

# STATUS AND FUTURE OF ACTION RESEARCH IN INNOVATION STUDIES

chaire **newPIC**

*Nouvelles Pratiques pour  
l'Innovation et la Créativité*

**PARIS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS**  
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# *Agenda for the symposium*

- **Originality of action research:  
Ethnography versus Action Research**
- **Action research is a perfect option  
to address different units/ levels of analysis**
- **Instances of action research projects  
based on the micro-foundations approach**
- **References**
- **Contact details**



## EURAM 2024 – SIG INNO – Symposium Action Research

# ACTION RESEARCH VERSUS ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

# Types of participant observation

## Where is “objectivity”?

	LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT	LIMITATIONS
Non participatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No contact with population on the field</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to ask questions when new elements arise</li> </ul>
Passive participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher in a by-stander role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limits the ability to establish a rapport and immersing in the field</li> </ul>
Moderate participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher maintains a balance between “insider” and “outsider”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good combination, good distance, yet difficult to handle in reality</li> </ul>
Active participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher becomes a member of the group and embraces habits, customs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement carries the risk of becoming a native and of losing the distance</li> </ul>
Complete participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher is completely immersed into the group life and is totally assimilated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reintroducing the distance is not natural anymore, and requires lots of efforts</li> </ul>
<b>Action research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher is a actual ACTOR and his/her project is Action-oriented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires sequenceS (plural) of reflection, action, questioning and sensemaking</li> </ul>

# Main rationales for the ethnographic method

- Ethnography is designed to study cultural phenomena, where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study
- It investigates knowledge and the system of meaning in a cultural group
- Ethnographic research consists of face-to-face interaction with local experts and residents in community settings and institutions.
- **Ethnography takes the position that the best and most authentic way to understand a different cultural setting is to immerse oneself in it.**
- Ethnography involves socialization into the rules, rituals, practices, beliefs, activities, organizations, and daily life schedules of those whose lives are the subject of study.
- Pioneering fields: biological, social, and cultural anthropology
- Now prevalent in sociology, communication studies, history

*Systematic study  
of people and cultures*

*Founding 'fathers':*

*EB Taylor,  
Lewis H. Morgan,  
Franz Boas,  
Bronislaw Malinowski,  
Ruth Benedict,  
Margaret Mead,  
etc.*

# Ethnography: critical success factors

- A good ethnography is based on several critical factors:
  - **Building “rapport”**,  
i.e. close relationships with others, empathetic understanding
  - Ability to work with “key informants”
  - **Keep distance** to preserve the scientist’s ability to analyse,
  - **Establish professional boundaries**,  
to protect intimacy and safety while performing data collection
  - *Ability to enjoy living in unfamiliar situations*
- Standard theory about ethnography explains that scientists remain outsiders, yet learn to behave as insiders and eventually become community members themselves

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# Demarcation between observation and action research

- **“Action research” is about working inside an organization and delivering “practical outcomes” while working on the very same issues as a researcher.**  
***Action is eventually improved by competencies available as researcher.***
- **“Action research” emphasizes an empirical and logical problem-solving process involving cycles of action and reflection, performed by the researcher himself/herself.**
- **“Action research” proceeds “in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, actions, and fact-finding about the results of the action” (Lewin, 1946-1948: 206).**  
***“Action research” is not about behaving like a spectator in the organization; it applies to individuals who make decisions and whose behaviors shape organizations.***
- **“Action research” is a “participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing”,**  
***“bringing together reflection and action, theory and practice, in participation with others...”***  
**(Sage Handbook of Action Research)**

# Challenges of “Action research” for research

- 3 tensions balancing between action and research resulting from the reflexive understanding of actions:
  - **Conflict of agenda between research and active participation**
  - Self-ethnography, research on one’s own actions, introduces a **risk of self-justification** through biased generation/ selection of data (increased by one’s expertise about the “technical” content observed inside the company during action research)
  - **Ambiguities in the epistemological and methodological agendas:**
    - *Abductive? Inductive? Hypothetico-deductive?*
    - *Potential for generalization?*
    - *Triangulation of data sources? Of data collection methods?*

*Presence as consultant,  
or manager, or coach,  
AND  
as researcher*

*This twin role shall be  
discussed explicitly in  
research publications,  
and with people  
commissioning action  
(but not automatically  
with other people  
in the staff)*



# Action research as a method

## ■ Methodological drivers:

- **Field based** (not developed in labs)
- **Personalized** (conducted by researchers DURING ACTION AS MANAGERS, COACHES, CONSULTANT...)
- **Multi-factoral** (“On the fly” improvisation during action, and depending on role in action)
- **Long-term commitment** (personal interaction with “subjects” during action)
- **Inductive** (no pre-existing general patterns) or **abductive** (“gaps” as starting points)
- **Dialogic** (depends on roles during ACTION, is not homogeneous for all action research roles)
- **Holistic** (target is to generate a comprehensive perspective on the group of “subjects”)

## ■ Challenges:

- Deep expertise is required;
- The ethnographer is an “insider” committed to reach concrete results through action;
- Duration and cost of research projects;
- Descriptive, often not at ease outside of storytelling
- Faces the challenge of retrospectively JUSTIFYING action and decisions through research.

# How to cook action research for academic purposes

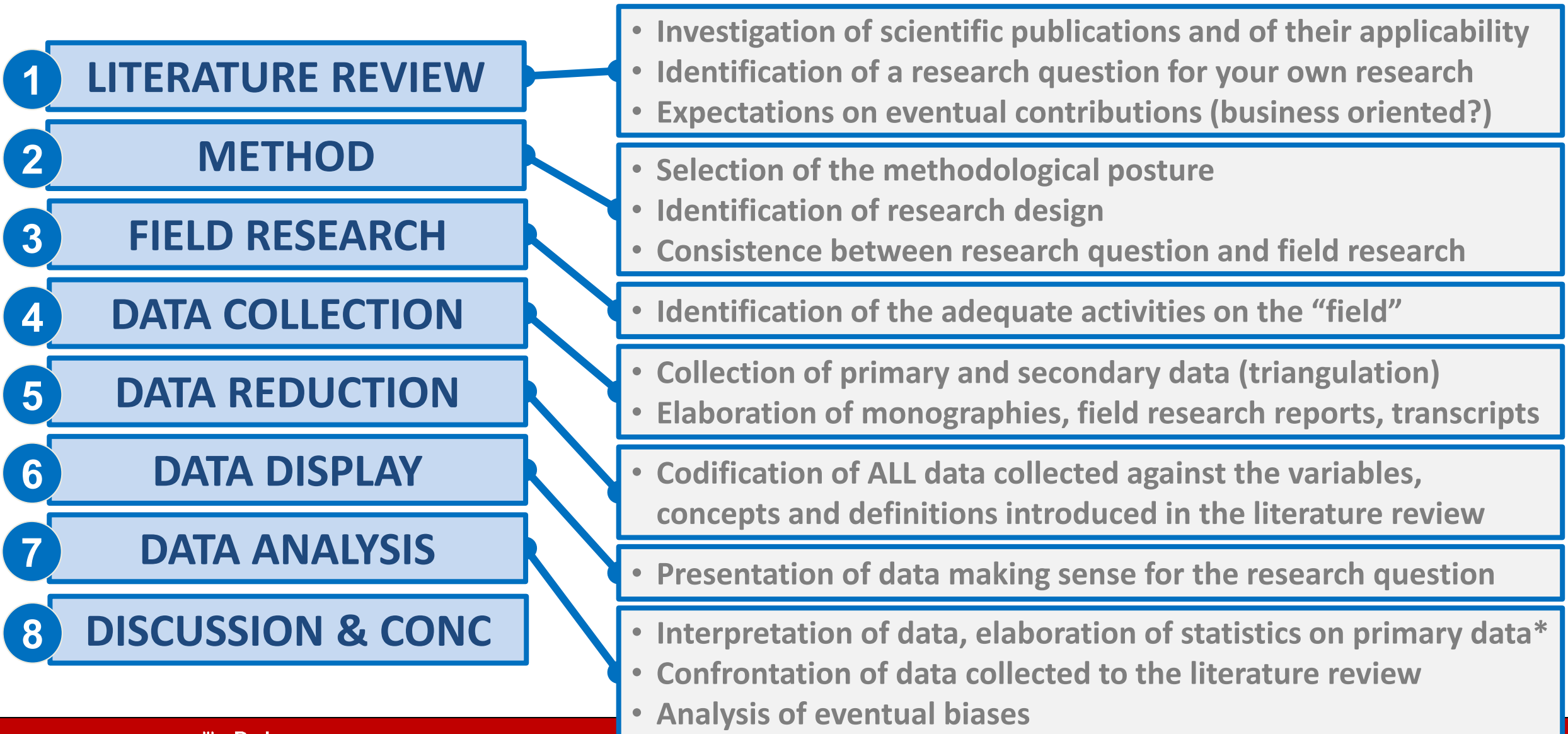
- Draft field notes on a regular basis, and in real time
- Draft reflexivity journals (record your own personal thoughts and feelings)
- Codify interviews and other documents
  
- “Do as the locals”, but remain aware of bias linked to abusive misinterpretations transposing personal experience in the study, or justifying personal decisions thanks to the research protocol
- Document the different sequenceS of action and reflection, and the stepS leading to (collective) questioning for issues under investigation and sensemaking of collected data.
  
- The protocol implies a “participative turn” and an “action turn”, to be extensively documented. The researcher is an actual actor in the “action turn”.



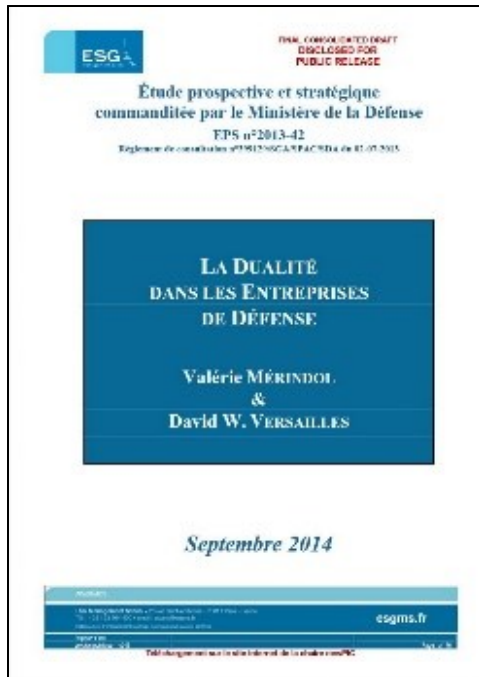
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# IN-DEPTH CASE STUDY BORROWED FROM ACTIVITIES OF THE NEWPIC CHAIR

# Steps in documenting research



# Non participant observation: project on dual-use technologies (EMR 2020)

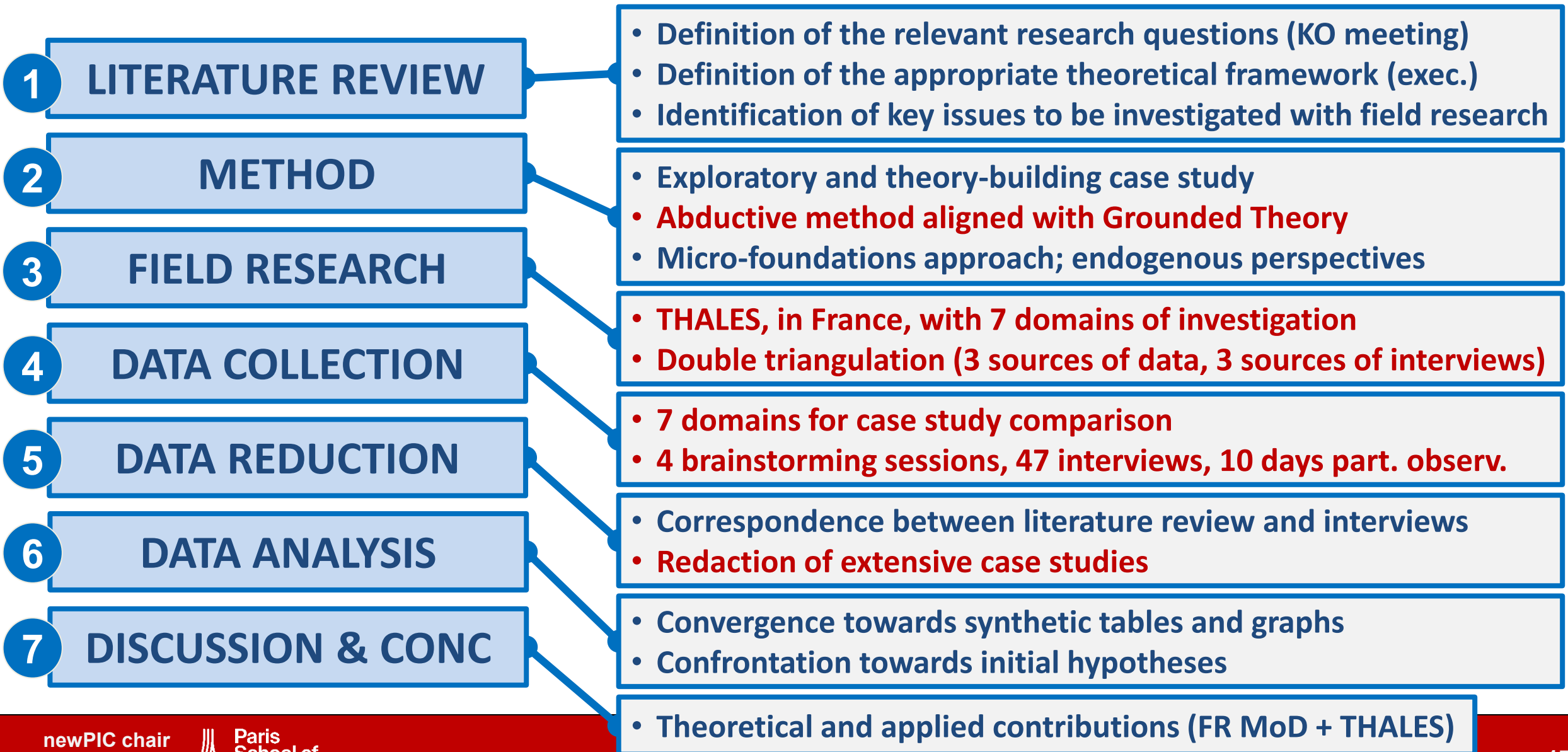


**Project commissioned by the French Ministry of Defense (OED) as part of the prospective and strategic research program (EPS 2013/42) after a competitive call for tenders, under the title**  
**“Dual use technologies and innovation in the Defense industry”.**

*The research report (in French) is available from the newPIC chair website (menu Research projects)*

**Presentations at academic conferences (EGOS 2015, AIMS 2015), and submitted to 2 journals (FCS and EMR)**

# Non-participant observation about dual-use technologies



# Participant observation: open labs and coworking spaces (Routledge 2023)

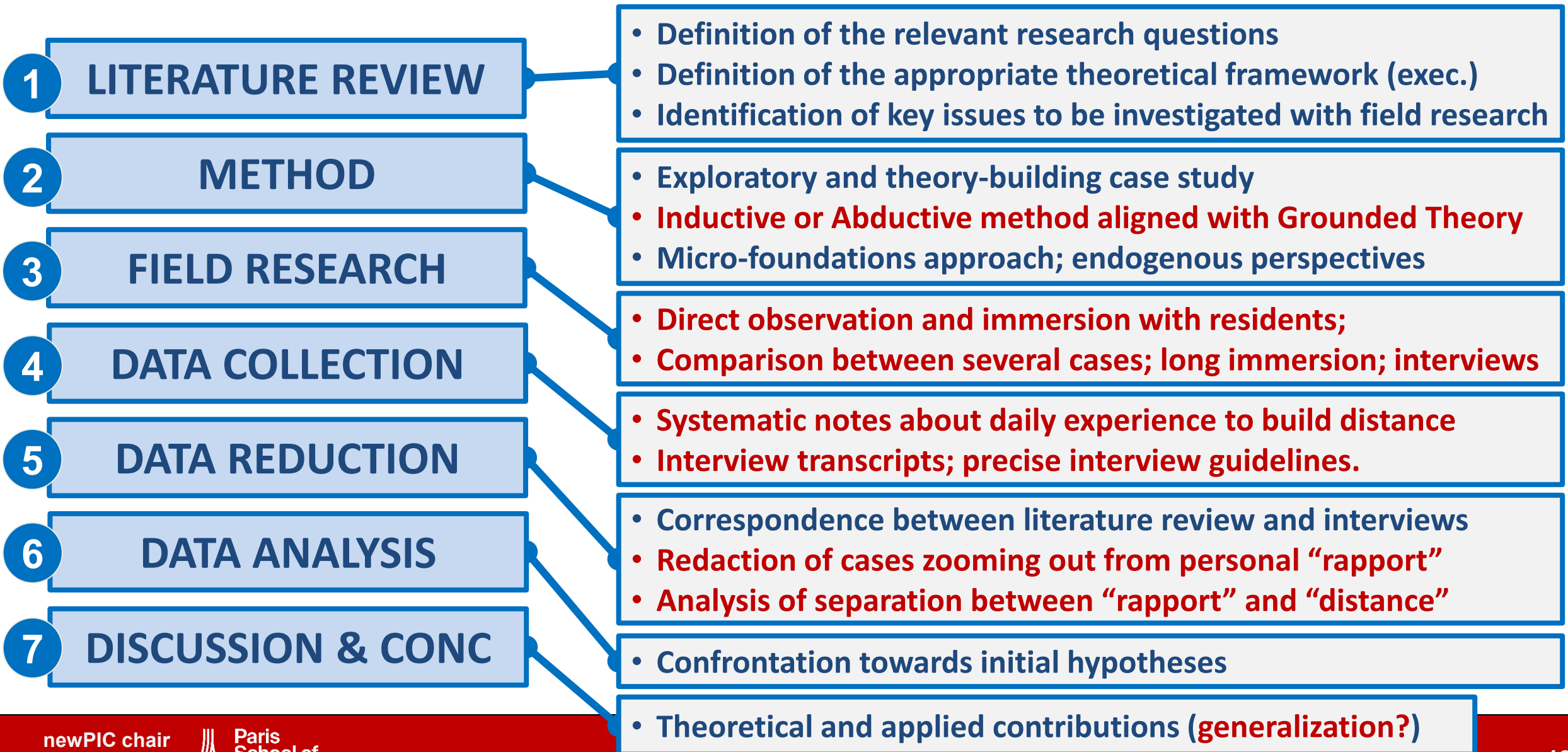


**Project commissioned by Bpifrance on Open labs, with different rounds of data collection and progressive expansion of the topic from open labs located in Paris region to “third places” located in other regions, or in different countries (Catalogna).**

***Research report (in French) are available from the newPIC chair website (menu Research projects)  
Research report by Ignasi Capdevila available from the Cowotcat rural website***

**Presentations at numerous academic conferences (EGOS, AIMS), and published in numerous journals**

# Participant observation: open labs and “third places”





# Action research: project on third mission of universities

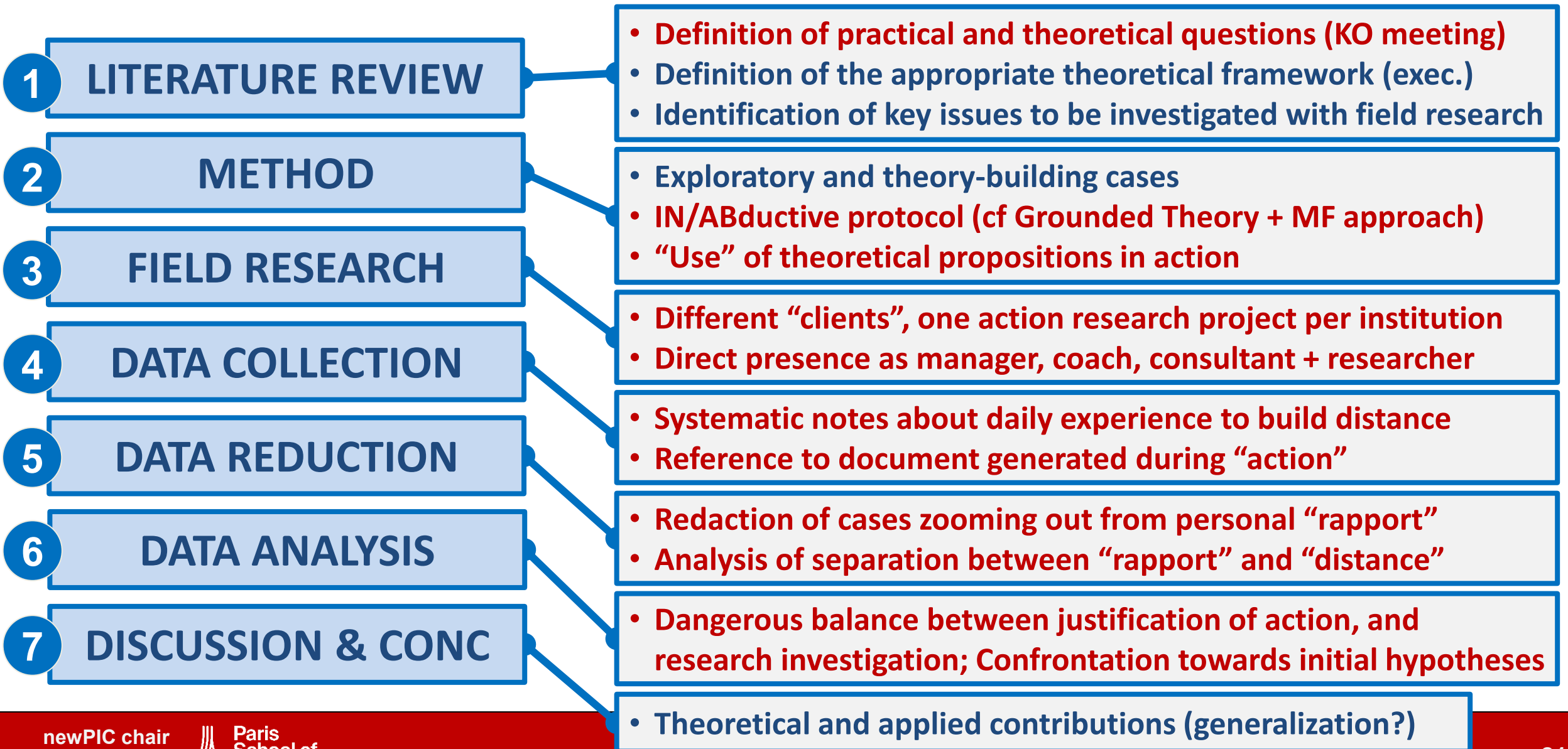


**Project commissioned by the French governmental agency Bpifrance as part of the elaboration of the public policy on PUI “Pôles universitaires d’innovation”.**  
**Support to Bpifrance to operate as focal actor in the PUI policy**  
**Support to several universities to operate as regional PUI**

*The research report (in French) is available from the newPIC chair website (menu Research projects)*

**Pending presentations at academic conferences, and submissions to journals (time frame issue)**

# Action research: “PUI” and the “third mission of univ”



# REFERENCES

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