

These potential reoccurring ideas are coded, simply meaning that the constructs are physically noted (handwritten or in a software database). Sometimes what originally appeared to be a theme does not turn out to be aptly supported by the data. Those codes eventually are ignored or discarded. Other codes, however, occur repeatedly—both in terms of breadth, and, when appropriate, depth of occurrences. These reoccurring coded phrases, terms, and expressions (and the like) formulate constructs that seem to be shared by most or many of the participants of the study. When sufficiently grounded in the data collected, they become the study's themes.

Quantitative researchers sometimes overlook the inductive method of qualitative themes. As a hallmark, qualitative researchers use an inductive method of analysis. Most quantitative researchers begin with hypotheses that they attempt to prove or disprove statistically. Essentially, it is a deductive method. The researcher begins with a conclusion (null hypothesis) and goes to data for its support. Qualitative researchers, in contrast, are inductively driven. They begin with the data, and from it, develop hypotheses or conclusions. Most often, the themes generated from the data are the study's conclusions.

Finally, themes are assessed by qualitative researchers in more than just transcribed interviews. Triangulation involves sifting through documents, websites, test results, public relations materials—anything that might substantiate or negate the stability of themes found from participant interview transcripts. In other words, information from related documents should support the overall themes generated from the coded transcript data.

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See also Categories; Essence; Interpretive Research; Methods

Further Readings

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Although the term does not have a clear and consistent definition, *theoretical framework* is defined as any

empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, mid-range, and explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena. Qualitative research has often been criticized for not being guided by theory in its development and conduct. Additionally, students as well as experienced researchers who employ qualitative methods frequently have trouble identifying and using theoretical frameworks in their research (i.e., understanding how and what it affects in the process of conducting the research).

The confusion related to understanding and using theoretical frameworks stems from a wide variety of treatments of this topic by leading writers in the field. Many of the prominent writers on qualitative methods provide neither the depth of understanding nor the specificity needed to explicate the topic. In an attempt to address this confusion, this entry focuses on what has been written about the role of theory and theoretical frameworks in qualitative research, defining what a theoretical framework is, looking at how one finds and utilizes a theoretical framework in qualitative research, and addressing the effects of a theoretical framework on the research process.

What the Literature Says

While there is little disagreement about the role and place of theory in quantitative research, such is not the case regarding qualitative research. There is consensus neither about its role in qualitative research nor about its definition. Theory, though, has an unavoidable place for all but a few of the authors reviewed, and it plays a substantive role in the research process. An examination of the literature on this topic reveals three different understandings: (1) that theory has little relationship to qualitative research, (2) that theory in qualitative research relates to the methodology the researcher chooses to use and the epistemologies underlying that methodology, and (3) that theory in qualitative research has a pervasive role that affects all aspects of the research process. These categories of understandings are not exclusive, but help highlight the confusion that exists in the literature. Authors may lean toward more than one position. For example, an author may situate the role of theory within methodological paradigms, yet hint at the notion that theory has a much wider role to play. A brief review of each of these categories follows.

Theory Has Little Relationship

Some widely used textbooks do not discuss, nor even mention, theory in relation to qualitative research. Others mention theory, but confine the discussion to defining it as an attempt to develop a general explanation for some phenomenon or as primarily concerned with explanation. Several authors give short shrift to discussions of theory in qualitative research while acknowledging its relevance to a particular methodology. For example, in discussions of grounded theory, they hold that qualitative studies are done to discover theory because the researcher starts by collecting data and then searches for theoretical constructs, themes, and patterns that are “grounded” in the theory.

Theory as Related to Methodology

In sharp contrast to these works, where theory in relation to qualitative research is nonexistent or relatively modest, there is a substantive body of work that equates theory in qualitative research with the methodologies used in the conduct of the research and the epistemologies underlying these methods. These works are well known and are largely written about qualitative research specifically, rather than about research in general. Some authors in this category speak about theories emerging from naturalistic inquiry, not framing it.

Some researchers equate paradigms with theory and argue that these paradigms contain the researchers’ epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises that guide the researcher’s actions. These paradigms are identified as positivism and postpositivism; interpretivism, constructivism, and hermeneutics; feminism(s); racialized discourses; critical theory and Marxist models; cultural studies models; and queer theory. These paradigms clearly link theory to methodologies; however, it is also suggested that the study is widely affected by the linkage. Some writers of qualitative methods argue that case study research, in contrast to other qualitative research designs such as ethnography, requires identifying the theoretical perspective at the outset of the inquiry since it affects the research questions, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

Other writers of qualitative methods acknowledge that researchers bring paradigmatic assumptions (ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological) to the design of their studies, and may, in addition, bring ideological perspectives (post-modernism, critical theory, and feminism) that might guide a study. It is believed that with ethnography and

phenomenology, the researcher brings a strong orienting framework to the research, while in grounded theory, one collects and analyzes data before using theory. With biography and case study, a theoretical lens might or might not play a part, depending on the nature of the study and the disposition of the researcher.

Theory as More

As compelling as the work relating theory in qualitative research to methodologies and their underlying epistemologies, a body of work that, while not denying the influence of methodologies and their underlying epistemologies, suggests that the role of theory in qualitative research is more pervasive and influential than suggested by those who situate it methodologically. They contend that it plays a key role in framing and conducting almost every aspect of the study (e.g., development of purpose statement, research questions, data collection protocols and approaches, and analysis).

From this perspective, it would be difficult to imagine a study without a theoretical (sometimes called a conceptual) framework. We would not know what to do in conducting our research without some theoretical framework to guide us, whether it is made explicit or not. Researchers who hold this perspective call the theoretical framework the structure, the scaffolding, or the frame of the study. For some authors, the theoretical framework affects every aspect of the study, from determining how to frame the purpose and problem, to what to look at and for, to how they make sense of the data that are collected. In short, the entire process is theory-laden.

This position holds that without at least some rudimentary theoretical framework there would be no way to make reasoned decisions about what data to gather or to determine what is important from among the wealth of data and possibilities of approaches to analysis that exist. The theoretical framework can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or causal, but it delineates the main things to be studied and the presumed relationships among them. The theoretical framework is constructed from the theories and experiences the researcher brings to and draws upon in conceptualizing the study. These theories, implicit and explicit, include grand theories such as symbolic interactionism and middle-range concepts such as culture, as well as preconceptions, biases, values, frames, and rhetorical habits.

Few of us can claim that we enter the field *tabula rasa*, unencumbered by notions of the phenomena we seek to understand. Theory (i.e., a theoretical framework), then, includes any general set of ideas that guide action, and that theory profoundly affects the conduct of qualitative research. Theory is pragmatically linked with the activities of planning a study, gaining entry into the field, recording observations, conducting interviews, sifting through documents, and writing up research.

Definition of a Theoretical Framework

As noted above, the term *theoretical framework* does not have a clear and consistent definition; in this entry, it is defined as any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, mid-range, and explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena. This definition of theoretical frameworks excludes what some writers have called paradigms of social research (e.g., postpositivist, constructivist, critical, feminist). It also does not consider methodological issues or approaches to be synonymous with theoretical frameworks (e.g., narrative analysis, systems analysis, symbolic interactionism).

Examples of what is meant by theories that can be applied as “lenses” to study phenomena might include Vygotskian learning theory, micropolitical theory, class reproduction theory, job choice theory, social capital, cultural capital, liminality, transformational learning theory, the arena model of policy innovation, and grief theory, to name only a few.

There are a wide variety of theoretical frameworks available for qualitative researchers to consider. These frameworks originate in the many different fields of study and disciplines in the social and natural sciences. Thus, the well-read qualitative researcher is alert to theoretical frameworks in economics, sociology, political science, psychology, biology, physics, and anthropology, to name but a few. Researchers should be open to considering the applicability of these frameworks to the research problem they seek to study. It is, indeed, this diversity and richness of theoretical frameworks that allow us to see in new and different ways what seems to be ordinary and familiar.

In defining theoretical frameworks, we must be cognizant that any framework or theory allows the researcher to “see” and understand certain aspects of

the phenomenon being studied while concealing other aspects. No theory, or theoretical framework, provides a perfect explanation of what is being studied.

How Do I Find a Theoretical Framework?

The problem of finding a theoretical framework is not confined to students or neophyte researchers. Even seasoned qualitative researchers have been known to have manuscripts returned to them with questions about the theoretical framework that guided their study. Students of qualitative research as well as experienced researchers sometimes find themselves at a loss in the process of selecting a theoretical framework. They often expect it to appear or to magically drop into their laps. Admittedly, finding a theoretical framework, especially one that works well for the phenomenon being studied, is not always an easy process. Although students or researchers may be lucky and find a theoretical framework quickly and painlessly, having one handed to them by a professor for their thesis or dissertation, by a colleague, or by co-researchers, the fact remains that in all likelihood students or researchers will have to actively search for a theoretical framework. No doubt, this pursuit will be characterized by much reading (e.g., in the fields of economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and even the physical and biological sciences); possible discussion with colleagues; and finding, reflecting upon, and discarding several potential theoretical frameworks before one is finally chosen. Although some researchers use a particular theoretical framework for an extended period of time, others change frameworks with each study undertaken.

A good approach to beginning to find a theoretical framework might be to study a scholarly journal that requires its authors to identify the theoretical framework used. Typically, one will see a heading or subheading that is actually labeled as a theoretical or conceptual framework. Qualitative researchers are encouraged to spend some time looking at published research and identifying the theoretical frameworks used as a way to stimulate thinking about theories and their relationship to research projects. Additionally, qualitative researchers are encouraged to be persistent in the search for theoretical frameworks and to think beyond the confines of their disciplinary focus.

What Effect Does the Theoretical Framework Have on My Research?

A theoretical framework has the ability to (a) focus a study, (b) reveal and conceal meaning and understanding, (c) situate the research in a scholarly conversation and provide a vernacular, and (d) reveal its strengths and weaknesses.

Focus a Study

The ability of a theoretical framework to focus a study involves four issues. First, qualitative researchers often feel overwhelmed by the mountains of data (e.g., interview transcripts, documents, observation notes, and fieldnotes) that can be collected. By acting as a “sieve” or a “lens,” the theoretical framework assists the researcher in the process of sorting through these data. Second, the theoretical framework frames every aspect of a study from the questions asked, to the sample selected, to the analysis derived. The concepts, constructs, and propositions that are part and parcel of a theory help the researcher in formulating these component parts of the research process. Third, qualitative researchers are keenly aware of the existence of subjectivity and bias in their research. The theoretical framework helps the researcher to control this subjectivity by the self-conscious revisiting of the theory and a concomitant awareness that one is using a particular perspective. Fourth, the theoretical framework provides powerful concepts that may be used in the coding and the analysis of the data. In short, the theoretical framework forces the researcher to be accountable to ensure that the methodology, the data, and the analysis are consistent with the theory.

Reveal and Conceal Meaning and Understanding

The theoretical framework has the ability to reveal and conceal meaning and understanding. Theories can allow us to see familiar phenomena in novel ways, but they can also blind us to aspects of the phenomena that are not part of the theory. As part of theory’s ability to reveal and conceal, we should be cognizant that a theoretical framework can distort the phenomena being studied by filtering out critical pieces of data.

Researchers need to recognize this characteristic of a theoretical framework and give serious thought to what is being concealed. This ability to reveal and conceal makes it all the more important for researchers to tell their readers, if possible, what is concealed. This

concealment is, after all, the essence of a study’s delimitations. Although the choice of a theoretical framework clearly delimits a study, little recognition of this fact is found in theses, dissertations, or in journal articles.

Situate the Research in a Scholarly Conversation and Provide a Vernacular

In the process of advancing knowledge, the theoretical framework allows researchers to situate their research and knowledge contributions in a scholarly conversation. It allows them to talk across disciplines using the known and accepted language of the theory. It is this established language that assists in making meanings of the phenomena being studied explicit. The theoretical framework also provides convenient labels and categories that help in explaining and developing thick descriptions and a coherent analysis.

In reflecting upon this effect of the theoretical framework, it is important for qualitative researchers to learn the language of the theory being used and to use it precisely and clearly. It is also necessary to make every attempt to state their contributions to the scholarly conversation without overreaching appropriate parameters—parameters that will be dictated by the data they have collected and the analysis they have formulated. Part of participating in this scholarly conversation and documenting their contribution involves looking carefully at the relationship between their study and the theory they have used. Does their research support the existing theory, does it advance the theory in some meaningful and important way, or does it refute the theory? These are important questions that should not be avoided in this discussion.

Reveals Its Strengths and Weaknesses

No theoretical framework can completely and adequately describe or explain any phenomena. Researchers should be concerned about the power of a theoretical framework to be too reductionistic, stripping the phenomenon of its complexity and interest, or too deterministic, forcing the researcher to “fit” the data into predetermined categories. Other researchers have been concerned about the power of the existing literature on a topic to be ideologically hegemonic, making it difficult to see phenomena in ways that are different from those that are prevalent in the literature. Some have discussed the fact that strengths and weaknesses provide sufficient reason to employ multiple frameworks in one study.

Researchers need to be prepared for the strengths and weaknesses of a theoretical framework being revealed during the process of conducting a research project. Questions will be raised that need to be addressed. Whereas the “fit” of the theoretical framework for a study may become evident, it may in fact become necessary to discard the theoretical framework and start the process of searching for a new one. Researchers need to be wary of dropping data in light of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of any theory. It could be these data that help in the advancement of the theory or in its being refuted.

The relationship between theory and qualitative research remains complicated. The question remains, “Is it possible to observe and describe what happens in natural settings without some theory to guide the researcher in what is relevant to observe and to assist in naming what is happening?” Qualitative forms of inquiry demand that theory (i.e., theoretical frameworks) be used with imagination and flexibility. As John Dewey noted, it is part of our need to reeducate our perceptions.

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See also Theory

Further Readings

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THEORETICAL MEMOING

Memoing refers to the informal written records kept by qualitative researchers that reference ideas, hunches, hypotheses, research literature, and sundry observations about research questions, research design and methods, and theory as they arise in the process of a research project. *Theoretical memoing* refers to a specific subset of memoing that focuses on the theorizing aspect of research. Although memoing is described as an essential step throughout the process of conducting studies using grounded theory, it is also described by other qualitative researchers as a useful means to trace one’s development of theory from initial conception of a research project to publication of the findings. Given that theoretical assumptions underlie every aspect of a research project, theoretical memos provide an important record that researchers may use as a source of information, impetus for reflection, and record of analytic decision making.

Various descriptions of memo writing provide guidelines for how researchers can use theoretical memoing in their work, as well as exemplars of various types of memos. First, qualitative researchers can use multiple techniques to illustrate their developing understandings of how evidence may be generated, understood, analyzed, and represented. These include freewriting and drawing diagrams and concept maps. Second, qualitative researchers are advised to begin recording theoretical memos early—throughout the research design process, while conducting fieldwork, and throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

Advocates of theoretical memoing affirm that this technique assists researchers to develop researcher reflexivity, to make decisions with respect to data generation and research design, to make connections between the concrete details of evidence to abstract ideas and concepts, to support assertions and develop analyses and interpretations, to record the development of theory building, and to write and report findings. Although some scholars describe writing, coding, and filing theoretical memos on index cards, the introduction of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software packages (CAQDAS) to the field of qualitative inquiry has facilitated quick and easy access to systematic forms of memo writing in the form of annotated texts, linked memo documents, and hypertext links among electronic documents.

The focus of theoretical memoing is on reflection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as how researchers