



How theory is used and articulated in qualitative research: Development of a new typology



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ABSTRACT

There is a long tradition within qualitative research of theory being central and of critical importance. Qualitative research theory often equates with the methodologies used but this is a complex relationship, plagued by lack of consensus among scholars regarding how theory and methodology are related. This article furthers the debates on how theories are used in qualitative research, how they might influence a study and how they are articulated in publications. The aim is to provide a framework through which the relationship between theory and qualitative research can be understood. We propose a five-point typology on the levels of theoretical visibility, testing this against a range of published research from five key international health, medicine and social science journals. The typology captures a range of visibility – from seemingly absent through to highly visible and applied throughout. There was a clear gradient in this assessment – only a minority appeared to use theory consistently throughout a study. We outline several challenges to consistently applying theory in qualitative research and suggest potential solutions. This article is based on the argument that lack of theory in qualitative research undermines its quality. The typology is offered to assist researchers in applying theory in their own research and critiquing its use in the work of others.

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1. Background

Historically, qualitative research methods have had their roots primarily in the disciplines of social sciences and humanities (Lockyer, 2008). However, in the mid-1990s prominent medical journals such as the *Annals of Internal Medicine* and the *British Medical Journal* started to publish editorials that advocated for more qualitative research as a way to investigate peoples' attitudes, beliefs and preferences (Inui, 1996; Jones, 1995). Since then, qualitative research has become more prominent in medicine and healthcare, because it addresses research questions that cannot be answered solely by traditional experimental designs (Poses and Isen, 1998). In the contemporary world of research within social sciences and healthcare disciplines, qualitative inquiry enjoys a place of equal prominence in relation to other approaches. However, Creswell (2007) observed that the landscape of qualitative research has changed and the qualitative enterprise has become

more fragmented. He argued that qualitative researchers are far more aware of the designs they are using than they were in the 1990s and that they face a baffling number of choices of methods.

2. Qualitative research and theory: a complex relationship

The relationship between qualitative research and theory is both complex and contentious and numerous scholars have alluded to lack of consensus and poor understandings that reflect this troubled marriage (Sandelowski, 1993; Anfara and Mertz, 2006; Wu and Volker, 2009; Tavallaei and Abu Talib, 2010). The problem seems to be that theory in qualitative research is variable and can be used in different ways. Additionally, varying definitions of theory exist and researchers tend to use the same words to mean different things (Wu and Volker, 2009). It is likely that these issues combine to exacerbate the confusion.

The problem with contention, lack of consensus and fragmentation is the risk of qualitative research being regarded as an incoherent endeavour. It exposes it to charges of lack of theoretical robustness and maturity. Correspondingly, Anfara and Mertz (2006) highlighted the criticisms levied against qualitative research for its tendency to lack theory in its development or

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conduct. Their review of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research found little uniformity regarding the role of theory and it was often non-existent. This is important because when theory and research are isolated activities, they become 'excursions into the trivial' (Fawcett, 1978, p. 49). We take a stance that integration of theory and research is essential: theory is crucial and without it, the quality of qualitative research is diminished.

3. Definitions of theory

There are numerous definitions of theory, for example, Meleis (2007, p. 37) defines it as:

"An organized, coherent, and systematic articulation of a set of statements related to significant questions in a discipline that are communicated in a meaningful whole. It is a symbolic depiction of aspects of reality that are discovered or invented for describing, explaining, predicting, or prescribing responses, events, situations, conditions, or relationships. Theories have concepts that are related to the discipline's phenomena. These concepts are related to each other to form theoretical statements."

In this definition, the disciplinary nature of theory is captured. But theory in qualitative research seems to operate at two different levels and although Tavallaei and Abu Talib (2010) state that in qualitative research, theory often equates with the methodologies used, we attempt to disentangle what we mean by theory. Firstly, there are substantive or discipline-based theories that are specific to the topic at hand – such as Orem's self-care deficit nursing theory (Orem, 2001) or Rizzo Parse's theory of human becoming (Parse, 2007). These align with the definition of Meleis cited earlier.

Secondly however, there are theories that operate more at a methodological level and encompass for example, grounded theory or phenomenology. Attempting to separate theory from methodology in qualitative enquiry is likely to fail because as Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 30–32) observed, the researcher:

"Approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he/she examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)".

Moreover, Watling and Lingard (2012) refer to Glaser and Strauss' distinction between substantive and formal theories. They propose that substantive theories are based on empirical areas of enquiry within a particular domain, generated from a researcher's own data – such as the case with grounded theory. Formal theories are more conceptual and are unlikely to arise from a researcher's own data (unless generated from large numbers of studies in a variety of substantive areas). What these perspectives illustrate is the strong link between theories and methodologies; they are not clear cut and nor are they discrete entities. The inextricable linkage between the two needs to be considered when reading this article.

4. Dealing with theory from different methodological positions

Theory is used variously in research and is influenced considerably by ontological and epistemological positioning. In qualitative research, theory is associated with the methodologies used (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Anfar and Mertz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Tavallaei and Abu Talib, 2010) and different approaches to inquiry specify different roles for theory. Sandelowski (1993) identifies four uses and manifestations of theory in relation to its source,

centrality, temporal placement and functions: (1) the source of theory in qualitative research comes from the researcher itself (e.g. in grounded theory it is the researcher who constructs theory from the interview) or theory enters from the outside (e.g. researchers draw on extant theory or they approach research with the general perspectives, assumptions or theoretical formulations of their own disciplines). It is therefore important to distinguish between theory at the substantive and paradigm level; (2) theory may be central or only peripheral to the target phenomena under study; (3) although theory is always present in qualitative research, it is not always clear when or under what circumstances it actually entered or left a study; and (4) theory in qualitative research has numerous functions. For example, it can provide rationalization or justification for the methodological approach used, it can offer a comparative context or an organizational framework for the interpretation and representation of data or it can serve as a scheme for representing findings.

Our understanding of theory as explored in this article aligns with Sandelowski's notion of theory 'entering from the outside'. That is, the extant theories that researchers draw upon to inform and underpin their qualitative inquiries; what Meyer and Ward (2014) refer to as 'theory-driven'. But given the heterogeneity of approaches within the qualitative paradigm, there are different ways that qualitative researchers deal with theory and particularly in grounded theory and phenomenological studies. Researchers who embrace grounded theory with its inductive analysis as the principal technique, often use sensitizing concepts to guide their analysis (Bowen, 2006). Sensitizing concepts is a term first described by the American sociologist Blumer (1954). He contrasted definitive concepts with sensitizing concepts. While the former provide precise prescriptions of what to see, the latter suggest directions along which to look and thus might be used as a starting point for data analysis. Charmaz (2003) suggests to utilize "sensitizing concepts only as a point of departure from which to study the data" (p. 259). However, it is important to note that although sensitizing concepts might alert researchers to important aspects of research situations, they might also block the view of other important aspects (Bowen, 2006).

Bracketing is another issue that requires exploration in this context. Originated from within the phenomenology tradition, bracketing refers to the process of mitigating potentially deleterious effects of preconceived beliefs and opinions about the phenomenon under study (Tufford and Newman, 2010). Richards and Morse (2007) emphasise that bracketing – of one's theories, prior knowledge and experiences with the phenomenon – is intended to allow the researcher to encounter the phenomenon "freshly and describe it precisely as it is perceived" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237). Gearing (2004) identified six forms of bracketing apparent across several traditions in qualitative research including phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory. This might surprise some researchers who would associate bracketing solely with phenomenology, thus illustrating the complexity of qualitative research. In summary, the role of theory in qualitative research is variable and it is for this very reason that it needs to be made visible; because if "theories remain implicit their power to clarify or to confuse, and to reveal or obscure new insights, can work unnoticed" (Alderson, 1998, p. 1007).

5. The articulation of theory

Wu and Volker (2009) proposed that qualitative researchers do not consistently articulate how theory has been applied. Similarly, in a recent paper, Meyer and Ward (2014) have highlighted the challenges not only in using theory, but also in the subsequent articulation of theory in theses and publications. This is the nub of

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