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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH (2013)  
ROUTLEDGE

## Chapter 9

# Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

### INTRODUCTION

There is a range of views about the use of theories and concepts in qualitative research. Both qualitative and quantitative researchers place varying degrees of emphasis on the use of theories and concepts: some choose to use less formal theories and concepts for their research; some opt to use theories and concepts in ways that differ from traditional norms and a few choose to forgo the application of theories and concepts to their work completely. Perhaps because of these disparate views and practices, social science research studies at times have been criticized for lacking a sound theoretical and conceptual foundation. Admittedly, the use of theories and concepts in qualitative research is a complex issue, and researchers rarely are provided with much guidance about whether, when, where, and how to use them. This chapter provides key definitions of theories and concepts, debates competing perspectives on each and explores the role that both of these frameworks play in qualitative research. It goes on to apply these ideas to practice, presenting the nuts and bolts of developing and using theoretical and conceptual frameworks within a qualitative study.

### CONFUSIONS IN TERMINOLOGY: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The terms 'theoretical framework' and 'conceptual framework' appear frequently in published social science studies, and there appears to be some general confusion about the difference between the two, with good reason. At times, researchers seem to use the terms almost interchangeably. At other times, researchers seem to make sharp distinctions between the two; sometimes they use one or the other in their studies, sometimes both and sometimes neither. The competing opinions about the difference between a theoretical framework and a conceptual framework, coupled with a lack of a clear distinction in the literature, makes understanding either term and putting either concept in to practice a challenge. Indeed, in reading through many social science studies, it would appear that the notion of having some kind of theoretical or conceptual framework may have become lost, overlooked or misunderstood. Recent research, for example, has indicated that many PhD candidates struggle with the idea of conceptual frameworks:

Their difficulty arose despite the sessions/tutorials that many had previously received elsewhere 'on research' ... The majority of candidates could identify concepts and relate

them to their intended research design and research process. However, despite clarifying research questions and 'reading around their subject', one-third of candidates still had problems in visualising concepts within a framework.

(Lesnem and Trafford 2007: 93)

Such difficulty intimates that the lack of understanding of conceptual frameworks is having a long-term influence on the quality of qualitative studies in general. For this reason, researchers need clear ideas about conceptual or theoretical frameworks, and whether and how one or both should be applied.

## WHAT IS A THEORY?

A theory, as we see it, is an effort to explain, predict and master a phenomenon, such as a relationship, event or behaviour. Reeves *et al.* (2008), for example, define a theory as 'an organized, coherent, and systematic articulation of a set of issues that are communicated as a meaningful whole'. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) also state the following of theory:

Theory is seen as being concerned with the development of systematic construction of knowledge of the social world. In doing this theory employs the use of concepts, systems, models, structures, beliefs and ideas, hypotheses (theories) in order to make statements about particular times of actions, events or activities, so as to make analyses of their causes, consequences, and processes.

(Hitchcock and Hughes 1995: 20–1)

Strauss and Corbin (1994: 278) similarly suggest that 'theory consists of plausible relationship produced among concepts or sets of concepts'. Theories, then, are attempts to construct models that describe and explain 'reality'.

Theories generally are developed deductively, following from an empirically informed act of creativity, and then are verified empirically, a process which results in an on-going and cyclical process of deduction and induction (Reeves *et al.* 2008). Ary *et al.* (1990) suggest that the following are essential elements of a theory:

- It should aid understanding of observed phenomena by explaining them in the simplest form possible (*principle of parsimony*).
- It should fit cleanly with observed facts and with established principles.
- It should be inherently testable and verifiable.
- It should imply further investigations and predict new discoveries.

A theory is useful because it enables generalizations to be made about observations and consists of an interrelated, coherent set of ideas and models (Camp 2000).

## What kinds of theories exist?

Theories may fit into one of three primary categories: grand, middle range and substantive theories. *Grand theories* are used to explain major categories of phenomena and are more common in the natural sciences than in the social sciences. An example of a grand theory is Wilson's (1998) theory of the unity of knowledge. *Middle-range theories* fall somewhere below grand theories in a hierarchy and tend to describe a specific phenomenon. Middle-range theory is sometimes

referred to as 'to compare oneself to practice theories emergency room and classification

Social science grounded theory

## How do quantitative theories differ?

While there is general agreement that quantitative theories might be expected to differ from qualitative theories in how they are used to explain key variables

## Theory according to quantitative researchers

Quantitative researchers are interested in the relationship between variables (Camp 2000). They often focus on a social or human phenomenon and use numbers, and statistical analysis, to make generalisations of the relationship. They are typically stated 'for how and why a variable' (1994: 82) about relationships (for example, Kerlinger

## Theory according to qualitative researchers

Qualitative researchers are interested in the relationship between variables (Camp 2000). They often focus on a social or human phenomenon and use words and narratives to make generalisations of the relationship. They are always tentative and comparative analysis. They often use collection and analysis of data in quantitative research. 'Thinking about data in qualitative research' (1998: 188). She often uses abstract categories to explain the relationship between variables. She often considers whether

## What is a theory in qualitative research?

Marshall and Rossman (1999) define a theory in qualitative research as a set of ideas and models that

interest in its formal theory. Merton's theory of a reference group (having a group by which to compare oneself) is an example of middle-range theory. (Merton and Kendall 1946). Substantive or narrow theories offer explanations in a restricted setting and are limited in scope (such as intelligence, room care), often being expressed as propositions or hypotheses. Narrow typologies and classification systems may also be considered substantive theory.

Social science researchers tend to use middle-range theories and substantive theories, and grounded theory researchers tend to seek to develop substantive theories.

## How do quantitative and qualitative researchers see theory differently?

While there is general agreement as to the nature of a theory and its general categories, as might be expected, quantitative and qualitative researchers have tended to define and use theory differently. The primary difference seems to be in the way in which theory is used to understand or explain key variables or concepts.

### *Theory according to quantitative researchers*

Quantitative researchers tend to see theory as a documentation of relationships between variables of interest (Camp 2000). Creswell (1994) suggested that quantitative research involves 'an inquiry into a social or human problem, based on testing a theory composed of variables, measured with numbers, and analyzed with statistical procedures, in order to determine whether the predictive generalisations of the theory hold true' (1994: 2). He noted that the relationships among variables are typically stated in terms of magnitude and direction, thus providing 'overarching explanation for how and why one would expect the independent variable to explain or predict the dependent variable' (1994: 82–3). Quantitative researchers, then, tend to use a theory to develop hypotheses about relationships between variables, for the purpose of predicting and explaining phenomena (for example, Kerlinger 1979; Ary *et al.* 1990; Best and Kahn 1993).

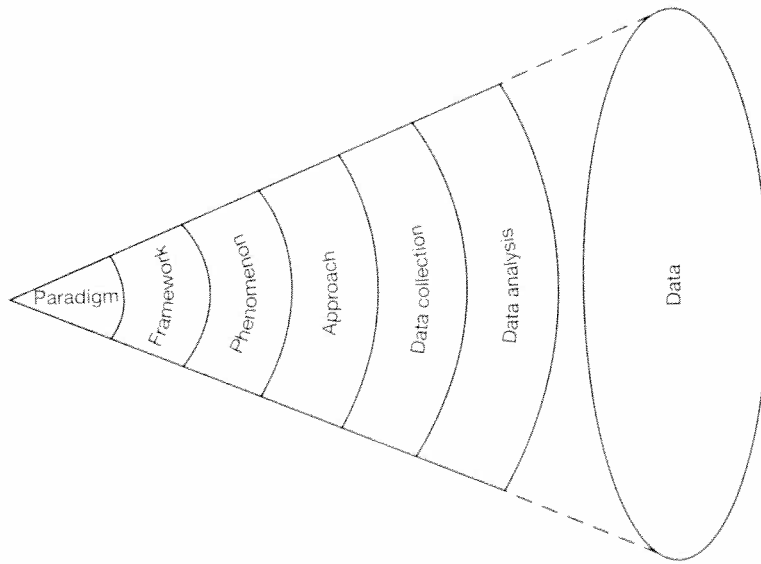
### *Theory according to qualitative researchers*

Qualitative researchers often see theory as something that researchers do during data collection and analysis, so theory for the qualitative researcher does not predict relationship between variables (Camp 2000). According to Merriam (1998), unlike in quantitative research, hypotheses are always tentative in qualitative research and are developed through use of a constant comparative analysis of data. Hypotheses emerge, according to her, simultaneously with the collection and analysis of data, rather than being stated in advance of data collection as occurs in quantitative research. Merriam described this view of the role of theory when she wrote that 'thinking about data theorising is a step toward developing a theory that explains some aspect of educational practice and allows a researcher to draw inferences about future activity' (Merriam 1998: 188). She defines theorizing as 'the cognitive process of discovering or manipulating categories and the relationships among those categories' (1998: 188). Theory, then, explains the relationship between categories rather than predicts them. What researchers should consider is whether they will test theories, use them on to guide data analysis or generate theory.

## What is a theoretical framework?

Merriam and Richardson (1999: 1995: 24) and others distinguish a theory as governing the way in which a research is conducted, and this term has been applied increasingly to the way in which

specific theories are applied in social science research. The authors argue that the theoretical frame 'provides the conceptual grounding of a study. It is built upon a combination of tacit (experience-based) theory and formal (literature-based) theory and serves to inform researcher's assumptions and guide his or her questions about the research setting' (1989: 24). Merriam (1998), for example, defines a theoretical framework as a 'lens through which [the researcher] view[s] the world' (1998: 45). Within the context of qualitative research, a framework is a structure that is intended as a guide for thinking about the research subject and as an interpretive lens through which to view data. In our view, a theoretical framework is a theory that works with the philosophical lens in a complementary theory way, which we described in Chapter 4. We illustrate the interconnection between philosophy and complementary theory in Figure 9.1.



--- The philosophy and theory lens

In the researcher reflection, Childers explains how she uses a theoretical framework as a complementary theory (see Chapter 4) to her philosophical position.

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**Sara M. Childers, Assistant Professor of Research Methodology, University of Alabama, USA**



Researcher  
reflections

As discussed in this book, there are multiple ways in which theory can be utilized to frame a study. In my own work, I have found that theoretical frameworks are useful when they provide explanatory power, or help me to better articulate the phenomena I am witnessing and experiencing as I conduct my research. I think some considerations are in order as we think through which lenses are most appropriate for our work.

*Appropriate theoretical frameworks: where's the fire*

As students begin to situate themselves paradigmatically and philosophically outside positivism, these positions often seem overwhelming. One of the best ways to reorient oneself is to read widely and pay attention to those social and philosophical orientations that both align with the way you read the world and also inspire your thinking. The social theories then that comprise these orientations also provide researchers with theoretical lenses for analyzing data.

Owing to my early training in feminist theory and research, my exposure to critical and post-structural philosophies and social theories was extensive. I found in reading the theories of feminists, critical race theorists and post-structuralists that their work 'set me on fire', galvanized my thinking and helped me to make sense of my perceptions of the world. Their theoretical frameworks for understanding power, knowledge, race/gender/class, difference and social materiality became analytic tools for analysis.

*Explanatory power, fit and critique*

While theoretical frameworks can be indispensable to data analysis, they can also be dangerous when researchers try to force the fit between lens and data. When a theoretical framework is adopted prior to entering the field site it is imperative that the framework 'earn its keep'. And if it does not, we must seek out other theoretical frameworks that offer explanatory power to describe what we are witnessing in the data.

I conducted an eighteen-month ethnographic case study of a high-achieving, high-poverty, predominantly black college-preparatory high school in Central Ohio. The preliminary research that included policy and document analysis, pre-pilot interviewing and casual observation pointed me towards an a priori hunch that it could serve as a critical case study of how one school was successful in circumventing the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy through practices of curriculum and instruction that went against the grain of 'teaching to the test'. Through the course of data collection, my hunch earned its keep and the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault, through which I had become accustomed to thinking about relations between power and knowledge, earned their keep as well by providing explanatory power for analyzing how policy comes to be practiced in a high-achieving school.

At the same time though, I also witnessed an internal racial segregation of students across the curriculum where African American students were concentrated in the basic college prep level courses, while advanced placement and international baccalaureate courses were predominantly white. Foucault's theories were not adequate to address

continued

the racial stratification across the curriculum. I turned to critical race theory because it provided the explanatory power lacking in post-structural theories inattention to race and also offered a language through which I could frame the material effects of this stratification on students.

Together, critical race theory and post-structural theory provided generative co-critique and were constitutive of the larger analysis that resulted where both success and failure were engaged in coming to understand how race continues to matter, even in our best schools.

Researcher reflections

### Claire Howell Major, Author

In teaching a course on reading research in higher education, I held a session on theoretical frameworks. I presented definitions of theoretical frameworks and how they might be applied. To demonstrate how a qualitative researcher uses a theoretical framework, I described some of my work on lecturer experiences of teaching online (Major 2010). For the research, I used qualitative meta-synthesis as my research approach (see Major and Savin-Baden 2010). To illustrate my point about theoretical frameworks, I presented students with a quotation and asked them what it meant.

I then told the students about my theoretical framework, which involved change theory related to technology. In particular, I relied upon Zuboff (1984), who conceptualizes change in the *nature and character of jobs* that using technology creates. Zuboff asserted that computer-based technologies are not neutral. Rather, technology imposes as well as produces new patterns of information and social relations. Technology may 'automate', replacing human labour and physical motions, so leading to dull jobs with lack of meaning. It also may 'informate', replacing human contact with collecting information and data but potentially leading to more stimulating, challenging work and greater job satisfaction. In its ability to 'informate', Zuboff suggests that information technology displaces sensory or expressive relationships with objects or persons, and replaces them with the technological interface. Thus, the sensory- or expressive-based skills diminish, while new skills develop, in order to allow the effective management of the new interface, so as to harness the full power of the technological tool. I then asked students to use this theoretical framework and examine the data again.

The students felt that the theoretical framework provided them with guidance for thinking about the data. It helped them focus on a specific aspect of what the lecturers in question were verbalizing, in this case, lecturers' experiences as teachers in an online environment. It made them think about what the lecturers were saying in ways that had not occurred to them before, specifically about how the technology could informate or automate their work as teachers. The difficulty of using a framework can result in it imposing meanings on the data, without really examining them in-depth and exploring the subtext of what was being said. The disadvantage then of using a theory in this way is that data analysis can be simplified into easy categories too quickly that just fit almost too readily with the chosen theory. For a specific example of the student interpretation of a quotation with and without the theoretical framework, see Table 9.1.

Table 9.1 Student

Quote

I think it has added new challenges. To been around for hu what works and wh with computers and opened for us. This us we are not famili effective teacher in are an effective tea issues, new challeng (Coppola *et al.* 200

Things are much me than they are in a re oftentimes I find top interest the day bef new journal article, I I bring that into clas syllabus accordingly. make decisions abou what content to cov knowing the audienc needs, without being from the class. (Con

### WHAT IS A C

A concept is a gen or model. At its bas (1983: 200) defin that is derived fro as: "A label used to that concepts are l phenomenon. For c all share. Concepts other concepts (a b or abstracted (a do the phrase 'don't if concept is an abst

Concepts exp intelligence, d representing symbol) and e of concepts. them reality is to come to te pick up and th

Student responses to the question posed in author reflections

Quote

I think it has added some excitement in teaching, some new challenges. Teaching is not a new concept, it has been around for hundreds of years. People have learned what works and what doesn't work. Then all of a sudden with computers and technology, a new avenue has been opened for us. This offers a new mode of teaching for us we are not familiar with. Because you are an effective teacher in the classroom does not mean you are an effective teacher in this mode. There are new issues, new challenges, new tools to bring to this. (Coppola et al 2002: 185)

Things are much more structured and perhaps rigid than they are in a regular course. When I teach a course, oftentimes I find topics and readings and things of interest the day before I teach. I read a book, I read a new journal article, I would see something in the paper. I bring that into class. And I modify and adjust my syllabus accordingly. In an online environment, I have to make decisions about what to teach, what to talk about, what content to cover 6 months in advance, without knowing the audience, without knowing their specific needs, without being able to react to what's coming from the class. (Conceição 2006: 35)

Sample student responses

Technology is cutting edge. Technology can improve teaching and learning. This teacher likes technology.

This is a late adopter. This teacher isn't thinking that he could post this on a discussion board. This teacher doesn't like technology.

Student reading with framework as lens

Technology changed the teaching job and made it more exciting. This tutor member's efforts were most closely aligned with 'informating'.

This tutor member found that the job was more dull and boring. The job was changed in a way that made him feel it was more automated.

## WHAT IS A CONCEPT?

A concept is a general idea generated from specific instances, which frequently is part of a theory or model. At its base level, it is a unit of meaning that tends to signify something. Chinn and Jacobs (1983: 200) define a concept as: 'A complex mental formulation of an object, property or event that is derived from individual perception and experience'. Meleis (1991: 12) defines a concept as: 'A label used to describe a phenomenon or a group of phenomena'. McKenna (1997) argues that concepts are labels that give meaning and enable an individual to categorize and interpret a phenomenon. For example, the concept 'bird' brings to mind qualities that eagles, jays and robins all share. Concepts are thought to derive from experiences, from which they may be compared to other concepts (a bird is in some ways like a butterfly), reflected upon (what makes a bird a bird?) or abstracted (a dog is not a bird). A concept can call to mind or conjure an image; for example, the phrase 'don't think of a black cat' immediately calls to mind the image of a black cat. Thus, a concept is an abstract signifier of something else. As Cohen et al (2000: 13) suggest:

Concepts express generalizations from particulars – anger, achievement, alienation, velocity, intelligence, democracy. Examining these examples more closely, we see that each word is representing an idea; more accurately, a concept is a relationship between the word (or symbol) and an idea or conception. Whoever we are and whatever we do, we all make use of concepts. . . . Concepts enable us to impose some sort of meaning on the world; through them reality is given sense, order and coherence. They are the means by which we are able to come to terms with our experience. The more we have, the more sense data we can pick up and the surer will be our perceptions (and emotional) grasp of whatever is 'out there'.

(Cohen et al 2000: 13)

## What is a conceptual framework?

A conceptual framework is a collection of general but related concepts from the literature that serve as partial background for the study and that support the need for investigating the research question. They are deemed by many researchers as a key part of research design (Miles and Huberman 1994; Robson 2002; Maxwell 2005).

Miles and Huberman (1994: 20) defined a conceptual framework as 'the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated'. Likewise, Rudestam and Newton suggest that:

A conceptual framework, which is simply a less developed form of a theory, consists of statements that link abstract concepts to empirical data. Theories and conceptual frameworks are developed to account for or describe abstract phenomena that occur under similar conditions.

(Rudestam and Newton 1992: 6)

Weaver-Hart (1988) defines a conceptual framework as: 'A structure for organizing and supporting ideas; a mechanism for systematically arranging abstractions; sometimes revolutionary or original, and usually rigid' (1988: 11).

While we believe these are reasonable starting points, we suggest that a conceptual framework is more likely to relate to the focus of the study, is broader and more far reaching and can guide the design of an entire study. Smyth (2004) defines a conceptual framework as 'a set of broad ideas and principles taken from relevant fields of enquiry and used to structure a subsequent presentation'. We describe a conceptual framework as a *model for thinking that is the direct result of a systematic process of reviewing and synthesizing information from a related body of knowledge that provides the intellectual underpinning to guide the development and conduct of an empirical research study*. In practice, this means that the framework guides each step of the process, as in Table 9.2 on the facing page.

We suggest that what is useful about having a conceptual framework is that it helps the researcher to answer questions about the study in terms of:

- In what ways did the literature inform the study?
- How did the literature read affect the ways the study was designed?
- What research approaches were considered?
- Which research approach was chosen and why?
- How did the tradition chosen inform the ways data were collected, analyzed and presented?

A researcher needs to consider the conceptual set to determine whether it offers new directions, and to consider how what is being done or learned may contradict what the theory or set would suggest. Smyth (2004) describes her experience with using a conceptual framework.

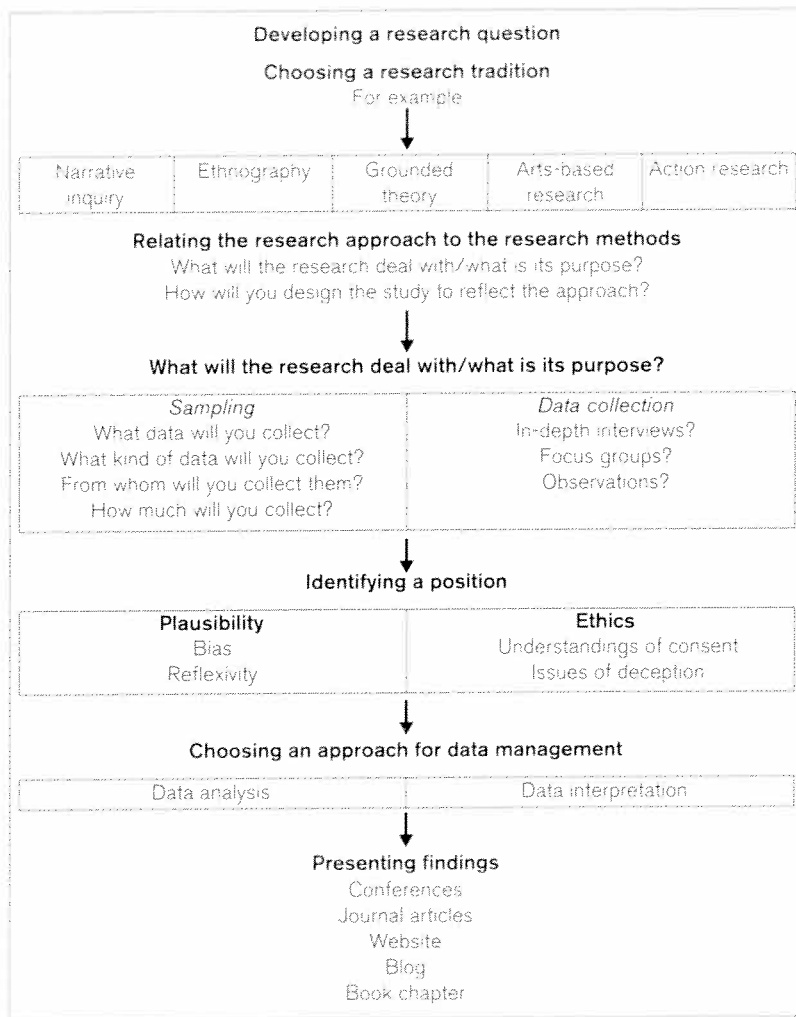
In my case, the conceptual framework became the heart of the study as the research gained momentum. It increasingly scaffolded, strengthened and kept my research on track by:

- Providing clear links from the literature to the research goals and questions
- Informing the research design
- Providing reference points for discussion of literature, methodology and analysis of data
- Contributing to the trustworthiness of the study (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984).

(Smyth 2004: 167)



Table 9.3 A map for using a conceptual framework to design research (adapted from Savin-Baden 2010: 133)



Conceptual frameworks have drawbacks as well. Smyth offers the following cautions about conceptual frameworks:

Firstly, the framework is a construction of knowledge bounded by the life-world experiences of the person developing it and should not be attributed a power that it does not have. Secondly, the nature of a conceptual framework means that it consciously, or unconsciously informs thought and practice by increasing personal sensitivity to notice particular occurrences so this must be accounted for (Mason and Waywood 1996). Thirdly, no researcher can expect that all data will be analyzed using the framework without the risk of limiting the results from the investigation.

(Smyth 2004: 168)

We provide a concrete example of a conceptual framework in Figure 9.2.

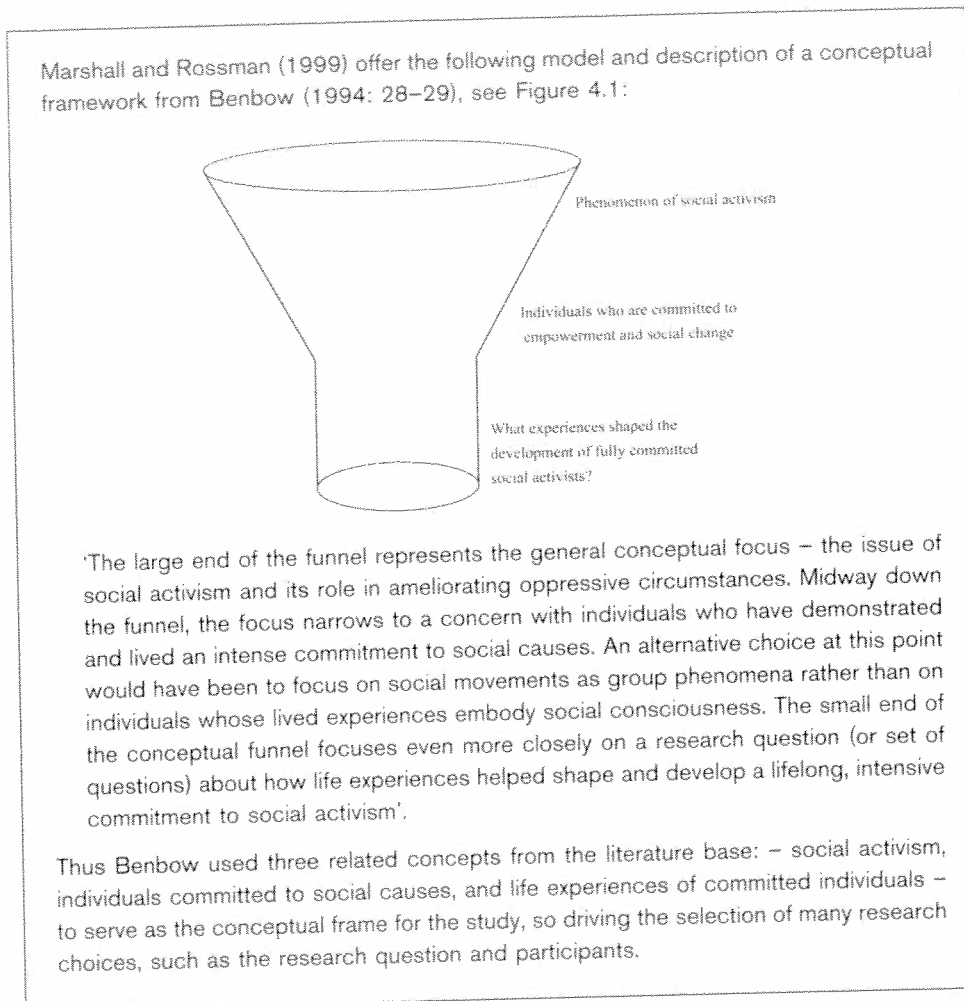


Figure 9.2 Conceptual funnel

## COMPARING THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks have some similar features. They both serve as tools for the researcher to help guide their studies, particularly the interpretation of data. The following researcher reflection from Leshem illustrates the benefits of theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Yet there are clear differences between a theoretical framework and conceptual framework. Namely, a theory helps to structure an explanation of a phenomenon and so a theoretical framework is used largely as complementary to a philosophical framework (see Chapter 4) and intends to serve as an explanation of the findings and to help drive the interpretation. A concept

Dr Shosh  
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### Developing framework

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*Developing conceptual or theoretical  
frameworks?*

Research reviewers place importance on the significance of conceptualization. Evidence also suggests that a research report without a conceptual framework is unlikely to exhibit scholarship. Thus, engaging with conceptual frameworks is an essential prerequisite of solid research.

However, research conducted by Leshem and Trafford (2007) suggested that researchers frequently are uncertain about both what constitutes a conceptual framework and how it can be applied within the research process. Confusion also arises from the fact that the terms 'theoretical perspectives', 'conceptual frameworks' and 'theoretical frameworks' are sometimes used interchangeably in texts on research.

Theoretical perspectives provide views, approaches and arguments on the research issue that originate in the literature and the corpus of the topic. They identify and confirm the foundation for a gap in knowledge. They then define the research topic by delimiting the research through stating what is included or excluded from the investigation. The justifications for such choices are found within the perspectives themselves. Thus, theoretical perspectives provide a lens outwards from the literature.

In contrast, theoretical frameworks and conceptual frameworks serve different purposes. They are tangible foundations to act on and '*tools for researchers to use*' (Weaver-Hart 1988). They provide ways of linking theoretical perspectives with the act of research. Thus, they serve similar functions within the research process.

Research texts use a variety of metaphors as bridges between theoretical perspectives and the act of research. They all relate to the notion of conceptual frameworks and theoretical frameworks. They both fulfil an integrating function between theories that explain the research issue and provide a scaffold within which strategies for the research design can be determined and the fieldwork undertaken (Leshem and Trafford 2007). They also shape the research conclusions by emphasizing the conceptual significance of evidence. Conceptual frameworks and theoretical frameworks therefore have a linking function between the paradigm of the research topic and the paradigm of the research process.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks introduce order and cohesion both in the thinking and writing process. They are the signposts that run through the thesis as a conceptual thread (Trafford and Leshem 2008: 24), to show interconnectedness between stages and components of the research. They provide answers to the 'why' questions of the research process that demonstrate depth, rigour and a high level of conceptualization. Thus, they are essential prerequisites to research since they both serve the same function in the planning and conduct of serious high-level research.



Researcher  
reflections

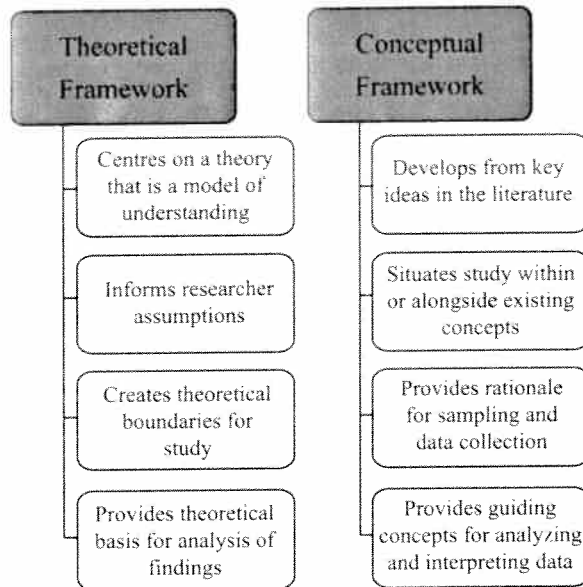


Figure 9.3 Comparison of theoretical and conceptual frameworks

is a key idea, generally taken from the literature, that can guide study design. We offer additional details comparing and contrasting theoretical and conceptual frameworks in Figure 9.3.

### ONE, BOTH OR NEITHER?

Social scientists are more frequently being called to both elaborate and prove their reliance upon theories and concepts in their work. Increasingly, journals and conferences are requiring inclusion of a theoretical or conceptual framing section and, often, dissertation and thesis advisors and committee members are calling for the same. Professional preference in some countries and in some fields appears to favour including a theoretical or conceptual framework (or both) in a qualitative research study.

The underlying notion behind the drive to use theories and concepts to frame research is that doing so should allow for a more rigorous and robust study. May puts it this way:

The idea of theory, or the ability to interpret and understand the findings of research within a conceptual framework which makes 'sense' of the data, is the mark of a discipline whose aim is the systematic study of particular phenomena. . . . Theory informs our thinking which, in turn, assists us in making research decisions and sense of the world around us.

(May 1993: 20)

The trend seems to suggest that theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be worth a researcher's consideration.

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### HOW TO FIN

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Whether to use one or the other, both or neither depends upon the purpose of the study and the availability of supporting work. Some research topics have been the subject of much investigation and thus there are a range of concepts and theories from which to draw. Others may not have been as well researched but will still possess related concepts and theories that can be of good use. In such cases, researchers may wish to choose to use both theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks may be used well together in a study. A researcher may, for example, draw key concepts from the literature that inform the choice of a phenomenon of study and selection of participants (see Chapter 6) and then use a specific theory to guide data analysis. Typically, the researcher presents the conceptual framework first and concludes the review of research, concepts and theories with the choice of a theory to frame data interpretation.

Tips

On the other hand, some scholars believe that using theories and concepts to frame research goes against the very purpose of qualitative research and moreover stifles researcher creativity. Such researchers may believe that theories and concepts should not be applied a priori. The argument is that doing so predetermines study findings, prevents new information from developing, and limits creativity (Thomas 1997). Those researchers who are against the application of theory or concepts contend that they should be the result, outcome or product of research. For example, pragmatic researchers may not take up a theoretical or conceptual framework on the grounds that they are guided simply by the best way to answer a question and that they want to gauge the efficacy of results by application to practice rather than theory. Moreover, pragmatic researchers taking up grounded theory in particular wish to generate new theory, not explore existing theory. Instead, these researchers believe that data can and should be used to develop new substantive theories. Another situation arises with specific research topics, for which it is difficult to find an existing body of supporting concepts or theories, and in these cases researchers justifiably choose not to bend concepts and theories inappropriately just to say that they have used them.

It is a legitimate stance to take to choose not to apply a theoretical or conceptual framework. However, we think whether to take up a theoretical or conceptual framework should be a conscious and purposeful decision. A researcher, then, should determine whether or not to use a theoretical or conceptual framework or both, provide a strong rationale for this decision and make it apparent that it is a clear choice when writing about a study. Researchers who use theory or concepts, however, need not feel constrained by them; rather, researchers may be guided by them, whether in designing their research, explaining data or refuting an existing theory. The important part is to make good use of theories and concepts in the research.

## HOW TO FIND THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

Finding a theory or concept to help guide a study is a daunting task. While many concepts and theories exist, finding those that are compatible with the research topic and question can be a challenge. The process generally takes several trials before the ideal theory or concepts are found. We have found the following approaches to be most beneficial.

### Examine what theories and concepts others have drawn upon

When reviewing literature related to a specific topic, a researcher will find a range of related studies. Carefully abstracting information from these studies, as we suggested in Chapter 8, provides ready access to a list of theories that others have either used to frame their own studies or developed in their own research. These can be a rich vein of theories and concepts from which to draw. As we noted earlier in this chapter, however, not all researchers have paid as much heed as others to the use of theory concepts, so it is possible that one may not find as many as desired. Alternatively, it may not be possible to find an exact fit for the intended study.

### Ask mentors for suggestions

Mentors, particularly experts in the field, can be a great source of information about theories and concepts that have been used over time in a particular area. Moreover, they may simply have come across theories and concepts in reading and reviewing articles, dissertations and theses. Checking with mentors often can yield several potential sources for theoretical or conceptual frameworks. Doing so can also provide a researcher with the opportunity to 'try out' the theory with a critical thinker, who can critique its application.

### Use a search engine

Search engines, such as Google, can be surprisingly good at yielding theories and concepts that are applicable. It takes a good list of search terms, patience and a lot of trial and error for this to yield an appropriate theory or concept but sometimes it is possible to hit gold in this way. The process, much like turning up articles for a literature review (Chapter 8) involves identifying good search terms and trying several different combinations.

## HOW TO PRESENT A THEORETICAL OR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK IN A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Many researchers have questions about how to present a framework in the study and about the degree to which it should be explored. It is a complicated question but the answer is that the framework needs to be presented with clarity and with sufficient detail to allow a reader to make a judgment about its applicability its use. We offer several suggestions that we see as key to introducing the framework and to acknowledging the role it will play in the research.

### Introduce the framework clearly and early

It is important to provide a clear indication of the framework. Generally, a phrase such as the following is used: 'Moore's transactional distance theory (1972) served as a theoretical framework for my study' or 'The following five concepts from the existing literature served as my conceptual

#### Tips

In social science papers, theoretical and conceptual frameworks typically are introduced at the end of the literature review section.

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framework . . .]. This technique provides a reader with immediate grounding about the framework being applied.

### **Identify the essential features and elements of the framework**

After specifying the framework to be used, it is critical to describe its most important components. These should distinguish it from other theories or concepts and make clear the particular components that are driving the work. This approach also allows a researcher the opportunity to explain his or her perspective about what the framework means.

### **Illustrate the framework, if possible by means of a diagram**

Many researchers have developed figures or models to represent their theories. If possible, it is a good idea to include the author's diagram. If not, researchers may consider developing a diagram of the theory of their own, as doing so can illustrate how they view theory and thus inform readers about how it is being used. Concept maps are often used to demonstrate the relationships within conceptual frameworks; examples of a concept map can be found in Chapter 8.

### **Explain the role that the framework will play in the research**

It should be clear whether the components of the framework will help guide design, frame the interpretations or be used in another way. The researcher should make a clear acknowledgement of the components that will be applied, as it is possible to apply only part of a theory if appropriate. It is also imperative to explain in what way(s) the theory or conceptual set were used. Making direct links from the different elements to explain their use is essential.

### **Provide a rationale for application of the framework**

Some frameworks simply seem to work better than others in serving as a lens and some seem just plain wrong for the case at hand. For this reason, we believe it is critical for a researcher to provide some rationale that the theoretical or conceptual framework both makes sense and is useful in the way it is intended. Providing a rationale for the selection also allows a reader a chance to evaluate the researcher's choice of a lens.

### **Cite main proponents of the framework, if appropriate**

A good way to give credence to a framework is to cite others who have used it successfully. Citing proponents can also demonstrate how the framework has been used, and in what contexts, over time. It can also document the development of a body of research based upon the framework, which can help position a study. Moreover, it can help build the case for the current study from a theoretical perspective; it can demonstrate how the current study may extend or build theory.

### **Support the exposition of the framework by ideas from other experts, if warranted**

At times, it can be useful to describe other theories and concepts that are related to the one being applied. This approach can demonstrate relationships between critical issues in a field. It can also help to situate the theory within a broader knowledge base, which can clarify its role in the current study. It is important to proceed with caution, however, as including too many 'related' ideas can create confusion.

### Reiterate the framework

After explaining the framework, it can be important to restate how it will be used in the work, particularly if lengthy or complex analysis of the framework and its uses in the field or discipline is required. This strategy can help the reader best appreciate the particular practical application that is intended for the framework, before preparing to learn about what is next, typically the study methods.

## CONCLUSION

Despite being heavily debated, theories and concepts have a crucial role to play in qualitative research. In this chapter, we have defined, compared and exemplified theoretical and conceptual frameworks in order to demystify these two important terms. We have explored the reasons for and against the use of each to show that ultimately, whether and how a researcher chooses to employ a theoretical or conceptual framework requires a strong rationale and explanation of the decision. We have also presented some of the nuts and bolts of finding, developing and using conceptual and theoretical frameworks in order that students can actively apply these theories to practice.

### Tips

In some research studies in which a theoretical or conceptual framework ostensibly is employed, it is left, hanging, at the end of the literature review section. It seems as if some researchers just give a perfunctory nod toward including one but then never really do anything with it. If researchers choose to adopt one, the other, both, or neither, they should make these choices clear as well as the ways in which, if any, they have employed them.

### Reflective questions

#### Concept questions

- What is the difference between a theoretical and conceptual framework?
- What can a theoretical framework do for a researcher? A conceptual framework?
- Should one, both or neither be employed in a given study?

#### Application questions

- Is a conceptual or theoretical framework (or both) the best approach for your study?
- How will you identify it/them?
- Is the framework a natural fit with the topic?
- Does the framework naturally follow from the literature reviewed?
- Is it the clearest avenue available for understanding the research question under investigation?
- Are the assumptions described succinctly and logically so that the framework seems coherent?
- Does the framework accomplish a clear and distinct purpose in the study?
- Does the framework seem related to the findings?
- Does the framework serve to help explain the findings?

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Camp, W. G. (2000) Formulating and evaluating theoretical frameworks for career and technical education research. *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, 26 (1), 4-25.

Camp's article is one of the best we have found on using theoretical frameworks in qualitative research. It provides solid information of what theory is and what it means in different traditions.

Leshem, S. and Trafford, V. (2007) Overlooking the conceptual framework. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44 (1), 93-105.

Leshem and Trafford's article was particularly influential to us in considering what it means to the field to overlook conceptual frameworks.

Smyth, R. (2004) Exploring the usefulness of a conceptual framework as a research tool: A researcher's reflections. *Issues in Educational Research*, 14 (2), 167-80.

We found Smyth's article to be an engaging one on this topic, particularly in her descriptions about her personal efforts in grappling with a conceptual framework; she provides a strong example of her own framework (that we would suggest is a theoretical rather than conceptual frame).

Key  
resources