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Setting the Stage

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Students as well as experienced researchers who employ qualitative methods frequently have trouble identifying and using theoretical frameworks in their research. This problem is typically centered on finding a theoretical framework and understanding its pervasive effects on the process of conducting qualitative research.

Our goal is to provide guidance to students and neophyte researchers; guidance about what a theoretical framework is, about the role of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research, about identifying frameworks relevant and appropriate to one's study, and about how and where a theoretical framework influences the study. And to do so by means of discussion and an abundance of examples. In short, this is a guidebook into the mysteries of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research.

To begin our journey, we look at what theory is and review the literature that currently exists on the use of theory in qualitative research. Ongoing confusion about the nature and use of theory and theoretical frameworks in qualitative research makes it all the more important to openly address this issue, look closely at what researchers say and do, and subject their use of theory to review by others. We, thus, provide readers with the definition of theoretical frameworks that is used throughout this book and exemplified in Chapters 2 through 12. The contributors of these chapters focus on published research studies and address how they found the theoretical framework they chose and where and in what ways it affected their studies. We conclude this chapter with a discussion of the organization of the book and guidelines for readers to maximize its use.

What Is Theory?

Although Flinders and Mills (1993) argued that “precise definitions [of theory] are hard to come by” (p. xii), theory has been defined in a variety

of ways by philosophers of science and scholars in the academic disciplines. Examples include Kerlinger (1986), who defined theory as “a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomenon” (p. 9). In similar fashion, Argyris and Schon (1974) defined theory as “a set of interconnected propositions that have the same referent—the subject of the theory” (pp. 4–5), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993) stated that “theorizing is simply the cognitive process of discovering or manipulating abstract categories and the relationships among these categories” (p. 239). In a somewhat different vein, Strauss (1995) noted that theory provides a model or map of why the world is the way it is. He further explained that whereas theory is a simplification of the world, it nonetheless is aimed at clarifying and explaining some aspect of how the world works.

Discussing these myriad definitions, Silver (1983) purported that formal definitions of theory rob it of its true beauty, its emotional significance, and its importance to everyday life. She defined theory as a unique way of perceiving reality, an expression of someone’s profound insight into some aspect of nature, and a fresh and different perception of an aspect of the world.

Although we favor Silver’s (1983) conceptualization of theory, it is evident from what she says that understanding theory and its relationship to the research process requires effort. To understand a theory is to travel into someone else’s mind and become able to perceive reality as that person does. To understand a theory is to experience a shift in one’s mental structure and discover a different way of thinking. To understand a theory is to feel some wonder that one never saw before what now seems to have been obvious all along. To understand a theory, one needs to stretch one’s mind to reach the theorist’s meaning.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THEORY

In many discussions of theory (e.g., Babbie, 1986; Silver, 1983; Turner, 1974), important points are made about its components parts—the relationship of concepts, constructs, and propositions to theory. As one moves from concepts to the level of theory, there is also a movement from concrete experiences to a level of abstract description.

Working from the most concrete level of sensations and experiences, concepts are words that we assign to events. Concepts enable us to distinguish one event or sensation from another. Concepts also allow us to relate events in the past to ones in the present or future. Often, these

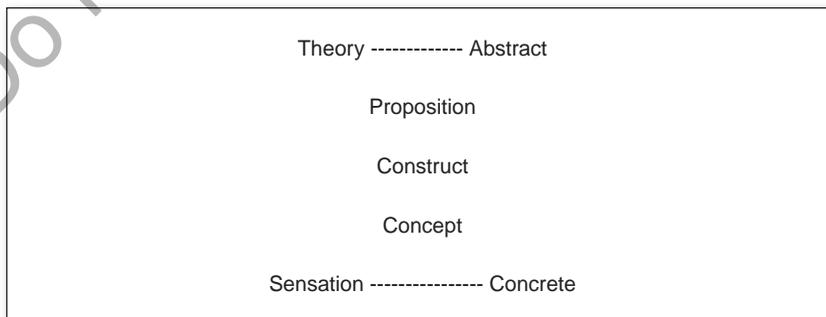
concepts will cluster and form a higher-order unit of thought known as a construct. Silver (1983) provides the example of IQ (intelligence quotient) as a construct. This construct incorporates the concepts of age (the amount of time one has lived) and intelligence (the amount of knowledge one has).

Moving to the next level of abstraction, we encounter propositions. Propositions are expressions of relationships among several constructs. Because propositions are new inventions, they must be carefully defined and explained. Because one proposition is usually insufficient to explain a new insight about an aspect of reality, researchers use a set of propositions that are logically related. It is this relationship among propositions that constitutes a theory. When we develop theory, we have completed a highly abstract thought process, with ideas being removed in successive stages from the world of immediate experience and sensation. Even though they are abstract, theories are profoundly helpful for understanding the experienced world. To help understand the relationship between and among the building blocks of theory and to assist in comprehending the movement from concrete experience to abstract explanation, we offer Figure 1.1.

SOME EXAMPLES

Within the social sciences, one can find a multitude of efforts to describe, explain, or predict phenomena. The nature of theory (what it is and its component parts) might be clarified by reference to two particular theories that are familiar to most readers. Let us then briefly turn to the work of Abraham Maslow and Leon Festinger.

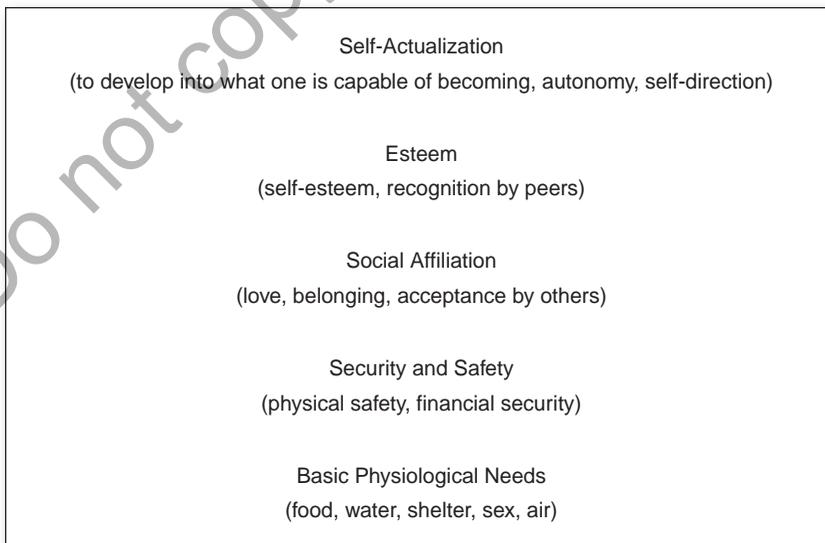
Figure 1.1 The Building Blocks of Theory



One of the most powerful ways of understanding human motivation was developed by Maslow (1954). According to Maslow, human beings have a variety of needs (concepts), some more fundamental than others. Maslow grouped these needs into five basic categories (constructs), arranged hierarchically from “lower” to “higher” (propositions). Lower needs dominate behavior when they are not satisfied. Higher needs become salient only after the lower needs have been satisfied. From these concepts, constructs, and propositions, Maslow concluded that behavior is an expression of one’s drive to reduce deficiencies by gratifying the most salient type of needs (theory). This hierarchy is shown in Figure 1.2.

As a second example, let us look at Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance. Published by Festinger in 1957, it has been one of the most influential and widely debated theories in social psychology. Festinger’s theory begins with the beliefs one has about “the environment, about oneself, or about one’s behavior” (p. 3). These beliefs (concepts) are called cognitions, and the theory deals specifically with pairs of cognitions (constructs). Pairs of cognitions may relate to each other in relevant or irrelevant ways (propositions). Irrelevant pairs of cognitions “may simply have nothing to do with one another” (p. 11). Relevant pairs of cognitions may be either consonant or dissonant. Consonant cognitions occur when elements of knowledge follow from one another. Dissonant cognitions occur when the obverse of one element follows from

Figure 1.2 Hierarchy of Needs as Used in Maslow’s Theory of Motivation



the other. For example, if a person knows that he or she is surrounded by only friends but feels afraid or threatened, a dissonant relationship between these two cognitive elements exists. This “uncomfortable feeling” motivates the individual to lessen or eliminate the dissonance. In stating his theory, Festinger wrote, “The presence of dissonance gives rise to pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. The strength of the pressure to reduce the dissonance is a function of the magnitude of the dissonance” (p. 18).

WHAT CONSTITUTES GOOD AND USEFUL THEORY?

McMillan and Schumacher (2001) discussed certain criteria that must be present for a theory to be useful in the development of scientific knowledge. A theory (a) should provide a simple explanation of the observed relations relevant to a phenomenon, (b) should be consistent with both the observed relations and an already established body of knowledge, (c) is considered a tentative explanation and should provide means for verification and revision, and (d) should stimulate further research in areas that need investigation. Agnew and Pyke (1969) recommended that good theory be (a) simple, (b) testable, (c) novel, (d) supportive of other theories, (e) internally consistent, and (f) predictive. Eisner (1993), however, framed it most cogently:

Theory attempts to satisfy the human need for scientific rationality by providing explanations that will meet that need. The adequacy of such explanations is tested not only by their appeal, their cogency, and their aesthetic quality, but by the extent to which they can be used to help us anticipate, if not control, the future. (p. vii)

A useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon. It is a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon.

THEORIES IN THE SOCIAL AND NATURAL SCIENCES

According to Langenbach, Vaughn, and Aagaard (1994), the social sciences have more theories than do the natural sciences, especially theories that compete with each other (e.g., McGregor’s, 1960, Theory X and Theory Y; Hershey & Blanchard’s, 1988, “situational leadership”). Agreeing with this notion, Alexander (1987) noted that the social sciences, in contrast to the natural sciences, will always be characterized by multiple theoretical orientations and will never achieve the degree of consensus about empirical referents or explanatory schemes characteristic of the natural sciences. Indeed, because the natural sciences—physics and biology, for example—have few competing

theories, disconfirming one and replacing it with another is a rather momentous event, an event Kuhn (1970) has termed a “paradigm shift.” In contrast, competing theories are common in the social sciences because the nature of the phenomena being studied allows for those phenomena to be viewed from multiple perspectives, or “lenses.” Each perspective could provide a reasoned and sensible explanation of the phenomenon being studied.

As an example, consider the classical theories of play drawn from the discipline of psychology. Gilmore (1971) categorized them into the following areas: surplus energy theory, relaxation theory, recapitulation theory, and pre-exercise theory. Surplus energy theory posits that humans accumulate energy that must be released. Play uses the surplus energy the body does not need. According to relaxation theory, play allows people to build up energy that can be used later for the purposes of work. Recapitulation theory contends that humans pass through stages that parallel the phases in the development of the human race. Essentially, play helps to transcend the primitive stages of life. Finally, pre-exercise theory avers that play prepares children for their adult roles. During play, children rehearse the skills they will use as adults. Each of these theories may be a reasoned explanation of the phenomenon; none appear to disconfirm the others. All of them may coexist, providing different perspectives on play.

Theories in social science research exist at a variety of levels. The most common levels are individual theories, organizational theories, group theories, and social theories (see Yin, 1994, pp. 29–30). Individual theories focus on the individual’s development, cognitive behavior, personality, learning, and interpersonal interactions. Organizational theories focus on bureaucracies, institutions, organizational structures and functions, and effectiveness or excellence in organizational performance. Group theories deal with family issues, work teams, employer–employee relations, and interpersonal networks. Finally, social theories focus on group behavior, cultural institutions, urban development, and marketplace functions. These levels cut across social science disciplines and afford myriad theories at each level.

In social science research, theories are generally drawn from the various disciplines (e.g., political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology). These disciplines provide a plethora of lenses for examining phenomena. Neophyte researchers often confine their consideration of theory to theories they have frequently encountered. In so doing, they may fail to uncover the wealth of theories in the various disciplines that might be efficacious. If properly used, these varied perspectives can tremendously enhance research. More than this, these “disciplines interact and mutually enrich each other” (Suppes, 1974, p. 56).

With a basic understanding of what theory is and some sense of the different ways in which theory is used in research in the natural and social

sciences, let us now turn our attention to what we know about the role of theory (specifically the use of theoretical frameworks) in qualitative research.

A Review of the Literature on Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research

Whereas there is little disagreement about the role and place of theory in quantitative research (Creswell, 1994, 2002), such is not the situation with respect to qualitative research. Indeed, there is no consensus either about the role of theory in qualitative research or about what is being discussed. Much of what we credit as warranted knowledge about qualitative research comes through the relatively small, albeit growing numbers of textbooks in the field, materials widely used by teachers of research to prepare and mentor students and neophyte researchers. Examination of the most prominent of these materials for wisdom about the role of theory in qualitative research leaves the reader with one of three different understandings: first, that theory has little relationship to qualitative research (Best & Kahn, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2003); second, that theory in qualitative research relates to the methodology the researcher chooses to use and the epistemologies underlying that methodology (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, 2003b, 2013; Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)—and a subset of this position, that it is related to some methodologies (Creswell, 1994, 1998, 2014; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006; Patton, 1990, 2002; Yin, 1993, 1994); and third, that theory in qualitative research is broader and more pervasive in its role than methodology (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Flinders & Mills, 1993; Garrison, 1988; Maxwell, 1996, 2013; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mills, 1993; Schram, 2003, 2006; Schwandt, 1993).

The categories of understandings are not mutually exclusive, and authors may lean toward more than one position. For example, Broido and Manning (2002) situated the role of theory within methodological paradigms, yet they hinted that theory has a much wider role to play. Similarly, Merriam and Associates (2002) acknowledged the part methodology plays in the “theoretical stances” researchers take, while continuing to address what they perceived as the broader, deeper influence of theory on the research process. It is, however, these differences in emphasis about what theory refers to and is about that are a source of confusion for the student and the neophyte researcher.

THEORY AS NEARLY INVISIBLE

In a widely used textbook, Gay and Airasian (2003) did not discuss, or even mention, theory in relation to qualitative research, although they

noted that “some fundamental differences in how quantitative and qualitative research are conducted reflect their different perspectives on meaning and how one can approach it” (p. 9). Best and Kahn (2003) mentioned theory but confined their discussion to defining it as “an attempt to develop a general explanation for some phenomenon . . . primarily concerned with explanation and therefore focus[ing] on determining cause-effect relationships” (p. 9), normally the province of quantitative research.

Several other authors give short shrift to discussions of theory in qualitative research, while acknowledging its relevance to a particular methodology. Gall and colleagues (1996, 2006) relegated the role of theory to its development or testing, identifying it as a type of research. Although most of their discussion of theory used examples drawn from quantitative research, they suggested that it has some role in qualitative research: “Many qualitative studies are done to discover theory. The approach sometimes is called grounded theory because the researcher starts by collecting data then searches for theoretical constructs, themes, and patterns that are ‘grounded in the theory’” (1996, p. 52).

THEORY AS RELATED TO METHODOLOGY

In sharp contrast to these works, where mention of 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. In earlier works by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba (1990), they spoke about paradigms as “what we think about the world” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 15), “basic belief systems . . . that have emerged as successors to conventional positivism” (Guba, 1990, p. 9), that is, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism, to which has been added participatory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). They speak about theories emerging from naturalistic inquiry, not framing it, and methods changing in the process of theory definition. Guba (1990), in particular, called on others to support the paradigm–methodology connection (Eisner, 1990; Schwandt, 1993) and concluded, “If inquiry is not value free, is not all inquiry ideological?” (Guba, 1990, p. 11). Interestingly enough in light of later works, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that “naturalistic inquiry is defined not at the level of methodology but at the level of paradigm. It is not crucial that naturalistic inquiry be carried out using qualitative methods exclusively, or at all” (p. 250)—clearly relating to methodology, in relatively simple terms, quantitative and/or qualitative methods.

In later works, Denzin and Lincoln (2003a, 2003b, 2013) equated paradigms with theory and argued that these paradigms “are overarching

philosophical systems denoting particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies . . . [which] represent beliefs systems that attach the user to a particular worldview” (2013, p.11) that guides the researcher’s actions. These paradigms were identified most recently as positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory (2013, p. 11). The way it works is that the researcher “approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)” (2003b, p. 30). This is a clear linking of theory to methodologies; it also suggests, however, that the study is widely affected by the linkage. Interestingly enough, the authors advised that the qualitative researcher needs to become a “bricoleur” (2003b, p. 6), taking on pieces of representations (paradigms, methods) to fit the situation and then “incorporating multiple perspectives” (2013, p. 207).

In attempting to clarify the relationship among the elements identified by those relating methodological approaches and their genesis in and from philosophic orientations (called theoretical perspectives by Crotty, 1998; paradigms by Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; theoretical stances by Merriam & Associates, 2002; theoretical traditions by Patton, 2002), Crotty (1998) differentiated among epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and method, although he held that they inform one another. For Crotty, theories of knowledge, or epistemologies (e.g., objectivism, constructionism, subjectivism), inform and are embedded in theoretical perspectives (e.g., positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism, postmodernism). He claimed that “the philosophical stance inform[s] the methodology and thus provide[s] a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (p. 3). Methodologies—which include a wide range of approaches, from experimental research and survey research, to ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and heuristic inquiry, to action research, discourse analysis, and feminist standpoint research—constitute research designs that affect the choice of methods to be used, for example, observation, case study, statistical analysis, document analysis, and so on. In reality, Crotty framed the reader’s understanding of the relationship the other way around, as he perceived that research is constructed from the methods “we propose to use,” to the methodology that “governs our choice and use of methods,” to the theoretical perspective that “lies behind the methodology in question,” to the epistemology that “informs this theoretical perspective” (p. 2).

Yin (1994) argued that case study research, in contrast to other qualitative research designs like ethnography, requires identifying the theoretical perspective at the outset of the inquiry, since it affects the research questions, analysis, and interpretation of findings. In a sense, he argued, “the complete (case study) research design embodies a theory of what is being studied” (p. 28), drawn from the existing knowledge base. It is interesting to note that whereas Yin categorized case study as a research design on a par with ethnography and

grounded theory, Crotty (1998) saw case study as a method to be used in realizing methodologies like ethnography and grounded theory.

Creswell (1994, 1998), too, posited the role of theory in qualitative research in relation to research designs (methodologies or theoretical perspectives in Crotty's, 1998, categorization). In his earlier work, Creswell (1994) had argued that the role of theory varies with the type of research design. In grounded theory, for example, theory is the outcome of the research. In phenomenology, "no preconceived notions, expectations or frameworks guide researchers" (p. 94). In "critical ethnographic" designs, that is, studies with "a critical theory component" (p. 94), one begins with a theory that "informs" the study—although Creswell did not specify what it informs in the study. Interestingly enough, in referring to ethnographic designs without a critical theory component (his designation), Creswell specified that theories might be drawn from "existing theories of culture" (p. 94), outside of methodological parameters, for example, social exchange theory. In referring to how these theories might inform the study, he indicated that they might "help shape the initial research questions" (p. 94). Having said this, however, Creswell argued,

In a qualitative study, one does not begin with a theory to test or verify. Instead, consistent with the inductive model of thinking, a theory may emerge during the data collection and analysis phase . . . or be used relatively late in the research process as a basis for comparison with other theories. (pp. 94–95)

Indeed, in depicting the research process for qualitative studies, the development of a theory or comparison with other theories comes after the gathering and analysis of data.

In a later book devoted to distinguishing among five different "research traditions" in qualitative research—biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study—Creswell (1998) acknowledged that researchers bring paradigmatic assumptions (ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological) to the design of their studies and may, in addition, bring ideological perspectives (postmodernism, critical theory, and feminism) that "might guide a study" (p. 78). Although he did not specify how the paradigmatic assumptions or ideological perspectives affect the various research designs (traditions), Creswell spoke of "another perspective" (p. 84), social science theories, which he referred to as a theoretical lens rather than an ideological perspective, and how this lens affects each of the research traditions. He contended that with ethnography and phenomenology, the researcher brings "a strong orienting framework" (p. 86) to the research, whereas in grounded theory, "one collects and analyzes data before using theory" (p. 86). 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. Adding to the confusion, in a recent edition, Creswell (2014) suggested that the researcher has to “decide if theory is to be used in qualitative research” (p. 67), clearly suggesting that it is a choice and, drawing on Schwandt (1993) in a prior edition, that if it is to be used, “a priori conceptual structures composed of theory and method provide the starting point” (Creswell, 2009, p. 64).

Patton (2002) posited a set of “theoretical traditions” (a mixture of theoretical perspectives and methodologies in Crotty’s, 1998, categorization) including ethnography, phenomenology, heuristics, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, ecological psychology, systems theory, chaos theory, hermeneutics, and orientational. Because these traditions derive from social and behavioral science disciplines, and the different questions central to these disciplines, Patton (2002) argued for the close link between theory and method: “How you study the world determines what you learn about the world” (p. 125).

THEORY AS MORE

As compelling as the work relating theory in qualitative research to methodologies and their underlying epistemologies, a body of work exists that, although not denying the influence of methodologies and their underlying epistemologies, suggests that the role of theory in qualitative research is more than that and more pervasive and influential than suggested by those who situate it methodologically. The authors of this body of work contend that theory plays a key role in framing and conducting almost every aspect of the study.

Merriam (1998) argued that “many believe mistakenly that theory has no place in a qualitative study. Actually, it would be difficult to imagine a study without a theoretical or conceptual framework” (p. 45). Referring to Becker (1993), Merriam (2009) emphasized that 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. She called the theoretical framework “the structure, the scaffolding, or frame of your study” (p. 66). For Merriam, the theoretical framework is derived from the “orientation or stance that you bring to your study” (p. 66) and draws on “the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (p. 67). For Merriam, then, theory affects every aspect of the study, from determining how to frame the purpose and problem, to deciding what to look at and for, to resolving how to make sense of the data collected. Indeed, she argued that the entire process is “theory-laden” (Merriam, 1998, p. 48) and that “a theoretical framework underlies all research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 66).

Echoing Merriam, Miles and Huberman (1994) spoke of what they considered to be the critical role theory plays in qualitative research. While admitting that “many social anthropologists and social phenomenologists consider

social processes to be too complex, too relative, too elusive or too exotic to be approached with explicit conceptual frames,” they held that “any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas” (p. 17). Without at least “some rudimentary conceptual framework” (p. 17), they argued, there would be no way to make reasoned decisions about what data to gather, and about what, and to determine what is important from among the welter of what is possible. The conceptual framework “can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or causal” (p. 18), but it delineates the main things to be studied and the “presumed relationships among them” (p. 18). The conceptual framework is, according to the authors, constructed from the theories and experiences the researcher brings to and draws on in conceptualizing the study. These theories, implicit and explicit, include grand theories such as symbolic interactionism and “middle-range concepts such as culture” (p. 91), as well as “preconceptions, biases, values, frames, and rhetorical habits” (p. 91).

Maxwell (1996, 2013) considered the conceptual framework as one of five components of the research design that connect and interact in a nonlinear, noncyclical fashion, “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and the theories that supports and informs your research” and speaks to “what you think is going on” (2013, p. 39). “The function of this theory is to inform the rest of your design [and] it also helps you justify your research” (2013, p. 40).

In his book *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry* (2003), Schram aligned the conceptual context of a study with theory, which he saw as extending “from formal explanatory axiom[s] . . . to tentative hunch[es] . . . to any general set of ideas that guide action” (p. 42). He contended that the researcher’s perspective, fundamental beliefs, values, hunches, assumptions, and purposes for engaging in the study constitute “premises about the world and how it can be understood and studied” (p. 29) and play a “pervasive but subtle” role in directing the study. This role includes “how you engage with a preliminary sense of problem and purpose, how you portray your involvement with study participants, the way you define key concepts, how you address assumptions within your research questions” (p. 39), as well as “deciding which of the things you see are legitimate and important to document” (p. 29). Summing it up in a subsequent edition, Schram (2006) concluded that the conceptual context declares, “Here’s how I am positioning my problem within an established arena of ideas, and here’s why it matters” (p. 62)

Similarly, whereas Bentz and Shapiro (1998) acknowledged that there are “cultures of inquiry . . . general approaches to creating knowledge in the human and social sciences, each with its own model of what counts as knowledge, what it is for, and how it is produced” (p. 9), they contended,

Research is always carried out by an individual with a life and a life-world . . . a personality, a social context, and various personal and practical challenges and conflicts, all of which affect the research, from the choice of a research question or topic, through the method used, to the reporting of the project's outcome. (p. 4)

Among the advocates of the position that the theoretical or conceptual framework in qualitative research is more than the methodologies and epistemologies underlying them, few are as vehement and articulate the position as cogently as Flinders and Mills (1993). In their book *Theory and Concepts in Qualitative Research*, they addressed the issue directly. Flinders and Mills began by asserting, “Few of us now claim that we enter the field *tabula rasa*, unencumbered by notions of the phenomena we seek to understand” (p. xi). They argued that theory includes “any general set of ideas that guide action” (p. xii) and that theory profoundly affects the conduct of the research. “Theory is pragmatically bound up with the activities of planning a study, gaining entry into the field, recording observations, conducting interviews, sifting through documents, and writing up research” (p. xiv). Indeed, they affirmed a statement reputed to William James, “You can't pick up rocks in a field without a theory” (p. xii).

Arguing that atheoretical research is impossible, Schwandt, in Flinders and Mills (1993), contended that it is impossible to observe and describe “the way things really are, free of any prior conceptual scheme or theory . . . without some theory of what is relevant to observe, how what is to be observed is to be named, and so on” (p. 8). It is “prior theoretical commitments and conceptual schemes” (p. 9) that guide the inquiry.

Mills (1993) defined theory as an “analytical and interpretive framework that helps the researcher make sense of ‘what is going on in the social setting being studied’” (p. 103) and spoke about the implicit and explicit theories underlying the case that is the focus of his chapter—the beliefs, propositions, and theoretical conceptions that framed the study and its analysis, even though the theory was purported to be “emergent.” These theories, he argued, “provide the researcher with a framework for the problem and questions to be addressed in the study” (p. 114).

A recent addition to resources that place the role of theory in the “more” category comes from a somewhat different position (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). First, Ravitch and Riggan (2012) reject the idea that conceptual and theoretical frameworks are essentially the same thing, contending that conceptual frameworks (their focus) are composed of three elements, “personal interests, topical research and theoretical frameworks” (p. 10), the latter defined as “formal theories that have been used in empirical work” (p. 12). The authors see the conceptual framework as affecting every aspect of the study but state

quite specifically that it “also guides the way in which you think about, collect, analyze, describe and interpret your data” (p. 14).

WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US?

Although this review of the literature on the role of theory in qualitative research is hardly exhaustive, it does provide a basis for considering where we are with respect to the role theory plays in qualitative research. Qualitative research has often been criticized as not being guided by theory in its development and conduct. Clearly, that is not a view shared by those who write about and guide neophyte researchers in doing qualitative research. Theory has a place—an unavoidable place for all but a few of the authors we reviewed—and plays a substantive role in the research process. For those writers for whom methodologies are primarily associated with the role of theory, the epistemologies underlying these methodologies as well as the methodologies themselves serve as lenses from and through which the researcher looks at the study. It is not just the choice of a methodology that affects the study. Those writers for whom theory affects studies in more ways than that, without speaking to the matter directly, clearly imply that methodologies and their underlying epistemologies influence and guide the study theoretically. They do not stop there, however, but suggest that there is more that the researcher brings to the study, that it is *all* that the researcher brings, implicitly and explicitly, that affects all aspects of the study.

In the majority of existing texts, consideration of theory and its effect on the study is but one aspect of the larger focus of the work. Thus, they provide neither the depth of understanding nor the specificity needed to explicate the topic. If one already understands, at some deep and intimate level, the role and place of a theoretical framework, then explanations are both understandable and confirmatory. One can put the disparate pieces together and fill in the blanks in the places the texts may not have detailed. None of the texts, however, provide sufficient guidance to students, neophyte researchers, or those who may not already understand theory’s role and place to enable them to “see” how theoretical frameworks affect research or to fully and appropriately identify and apply a framework to their own research.

This, then, remains the purpose of this book. But before we proceed with the use of theoretical frameworks, it is necessary to provide a clear definition of what we mean by the term *theoretical framework* and how it is used in this book.

A Definition of Theoretical Frameworks

We clearly situate our conception of the theoretical framework with those authors who see theory as “more than” (i.e., Flinders & Mills, 1993; Merriam,

1998, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schram, 2003, 2006). Acknowledging that the term does not have a clear and consistent definition, we define theoretical frameworks as any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, midrange, explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena. This definition of theoretical frameworks excludes what Guba and Lincoln (1994) 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 we mean by theories that can be applied as “lenses” to study phenomena might include Vygotskian learning theory, micropolitical theory, class reproduction theory, job choice theory, and social capital, as well as the theories employed by the researchers who have contributed chapters to this book. The theoretical frameworks they used include varied lenses such as Black feminist theory (Collins, 1997, 2000), liminality (Turner, 1967, 1977), transformational learning theory (Merizow, 1991), the arena model of policy innovation (Mazzoni, 1991), and grief theory (Kubler-Ross, 1969), to name a few.

There are a large number and wide variety of theoretical frameworks available for qualitative researchers to consider. These frameworks originate in the many different fields of study and the many 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. That researcher is also open to considering the applicability of these frameworks to the research problem chosen for 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.

As an example, Hoenack and Monk (1990) applied economic theory to a study of the costs and benefits of teacher evaluation systems in education. The economic aspects they addressed included production theory and efficiency, the economics of information, performance incentives, and the distributional effects of policy interventions. The use of this unusual theoretical framework in educational research allowed the authors to present a unique view of the phenomenon being studied. Another example is Pounder and Merrill (2001), who used job choice theory (developed by Behling, Labovitz, & Gainer, 1968; later adapted to an educational setting by Young, Rinehart, & Place, 1989) to examine potential candidates’ perceptions and job intentions with regard to high school principalships.

In defining theoretical frameworks, we are 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—a point we shall return to in the concluding chapter of this book.

Organization of the Book

The chapters that follow take you “behind the scenes” to examine the role of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research. They allow you to learn how these researchers found the theoretical framework they used in a particular study and how it affected that study. The contributors take you on their journey in using the framework and in thinking about its applicability, providing sufficient detail to allow you to assess what they saw against the published research study discussed and cited. These insights provide the reader with practical lessons drawn from real-world studies. These lessons concern not only the contributions of theory to qualitative research but also the dilemmas and pitfalls that theory presents to researchers.

To allow the reader to compare and contrast responses across chapters, the contributors were asked to address the following items (if relevant), in approximately this order:

1. An overview of the study that formed the basis for the discussion of the theoretical framework used, including its purpose, research questions, methods employed, findings, and conclusions
2. A detailed description of the theoretical framework(s) used in the study and the discipline from which it/they originated
3. How the researcher found the theoretical framework and what convinced him or her that this was an appropriate framework to use
4. What effects the theoretical framework had on the research questions, the design of the study, and the analyses obtained
5. Other conceptual frameworks considered and why they were used or discarded
6. Any additional issues the contributors wished to discuss in relation to the use of theory in their research

The headings and subheadings in the chapters in this book correspond more or less to the above items. As noted earlier, this structure was imposed to allow readers to compare and contrast the responses of the various contributing chapter authors. Readers will note variations in the wording of some of the headings and subheadings, but the content of the primary contributing chapters addresses each of the six areas. In addition, the briefs from doctoral dissertations provide snapshots of these same topics.

Unlike in many other books, after reading this framing chapter, the reader is not required to read the succeeding chapters in any particular order. Indeed, readers are free to choose any beginning point as their interest and curiosity dictate, without fear of missing critical lessons. That is the advantage of imposing the content guidelines on the authors. You can learn these lessons from each of the chapters, although collectively the lessons are clearer, stronger, and more

impactful. To help you in the process of choosing where to begin, Table 1.1 identifies the frameworks used by the contributing authors, the fields from which they were taken, and the foci of the studies that employed them.

Table 1.1 Chapters in *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research* (Second Edition)

Theoretical framework	Field of the study/discipline	Focus of the study	Chapter/Author
Culture (Goodenough)	Cognitive anthropology	School culture & organizational change	Chapter 2 Henstrand
Arena model of policy innovation (Mazzoni)	Political science	Comprehensive state school reform policy	Chapter 3 Fowler
Black feminist thought (Collins)	Critical social theory	Mentoring experiences of African American women in graduate and professional school	Chapter 4 Patton
Transformational learning and adult development (Mezirow)	Psychology	HIV-positive young adults	Chapter 5 Merriam
Social identity and self-categorization (Alvesson & Willmont)	Sociology	Faculty experience of department reorganization	Chapter 6 Mills & Bettis
Othermothering (Collins)	Black feminist scholarship	Administrative relationships with students at HBCUS	Chapter 7 Strayhorn
Typology of grid and group (Douglas)	Social anthropology	School culture	Chapter 8 Harris
Social field theory (Bourdieu)	Sociology	Curriculum development	Chapter 9 Mutch
Grief model (Kubler-Ross)	Psychology	Organizational change	Chapter 10 Kearney & Hyle
Bioecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner)	Developmental psychology	The development of white racial consciousness	Chapter 11 Peterson

NOTE: HBCUs = historically Black colleges and universities.

The final chapter of the book seeks to close the loop by looking across the chapters and briefs to reflect on their contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the use of theory in qualitative research and what their experiences suggest. After reflecting on these chapters, we come back to our discussion of the relationship between theory and qualitative research and seek to focus specifically on the questions that continue to plague students and neophyte qualitative researchers and to provide answers to those questions using the lessons learned from the contributing authors, and to questions for which they might not have provided clear answers.

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