



# Methodological decisions in comparative studies

## Managing university libraries A cross Australian/UK study of second tier managers in university libraries

Graham Walton

*Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK*

Liz Burke

*University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia, and*

Margaret Oldroyd

*De Montfort University, Leicester, UK*

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the management function of second tier posts in both Australia and the UK university libraries, including the identification of trends about their demography and responsibility range. The study aims to examine the major managerial challenges they face as individuals as well as the challenges for the wider university library. Various aspects of the skills needed by second tier university library manager are to be explored.

**Approach** – Data were gathered using an online questionnaire completed by managers in both Australia and the UK



## Benchmarking quality systems in two European academic libraries

Benchmarking in two European libraries

Núria Balagué

*University Autònoma of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain, and*

Jarmo Saarti

*Kuopio University Library, Kuopio, Finland*

227

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**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is a case study in which both libraries' approach to the building of their quality management system are compared.

**Findings** – The ISO 9001:2000 guides institutions so that they will develop their quality management

Peter J Lor

Visiting Professor

School of Information Studies

UWM

# Recent examples:

## UK & Australia

LM  
30,4/5

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## Finland & Spain

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Little or no information on, or rationale for:

Why these countries were chosen

Why & how these institutions were selected

What the purpose of the comparison was

In fact, very little real comparison took place.



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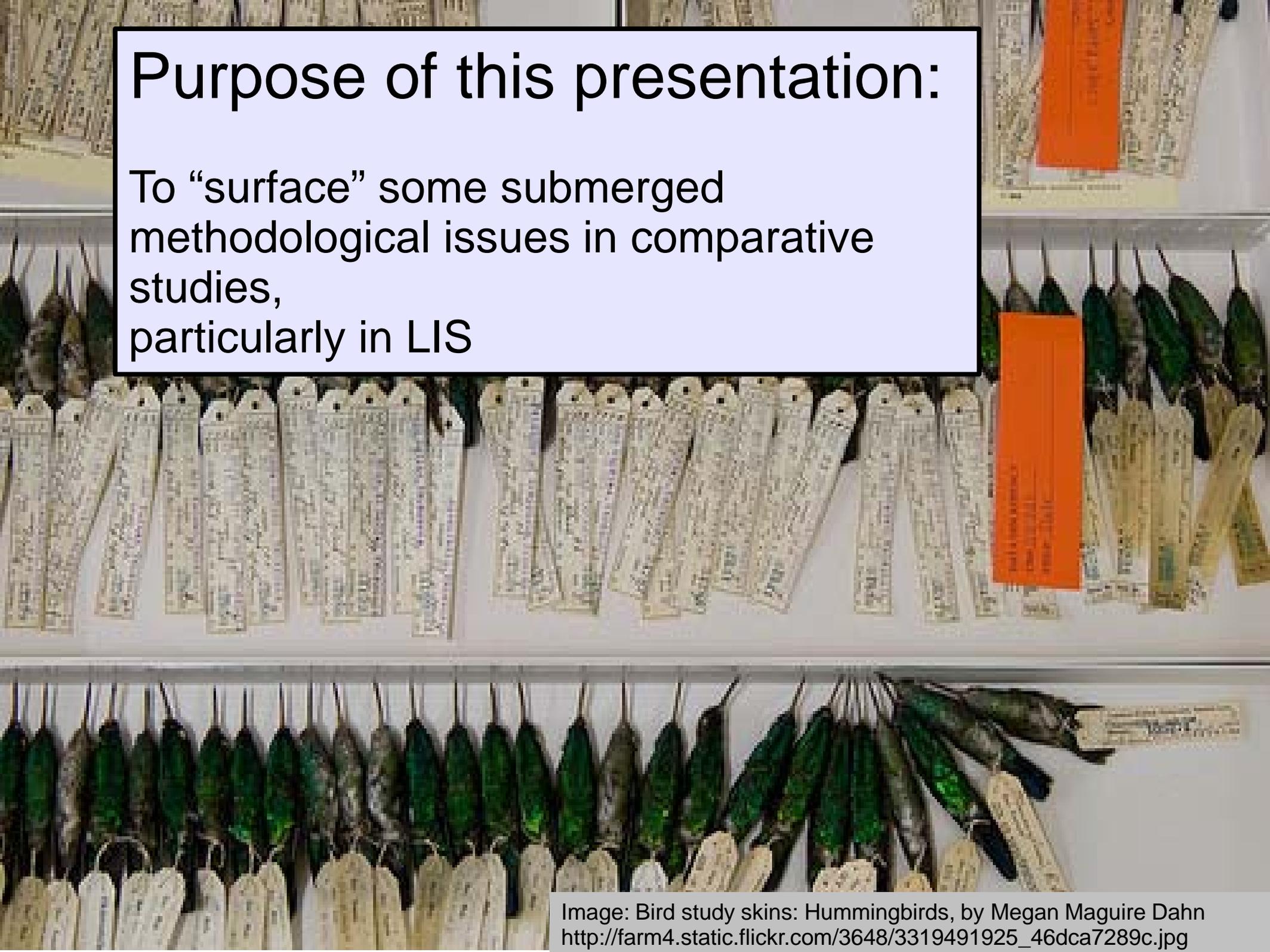
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## Finland & Spain

# Purpose of this presentation:

To “surface” some submerged methodological issues in comparative studies, particularly in LIS



# Outline:

1. Introduction, disclaimers, caveats...
2. Comparison in science & scholarship
3. Pre-methodological assumptions
4. Methodological decisions

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# Comparison is key for:

Identification

Classification

Phylogenetics

Experimentation

**Comparison:**  
Did value of dependent variable  
increase or decrease  
*significantly?*

X (Intervention)

O<sub>1</sub> (Observation)

-----  
[No intervention]

O<sub>2</sub> (Observation)

# The comparative method as alternative to experimentation in the social sciences

“We have only one way of demonstrating that one phenomenon is the cause of another. This is to compare the cases where they are both simultaneously present or absent, so as to discover whether the variations they display in these different combinations of circumstances provide evidence that one depends on the other. When the phenomenon can be artificially produced at will by the observer, the method is that of experimentation proper.

When, on the other hand, the production of facts is something beyond our power to command, and we can only bring them together as they have been spontaneously produced, the method used is one of indirect experimentation, or the comparative method.”

– Emile Durkheim (1901)

# Outline:

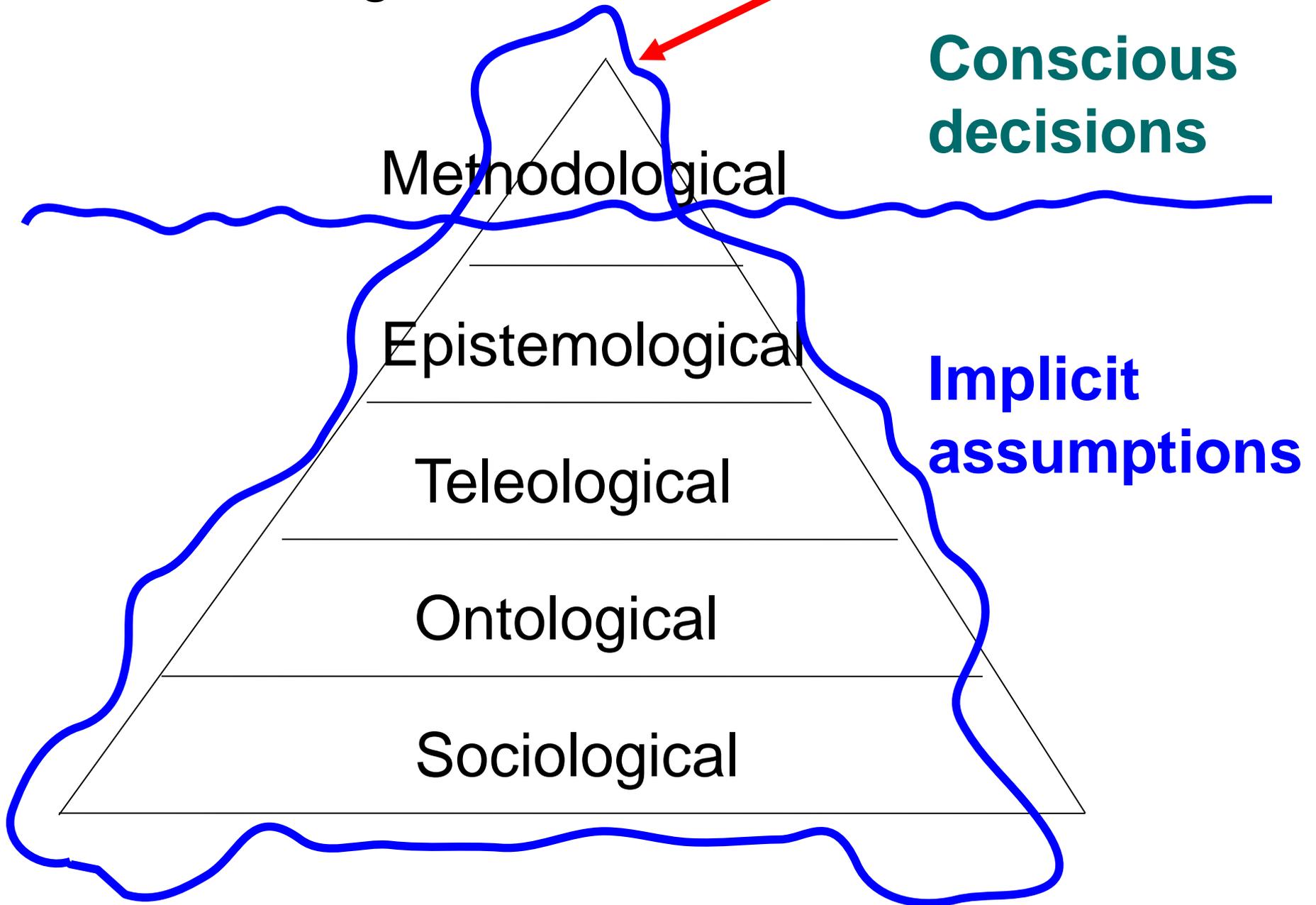
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# The iceberg model

Techniques (Data collection, etc.)

**Conscious decisions**





# Not just a series of steps

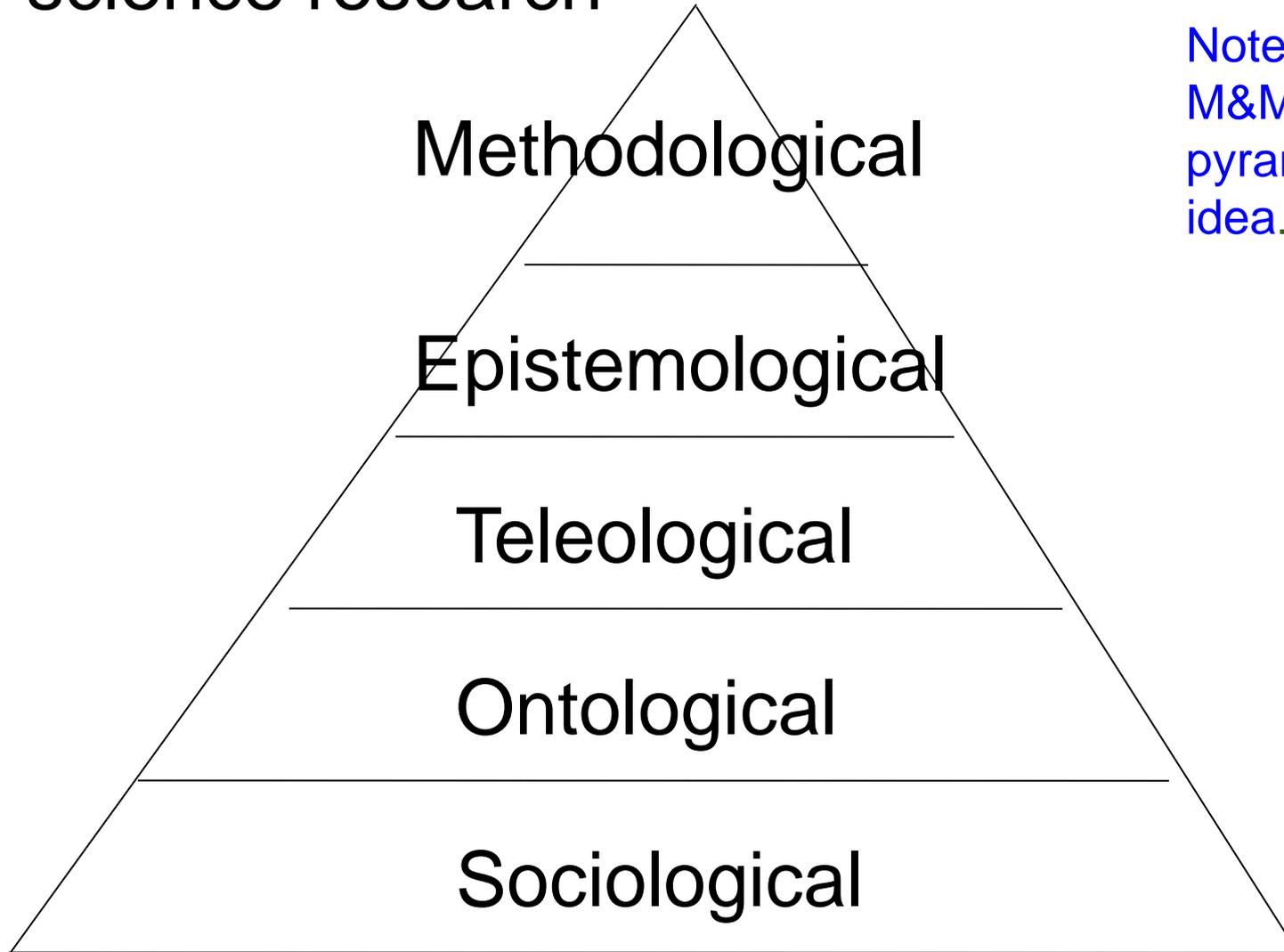
- Reflection required before determining methods
  - Why we study particular phenomena
  - What is an appropriate object for study
  - What we want to achieve
  - How we will know if we achieve it ...

depend on a sub-structure of assumptions

- Useful model for analysis of pre-methodological questions:

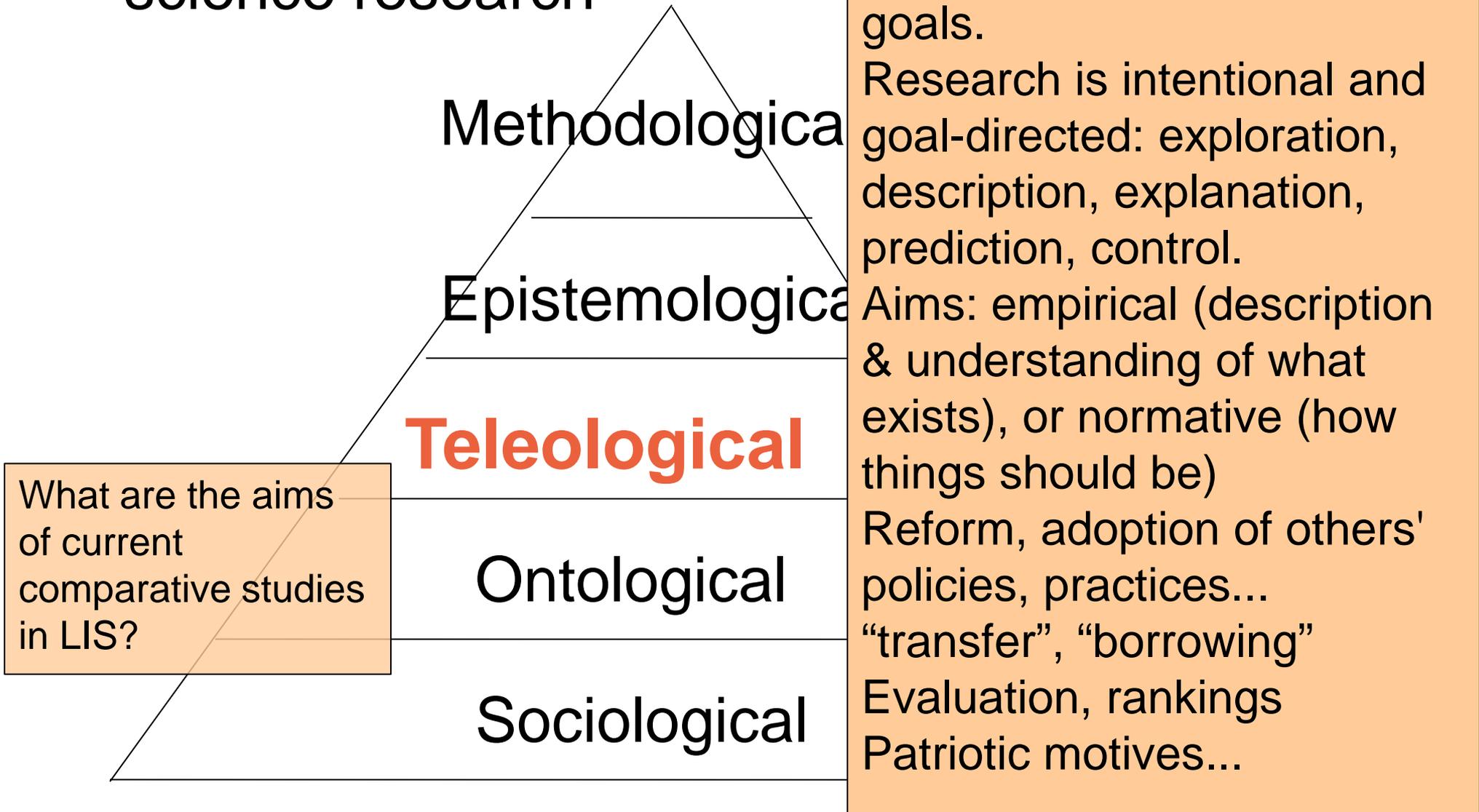
**Dimensions of social science research** (Mouton, J. & Marais, H.C. (1990) *Basic concepts in the methodology of the social sciences*. Rev ed. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research council, pp.6-17)

# Dimensions of social science research



Note: Don't blame M&M for the pyramid, that's my idea.

# Dimensions of social science research



What are the aims of current comparative studies in LIS?

Teleological: concerned with goals. Research is intentional and goal-directed: exploration, description, explanation, prediction, control.

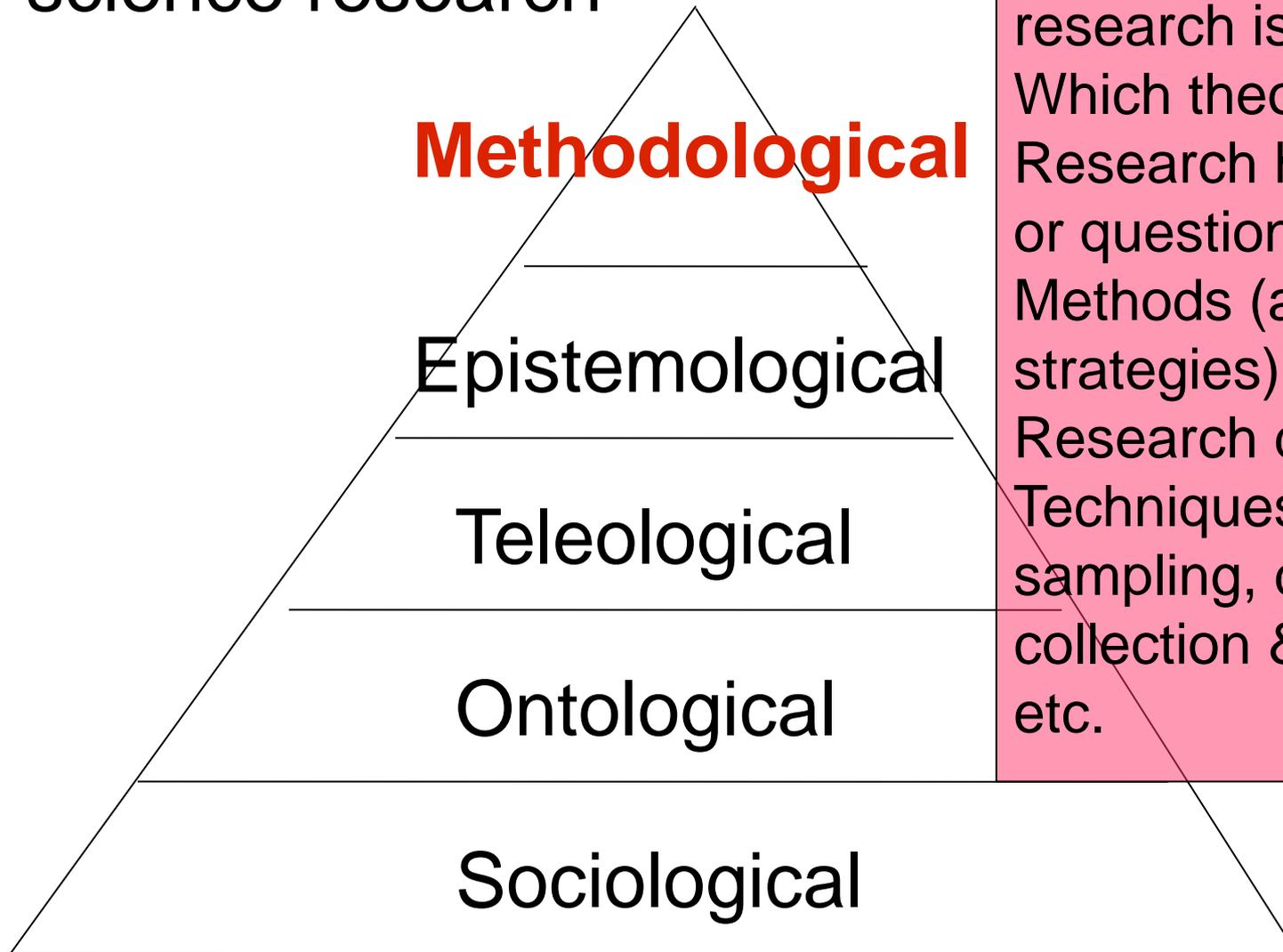
Aims: empirical (description & understanding of what exists), or normative (how things should be)

Reform, adoption of others' policies, practices... "transfer", "borrowing"

Evaluation, rankings

Patriotic motives...

# Dimensions of social science research

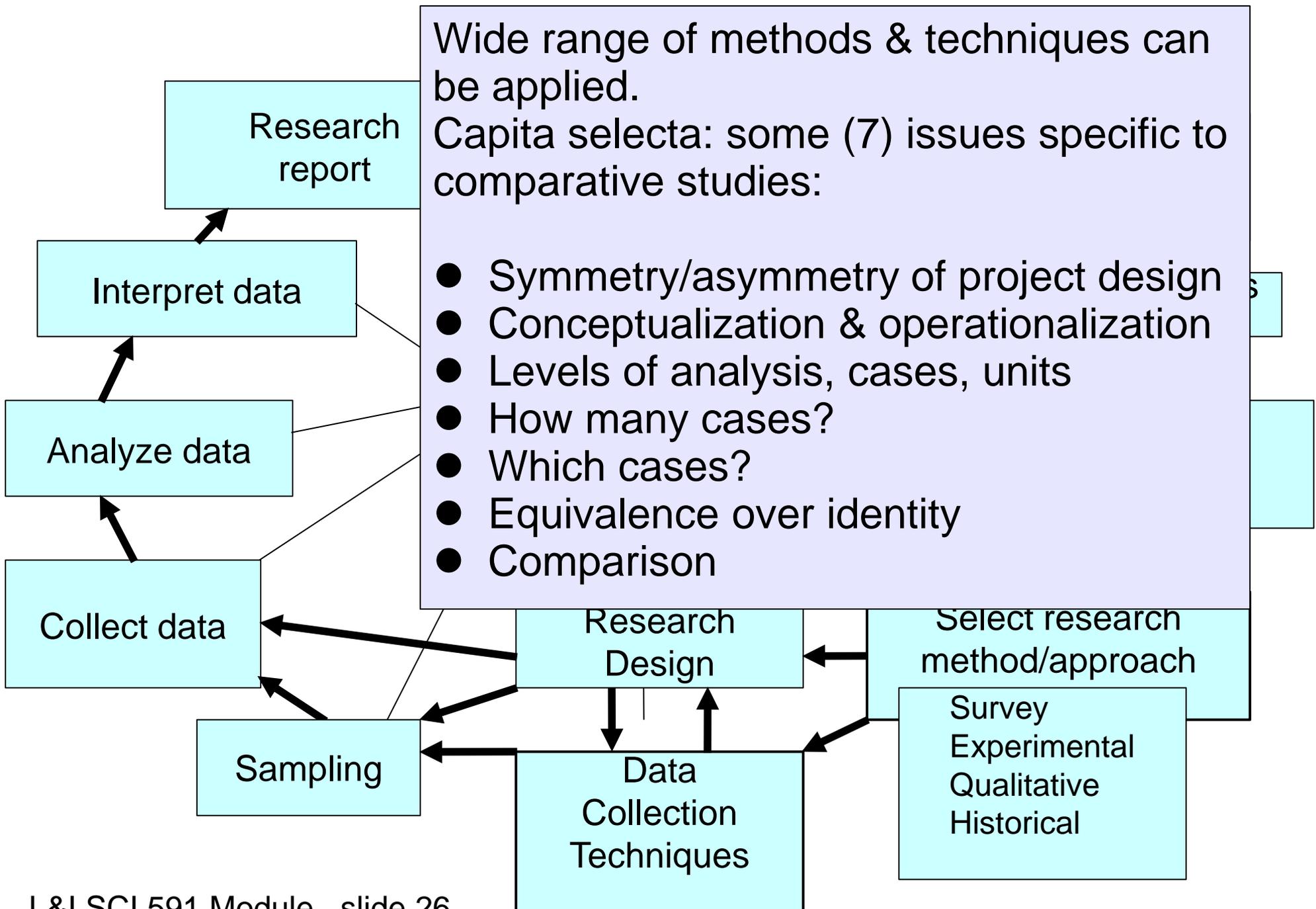


Methodology: “how” research is conducted:  
Which theory or model?  
Research hypotheses or questions  
Methods (approaches, strategies)  
Research design.  
Techniques (e.g. sampling, data collection & analysis), etc.

# Outline:

1. Introduction, disclaimers, caveats...
2. Comparison in science & scholarship
3. Pre-methodological assumptions
- 4. Methodological decisions**

# Introductory research “road map”



# Symmetry/asymmetry of project design

## Asymmetrical projects

Conceptualized & designed in one country, usually western, e.g. US-based “trans-Atlantic” research

Concepts operationalized & instruments & techniques designed in US/UK/France etc.

“Colonialist”

Assumed criteria, models

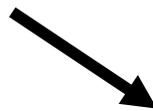
Danger of miscomparison

## Symmetrical projects

Conceptualized & designed in multiple countries – participation by “local” researchers



Search for “universal concepts”

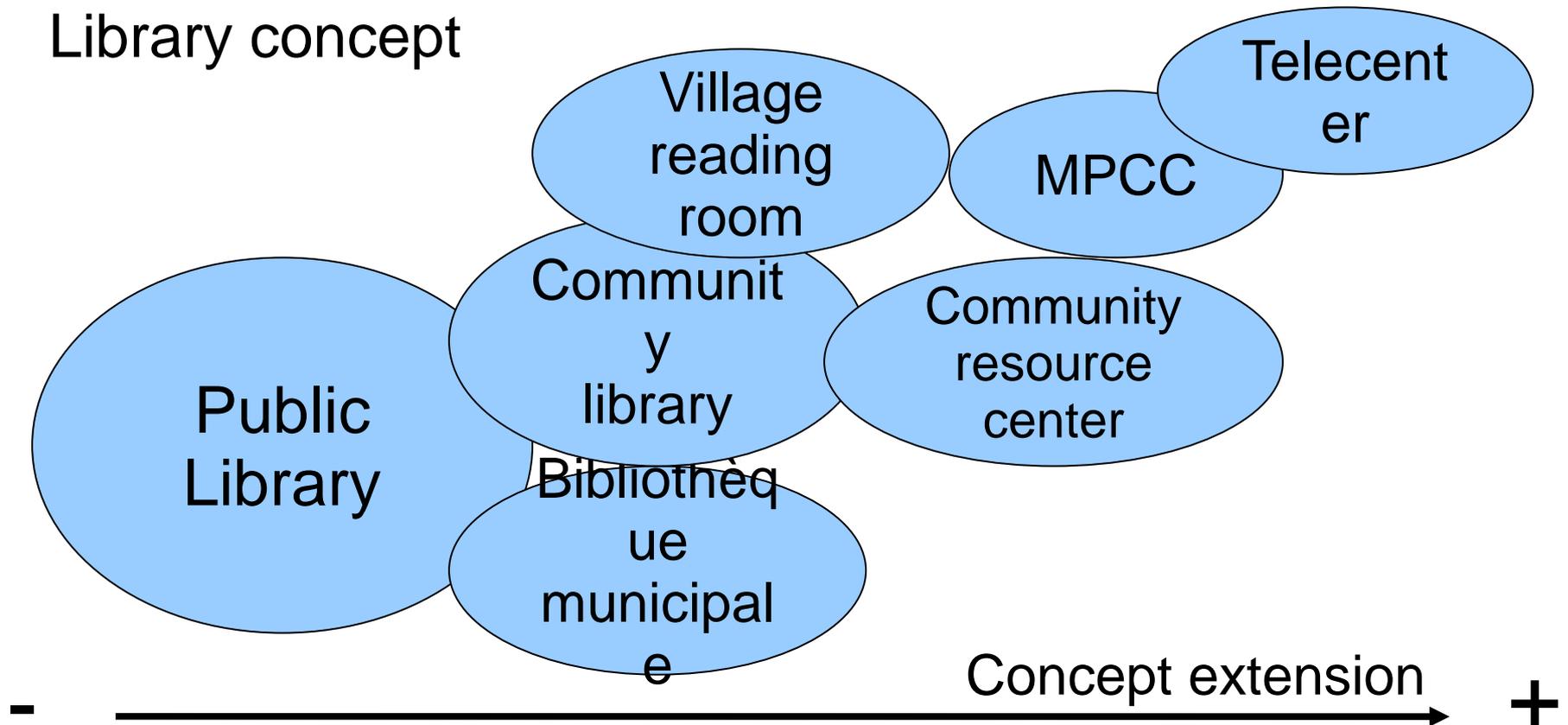


Challenging:  
Different assumptions,  
Clash of intellectual styles

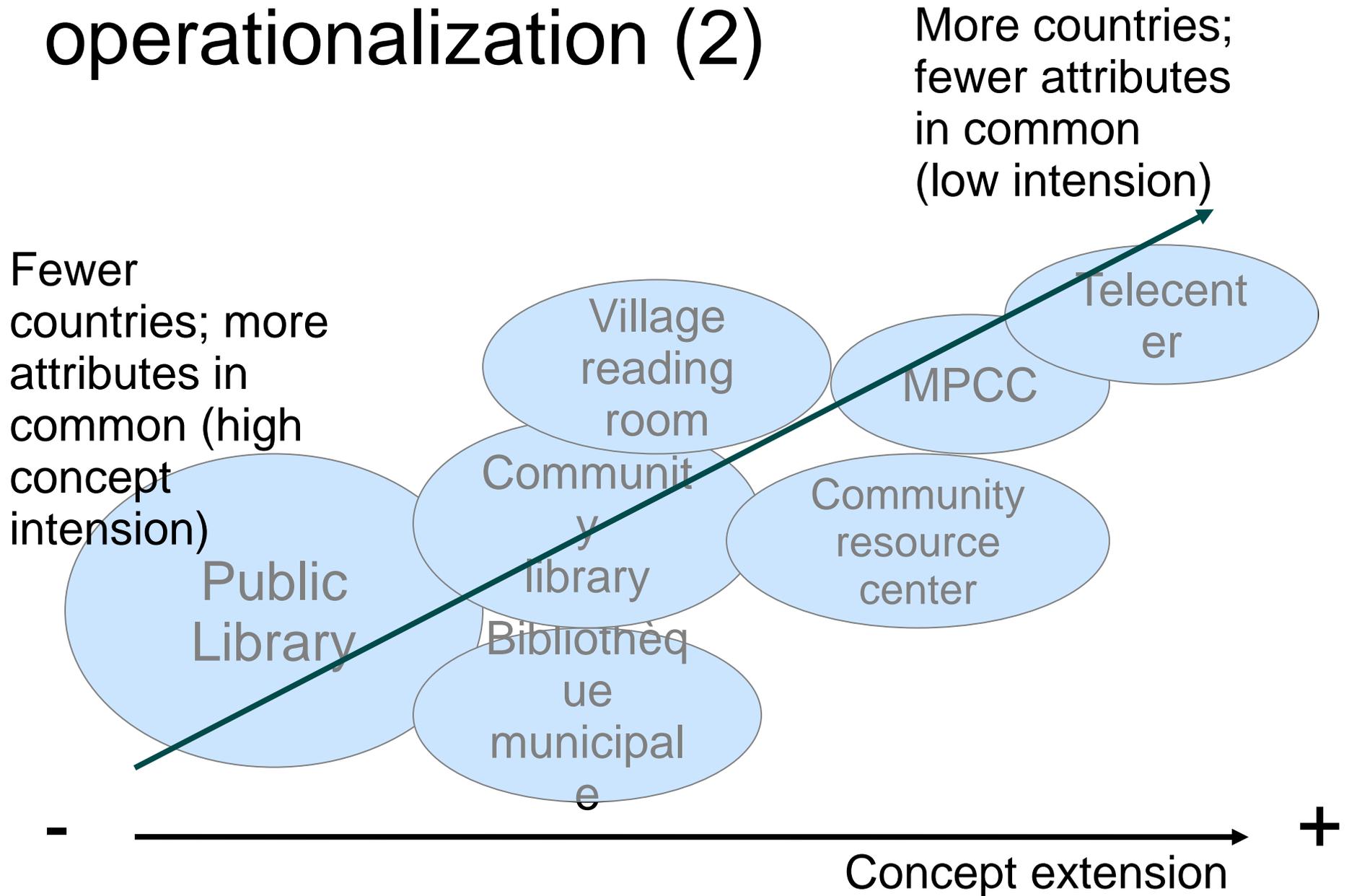
# Conceptualization & operationalization

Adapted from Sartori, via Pennings et al. (2006:48-49)  
"Verzuiling" example)

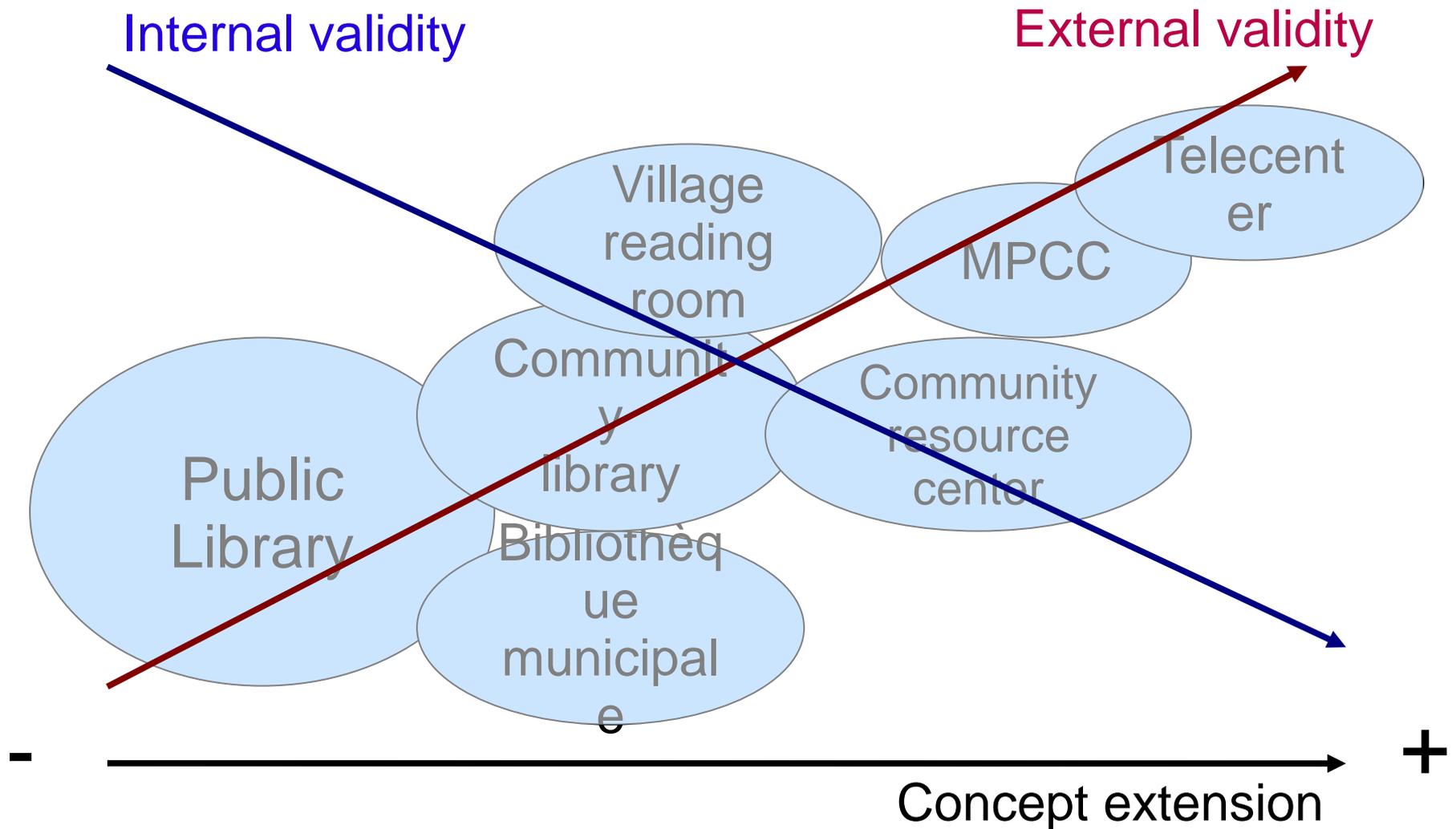
The Public  
Library concept



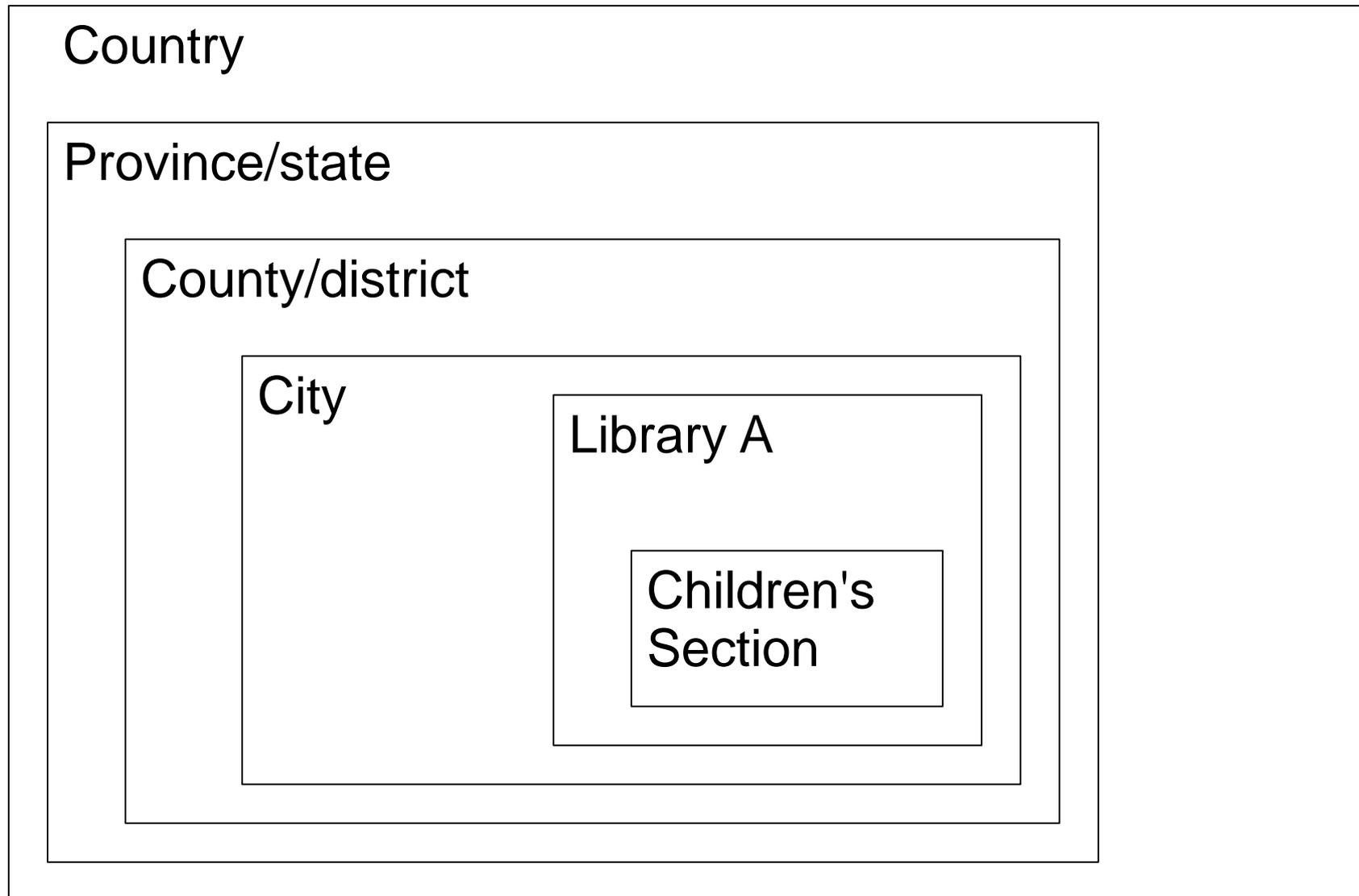
# Conceptualization & operationalization (2)



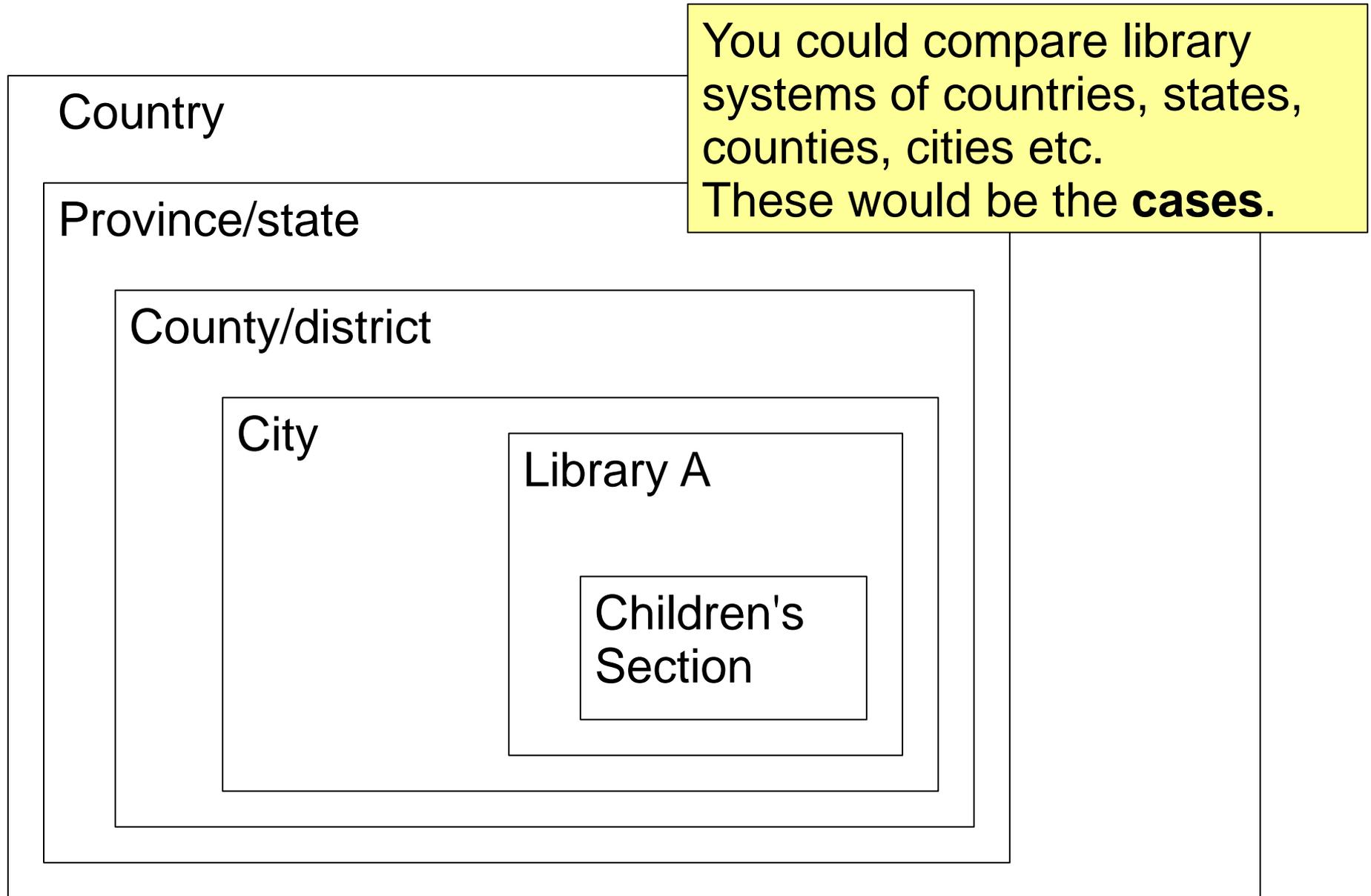
# Conceptualization & operationalization (3)



# Levels of analysis, cases, units of analysis



# Levels of analysis

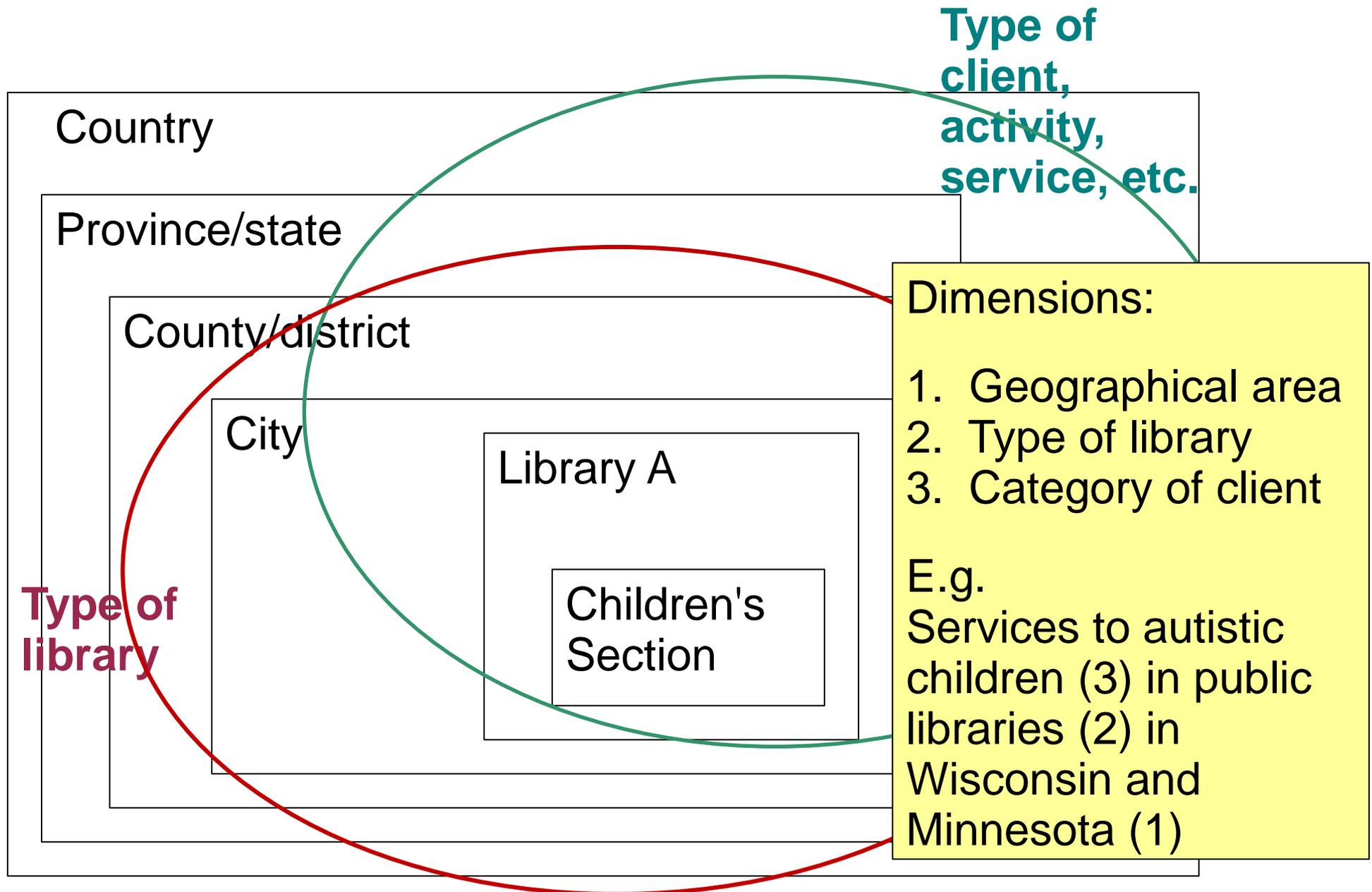




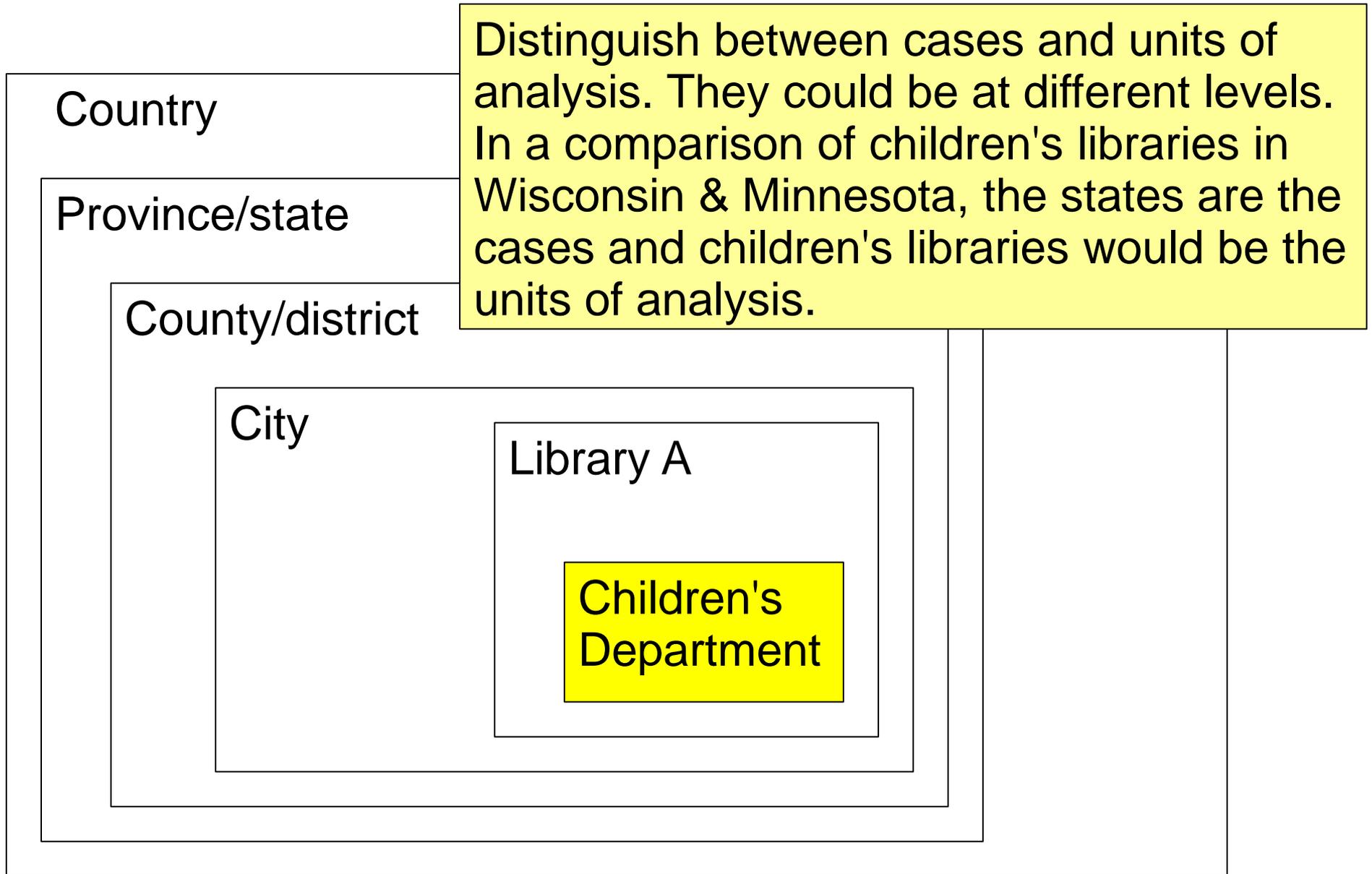
# Levels of analysis (2)

- Macro level: groups, systems, structures
  - e.g. Information literacy curricula of provinces or countries
- Micro level: individual activities or behavior
  - e.g. Information literacy of individual subjects
- Shuttling (interaction) between the two levels, combining macro & micro analyses can be very fruitful
- Danger of “ecological” or “aggregate” fallacies
- E.g.
  - Conclusions regarding information literacy of individual students on the basis of a comparison of their libraries' IL curricula

# Multidimensional studies

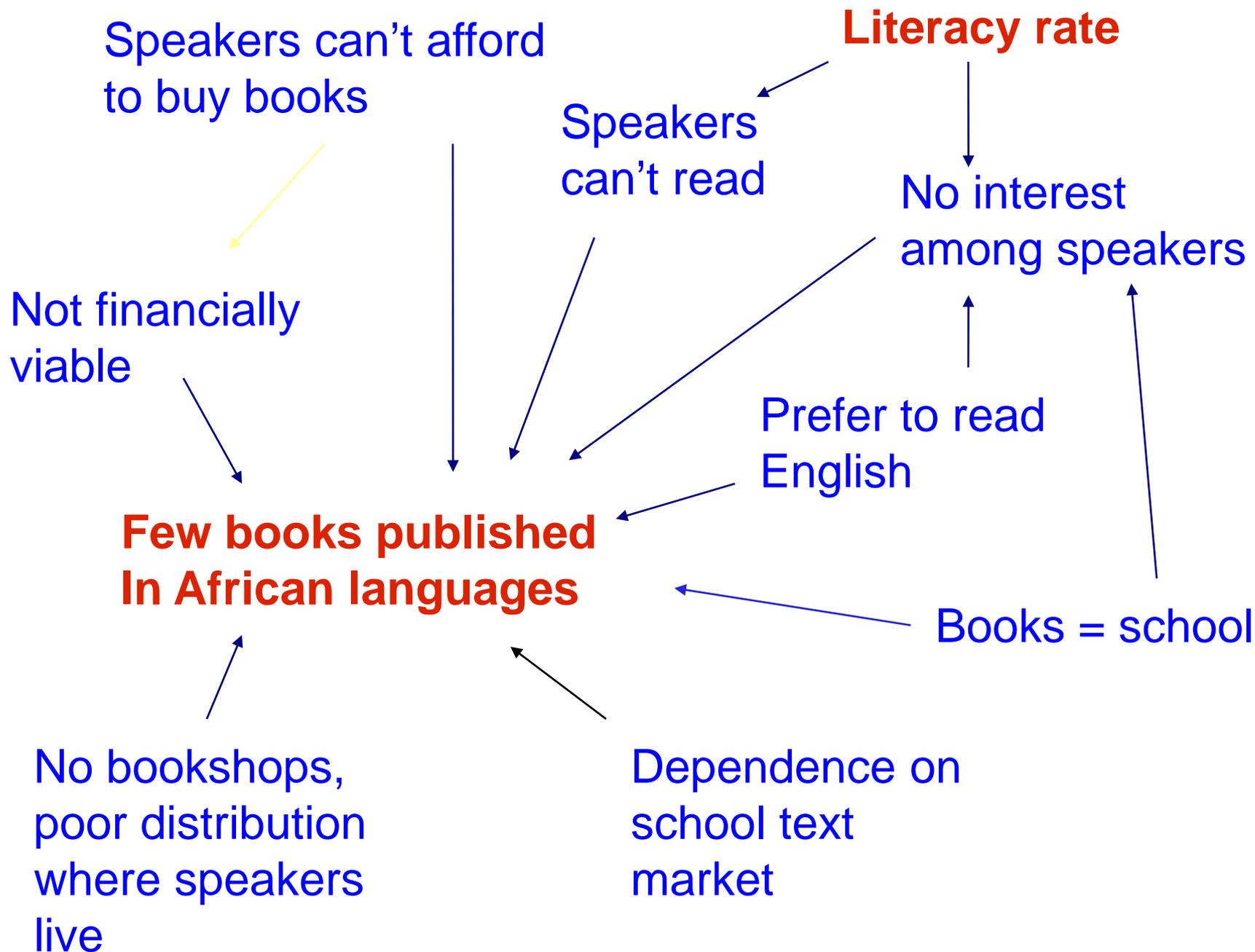


# Cases & units of analysis



# How many cases?

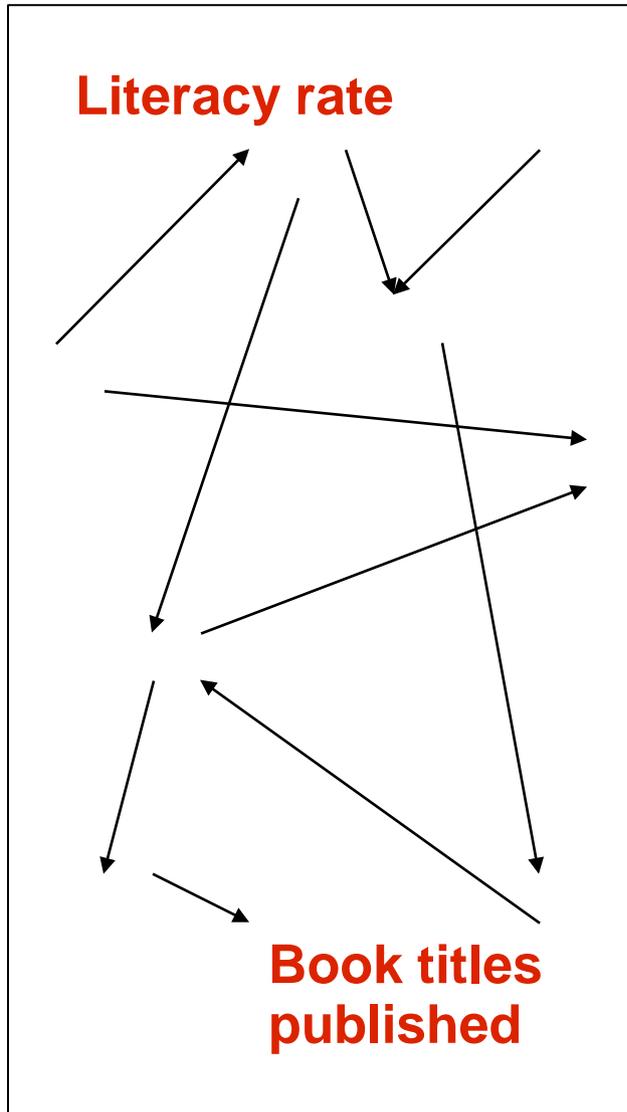
- Single case/country study
  - Controversial, is this comparative?
  - But good description is useful
- Case study approach
  - Few cases, many variables
- Survey (“statistical”) approach
  - Many cases, fewer variables



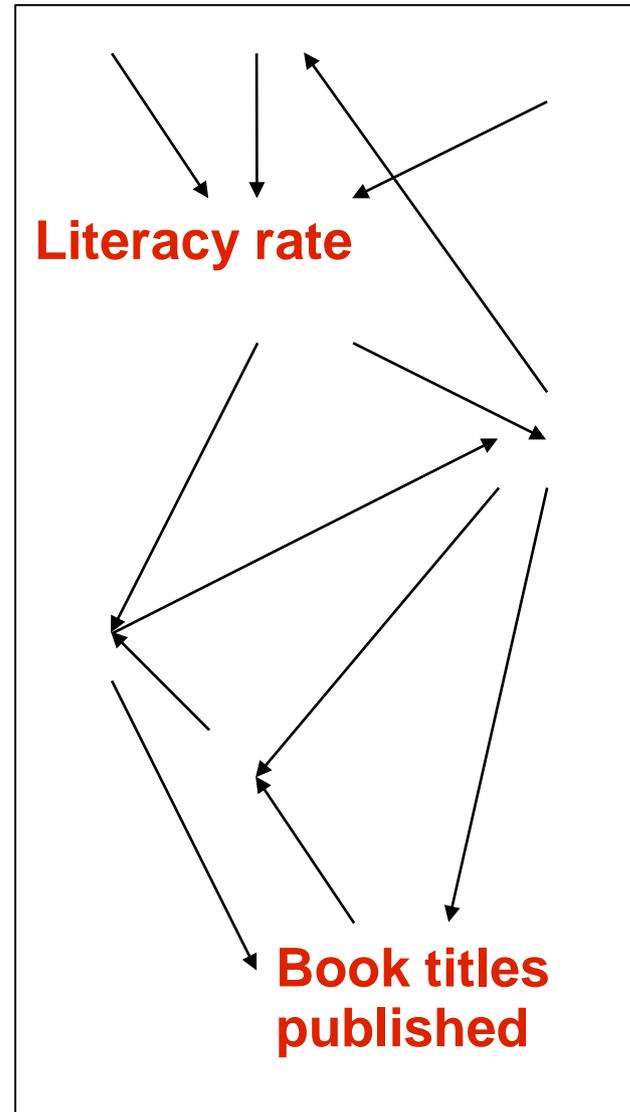
Example (single case) from South Africa

# Comparison of two cases

Country A



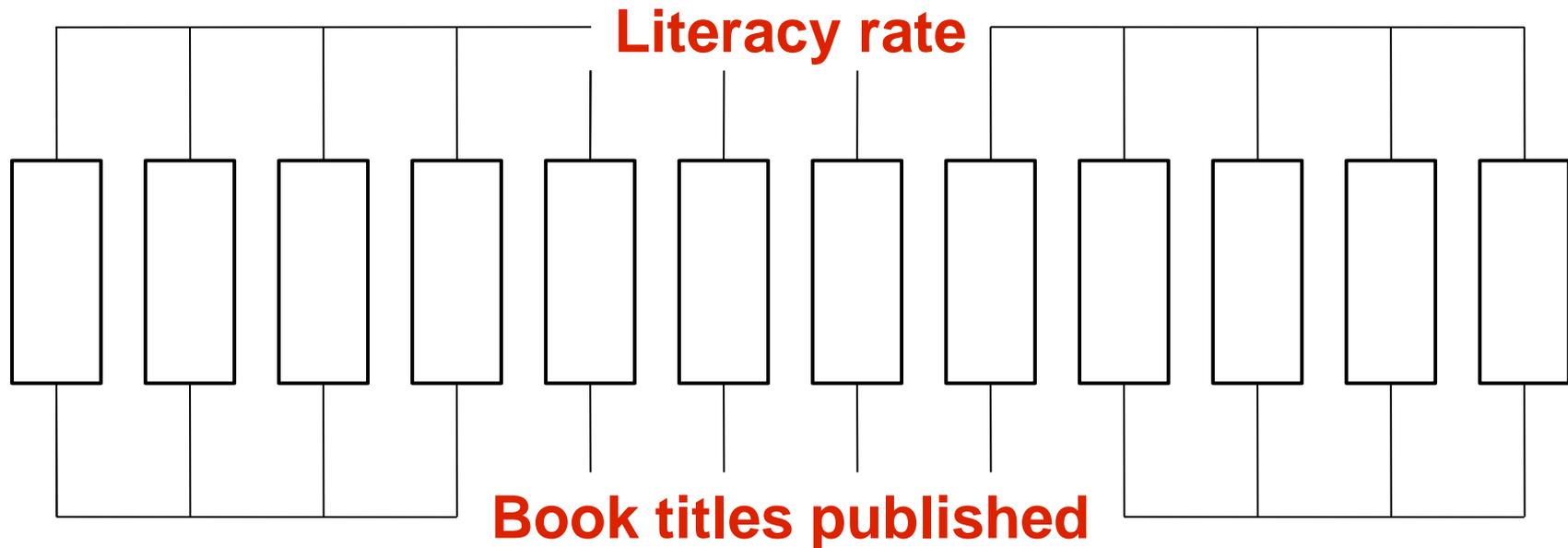
Country B



# Comparison of many cases

Choice:

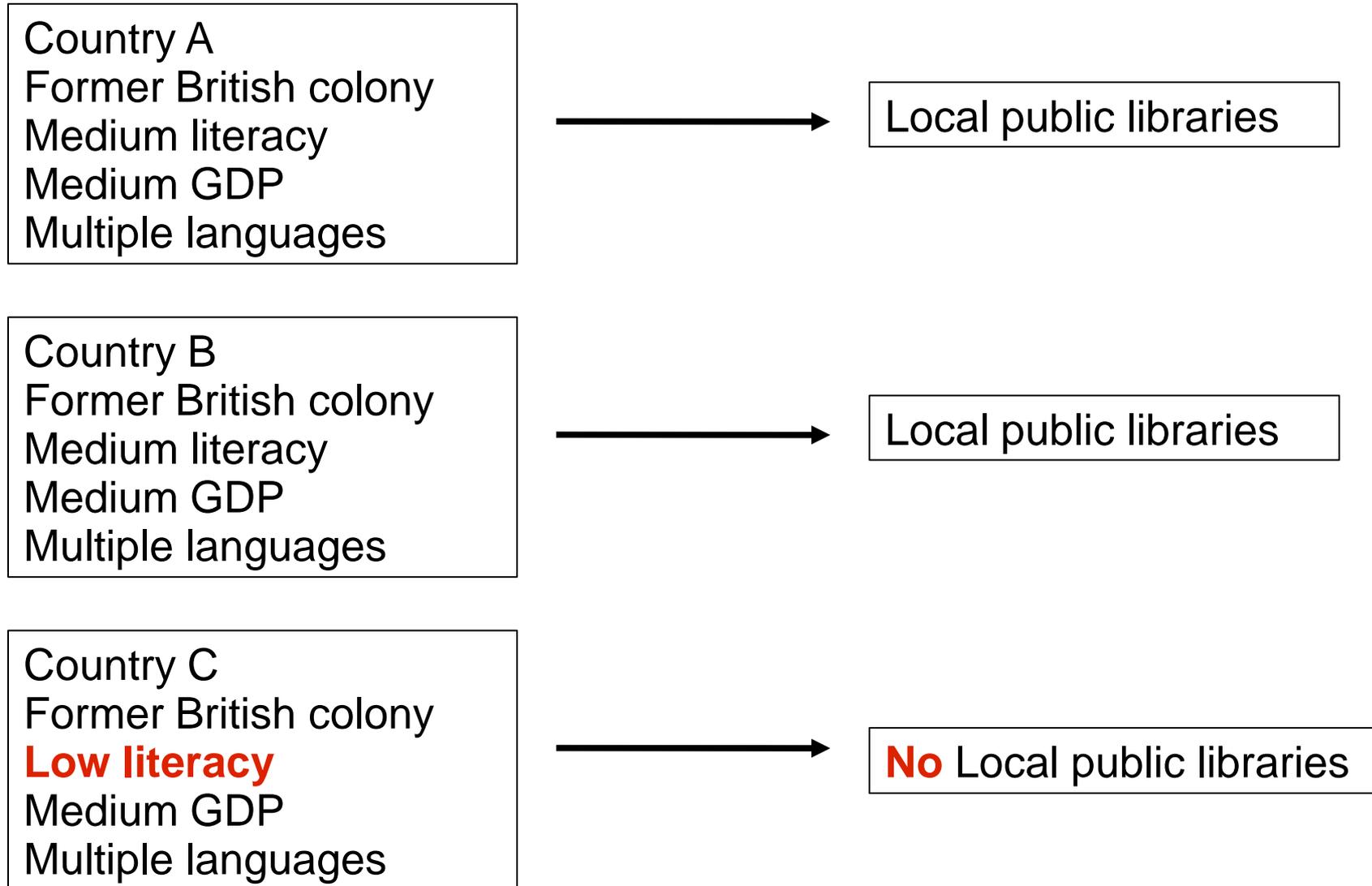
Small N, many variables, more insight, less external validity  
Large N, fewer variables, less insight, more external validity



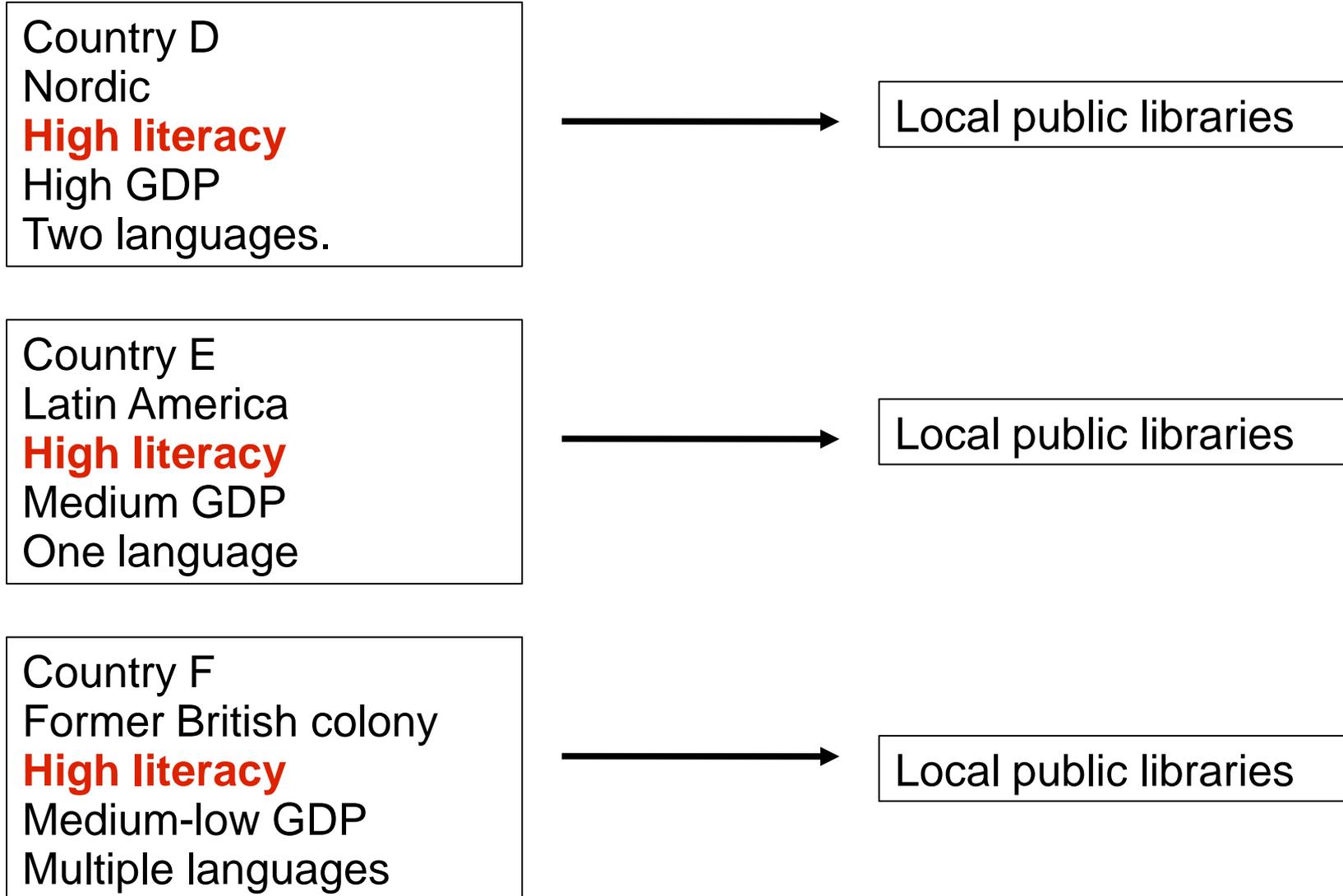
# Which cases? Which countries?

- Important decision with small N
- No random sampling: purposive selection of cases
- Countries that appear to be similar?
  - Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland
  - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania
- Countries that appear to be dissimilar?
  - South Africa, South Korea, Spain
- Either strategy can work – it all depends...
- J.S. Mills: Methods of agreement & difference

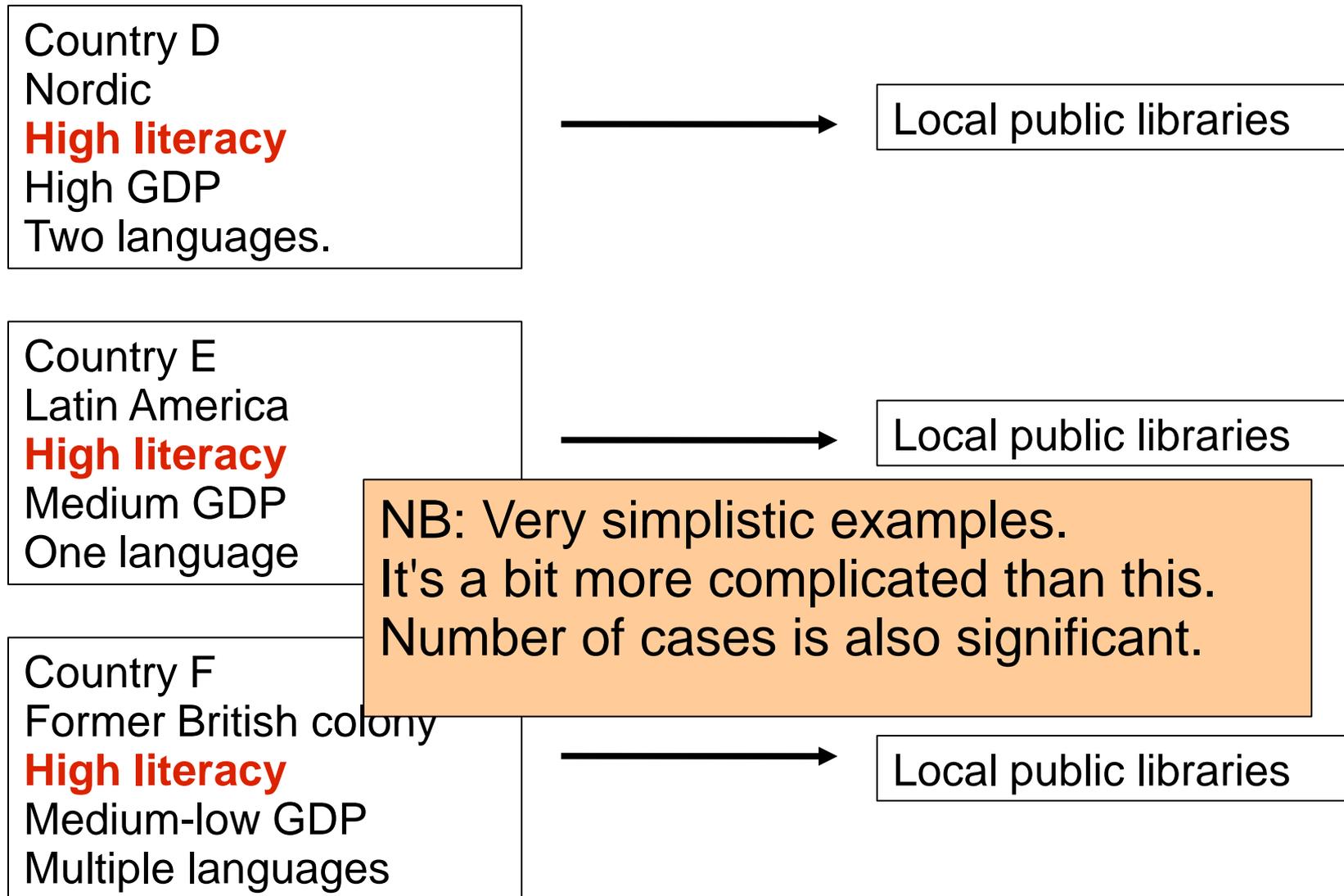
# MSSD: Most Similar Systems Design



# MDSD: Most Different Systems Design



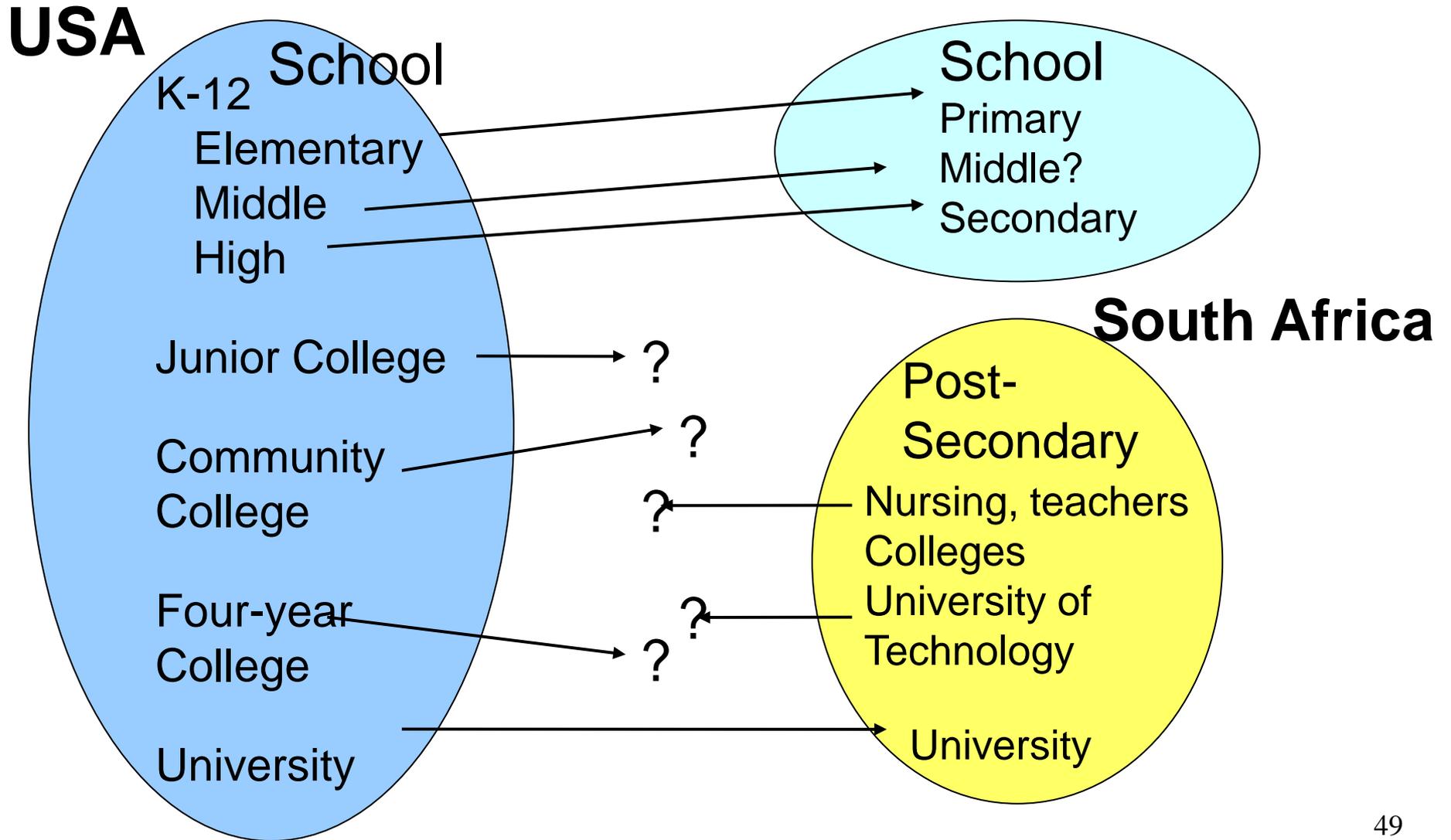
# MDSD: Most Different Systems Design



# Equivalence over identity

- Experience of European Social Survey
- Reliability of quantitative research depends on the “principle of equivalence”
  - Probability of inclusion in a random sample
    - Different sampling frames in different countries
  - Response rate
  - Questions (should have broadly equivalent meanings to all respondents) – “spurious lexical equivalence”
    - E.g. “left, center, right”, “liberal-conservative” continuum, “strong leadership”, “nationalism”, “democracy”
  - “Can questions travel successfully?”

# Spurious lexical equivalence



# Equivalence

- Principle of equivalence (cont'd.)
  - Coding schemes should be designed to minimize differences between coders
  - Methodological and procedural habits of researchers in different countries (39 national institutions involved)
    - Training of field workers
    - Interviewing styles
    - Visual aids
    - Socio-economic classifications
  - Emphasis on *equivalent*, not *identical*, methods & measures

# Comparison...

Studying two or more cases, systems, countries etc. is not enough.

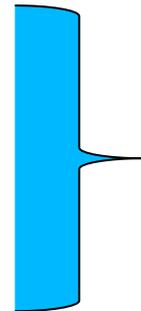
For comparative research we need:

Juxtaposition

Identification

Analysis

Explanation



Similarities  
and  
differences

Contextual factors

The image shows the interior of the Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai in Bergamo, Italy. The room is filled with wooden bookshelves on both sides, reaching up to the ceiling. In the foreground, there are several wooden study tables with chairs. A large globe is visible on the left side. In the background, there are large windows with light streaming in, and several people are seated at the tables, some working. A central display case with books is visible in the background. The overall atmosphere is quiet and scholarly.

Thank you

Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai, Bergamo, Italy