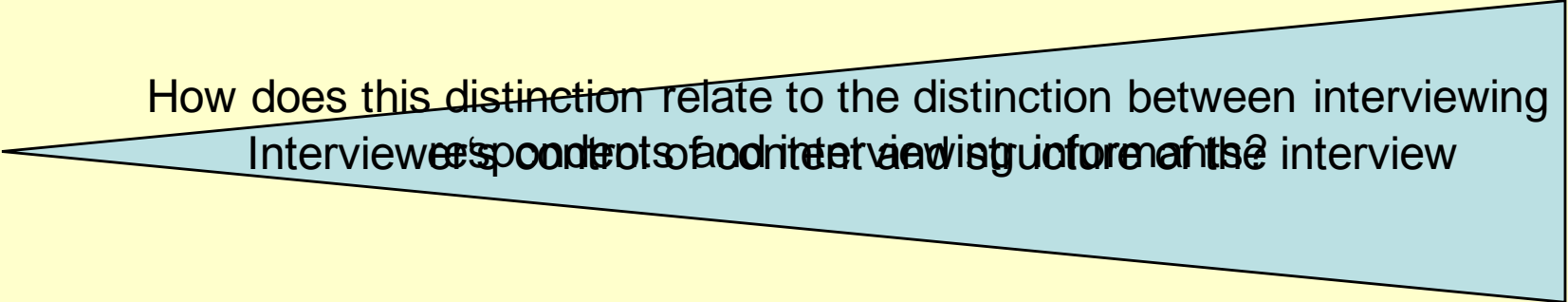
Bias is valuable information

Bias is distortion

What kind of interview do we use for interviewing informants?

Open Interview

Semi-structured interview

Topics (and sometimes first question) determined ex ante

Topics, questions and their sequence determined ex ante, sequence and wording subject to change

How does this distinction relate to the distinction between interviewing respondents and interviewing informants? Interviewee's control of content and structure of the interview

Suitability for addressing diverse and unrelated topics

Expert / Informant interviewing

Why do we need a conceptual background when interviewing informants?

Before we can conduct an interview, we must know:

- **What empirical information we need for answering our theoretical research question; and**

- **How this empirical information can be obtained.**

  * Which information <u>must</u> be obtained by interviews?

  * Who must be interviewed?

How can a conceptual background be formulated?

Ingredients:

Research question: Usually a question about a causal
relationship or a causal mechanism,

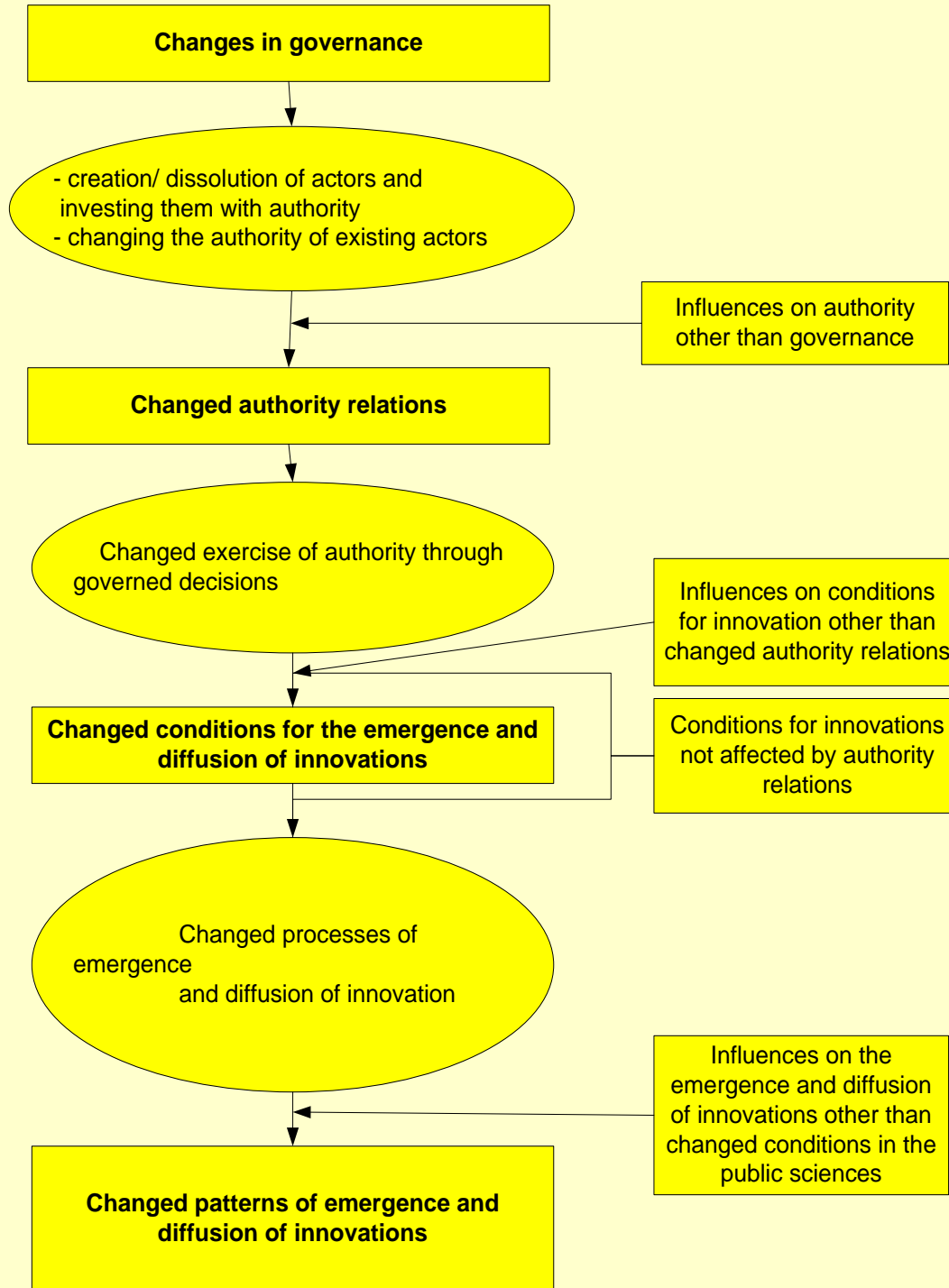State of research on the research question

List of assumed independent, dependent and intervening
variables

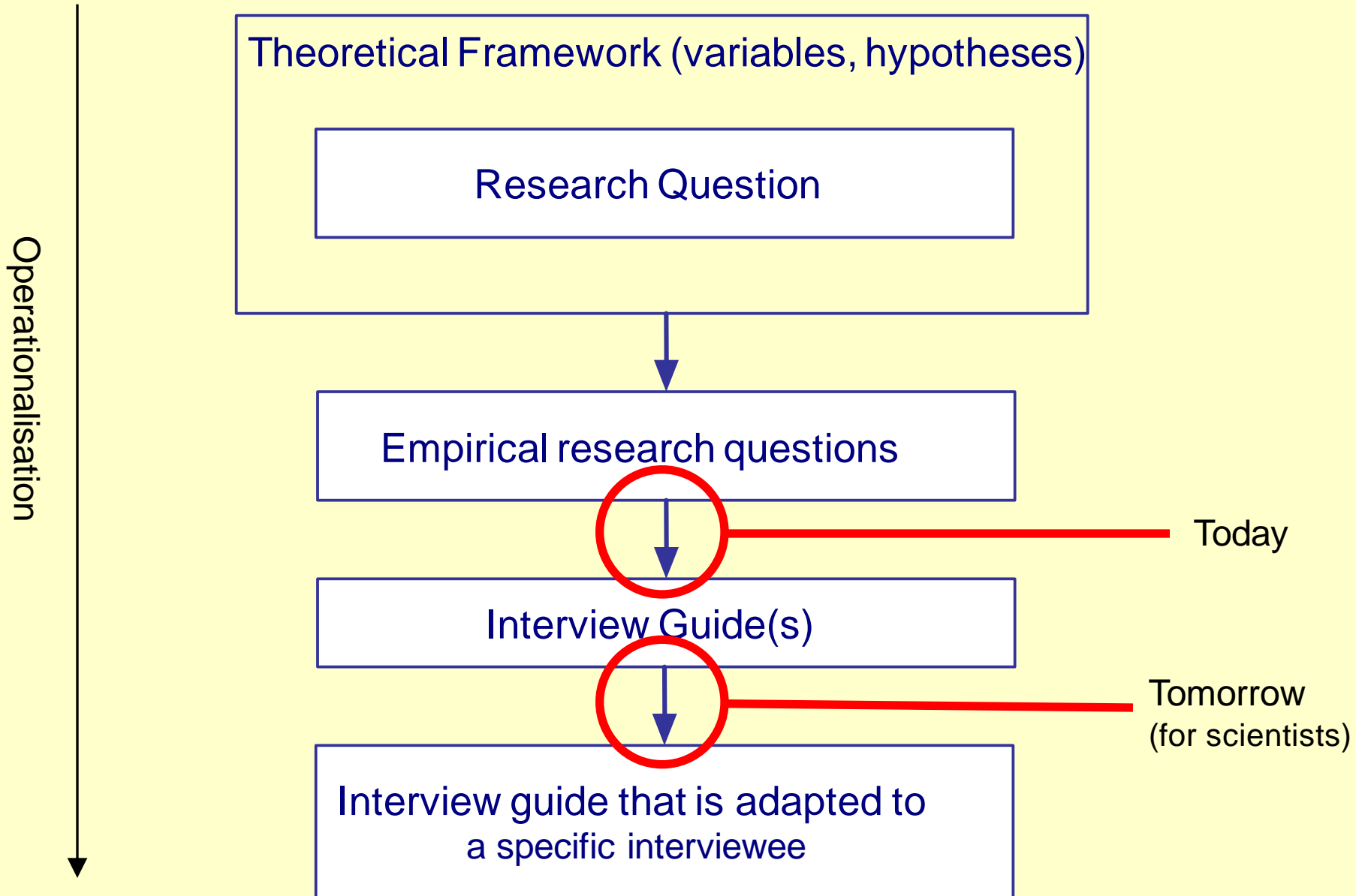Definitions of variables that enable empirical operationalisation

Hypotheses about the causal relationships or causal mechanisms

For recipes see the literature.

Example of a theoretical framework (RHESI project)

How can a conceptual background be translated into interview guides?

Operationalisation

Theoretical Framework (variables, hypotheses)

Research Question

Empirical research questions

Today

Interview Guide(s)

Tomorrow
(for scientists)

Interview guide that is adapted to
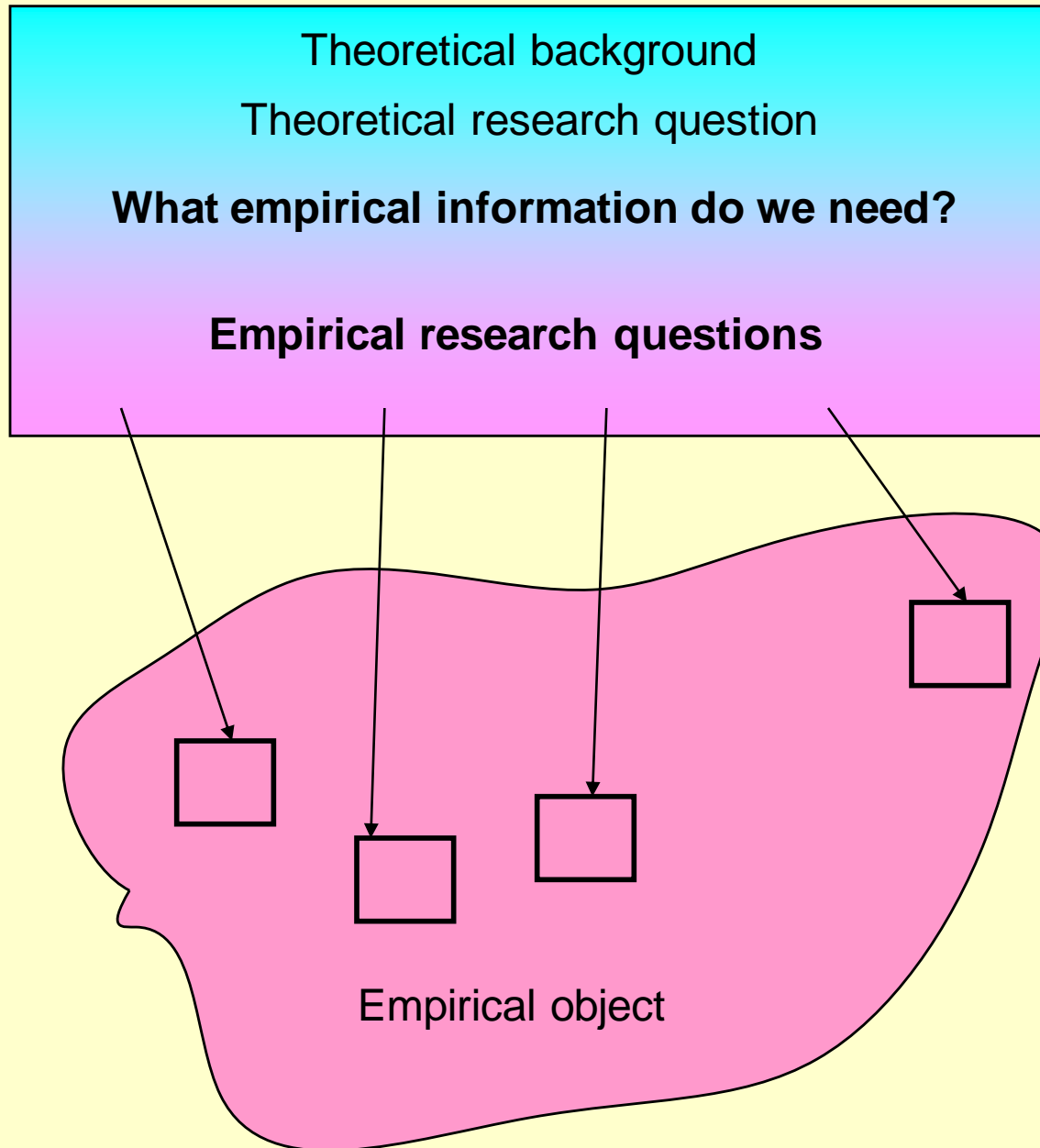a specific interviewee

How can a conceptual background be translated into interview guides?

Operationalisation: Translation of theoretical research interest
into questions that can be competently
answered by interviewees

Rule number 1 [most important rule for all qualitative interviewing]:

Do not pass on your theoretical research question to your interviewees!

What is an empirical research question?

Theoretical background

Theoretical research question

What empirical information do we need?

Empirical research questions

Empirical object

Examples of empirical research questions

a) Research trails:

How did the current research emerge?

- Which major changes occurred since the time at which the innovation was created?

- How were the innovation and its creator originally perceived? When and why was it developed?

- Alternatively: Why was it not developed?

- Which role played funding opportunities, and expectations of authoritative agencies (funding agencies, policy actors, user audiences, university management and scientific elites)?

Which changes of research lines were intended but haven't been realised (yet)? Why not?

How do the epistemic practices of the field affect the opportunities to begin new lines of research?

Which major research collaborations exist? What do collaborators contribute to the research? How did the collaborations emerge?