

Context network conference  
 Doing qualitative research: explore, practice, connect  
 Groningen, April 9, 2026

## Workshop: The role of theory in qualitative research

Fijgje de Boer, PhD  
 Retired university teacher AMSTERDAM UMC  
 Qualitative Researcher  
 Email: fijjedeboer@gmail.com

1

## Outline workshop

- ▶ Introduction on the role of theory in qualitative research (20 minutes)
- ▶ Workshop: exploring, practicing and connecting on the role of theory in qualitative research (90 minutes)

2

## Introduction: role of theory in qualitative research

- ▶ Theory: definitions and meanings
- ▶ The conceptual and/or theoretical framework, sensitizing concepts
- ▶ Research paradigm and research design
- ▶ Data collection and data analysis
- ▶ Workshop information

3

## Theory: definitions and meaning

Most known definition from a post-positivist perspective:

- ▶ a statement of relationships between abstract concepts that cover a wide range of empirical observations. Aim of theory: explanation and prediction

Meaning: the concept of 'theory' has multiple meanings:

- ▶ = an explanation of a particular societal phenomenon
- ▶ = to say something about social phenomena in the social world
- ▶ = a Weltanschauung: a perspective on how social phenomena are related in the social world
- ▶ Consists of complex arguments

Source: Kelle (2019); Abend (2008).

4

## Theory: definitions of qualitative researchers

- ▶ Theory is a set of **well-developed categories** (themes, concepts) that are **systematically interrelated** through statements of relationship to form a **theoretical framework** that **explains** some phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55)
- ▶ 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** (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 18)
- ▶ Theory: A theory is a set of **propositions** that are **logically connected** to express an **abstract description of a phenomenon** (Stallmeijer & Varpio, 2025:14)

5

## Role of theory in qualitative research

- ▶ No role
- ▶ Based on qualitative research approach
- ▶ Theory penetrates whole endeavour of qualitative research

Source: Anfara &amp; Mertz (2015)

6

## More detailed look on the role of theory in qualitative research

- Level 1: theory: a framework to guide the study: as outlined in the **conceptual** or **theoretical** framework
- Level 2: taking shape through research **paradigm** and research **design**
- Level 3: theory building as a result of empirical data collection and analysis

Source: Collins and Stockton, 2018: 4

7

## Level 1. Conceptual or theoretical framework

**Point of debate in qualitative research tradition: at the beginning of the study or at the end?**

### Conceptual framework

- ▶ Definition: a 'loose' map of how all of the literature works together in a particular study
- ▶ a narrative of what is known about the phenomenon that will be studied.
- ▶ Sensitizing concepts: notions that help researchers to focus their inquiry, but do not determine the end result of the study

Source: Collins and Stockton 2018:2 Charmaz, 2006:17

### Theoretical framework

- ▶ the researcher refers explicitly to a theory that guides the research: Health Belief Model
- ▶ the researcher explains the epistemological position
- ▶ the 'lens' or perspective that guides the research

8

## Incorporating a conceptual or theoretical framework: benefit or disadvantage?

### Benefit

- ▶ Support in organizing the data
- ▶ Support by throwing a light on certain aspects/elements in the data

### Disadvantage

- ▶ Can lead to bias
- ▶ Stumble block in seeing the 'unexpected'

Source: Collins & Stockton, 2018; Sale & Carlin, 2025, Stalmeijer & Varpio, 2026.

9

## Level 2: Role of research paradigm and research design

**Research paradigm:** "a mode of thinking within science that constitutes and is accepted as a way of viewing reality"

Research paradigms that can lead to qualitative research:

- ▶ **Interpretivism:** knowledge based on exploration and gaining an in-depth understanding
- ▶ **(Social) constructionism:** knowledge is situated and contextual
- ▶ **Critical Theory:** knowledge that contributes to equal and dialogical relationships in society
- ▶ **Pragmatism:** knowledge as a tool for solving (social) problems

Source: Ryan, 2018; Smaling & de Boer, 2011; Green & Thorogood, 2018; De Boer, 2024.

10

## Research paradigms that can lead to a qualitative research approach

Qualitative research paradigm	Qualitative research approach (Creswell 2018, de Boer, 2024)
Interpretivism	<b>Ethnography; Grounded Theory Approach</b> (GTA – Glaser & Strauss), GTA according to Strauss en Corbin.
Social constructionism	<b>GTM</b> – later versions of Charmaz, Clarke, narrative research, discours analysis, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun en Clark, 2022)
Critical Theory	<b>(Participatory) Action research;</b> feminist research, queer-research, critical race research, indigeneous research
Pragmatism	<b>Practice oriented research;</b> case study

11

## Level 3. Theory building as a result of empirical data collection and analysis

### Different ways of data collection

- ▶ Interviews: individual perspective
- ▶ Focus groups: group perspective
- ▶ Observation: researcher perspective
- ▶ Type of data collection has its impact on the results of the research

### Different styles of data analysis

- ▶ searching for patterns (ethnography)
- ▶ coding and categorizing (GTM)
- ▶ Developing themes (practice or pragmatic oriented research)
- ▶ Style of data analysis is often related to the qualitative research approach

12

## Conclusion: role of theory in qualitative research

- ▶ Determined in advance and presented in the conceptual or theoretical framework: deductive style of qualitative research
- ▶ Determined by research paradigm: impacts choice of qualitative research approach
- ▶ Determined by the type of data collection and/or style of data analysis: impacts the results of the research

Overall conclusion: theory penetrates the whole endeavour of a qualitative research. Researchers should take this into account and account for it in the research report.

13

## References

- ▶ Abend, G. (2008). The meaning of "theory". *Sociological Theory* 26 (2): 173-199.
- ▶ Anfara, V.A., & Mertz, N.T. (2013). Setting the stage. In: V.A. Anfara, & N.T. Mertz (Eds), *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research* (2nd edition) (pp.14-34). Sage publications.
- ▶ Boer, F. de (2024). De rol van theorie in kwalitatief onderzoek. *KWALON* 85.3: 133-143
- ▶ Charmaz K (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London/Thousand Oaks, Sage publications.
- ▶ Collins Chr, Stockton CM (2018). The central role of theory in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17:1-10.
- ▶ Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- ▶ Creswell, J.V. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Second Edition. Los Angeles. Sage Publications.
- ▶ Green, J., Thorogood N (2018). *Qualitative Methods for Health Research*. London. Sage Publications.
- ▶ Jolley U (2019). The state of theories and models in Grounded Theory. In: A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory* (pp.68-88). Los Angeles, Sage Publications.
- ▶ Ryan, G (2018). Introduction to postivism, interpretivism and critical theory. *Nurse Researcher*, 25(4): 41-49.
- ▶ Sale, J.F.M., & Garin, L. (2022). The reliance on conceptual frameworks in qualitative research - a way forward. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 25:36.
- ▶ Smaling A, Boer F de (2011). *Bevindingen in kwalitatief onderzoek: een inleiding*. In: F. de Boer & A. Smaling (Eds), *Bevindingen in kwalitatief onderzoek. Een inleiding* (pp.11-23). Den Haag, Boom/Lemnis uitgeverij.
- ▶ Stahmer, R.E., & Varpio, L. (2020). How to incorporate theory in qualitative research. *AMEE Guide No. 183, Medical Teacher*, DOI: 10.1080/0142159X.2020.2014604

14

## Workshop: Exploring, practicing and connecting on the role of theory in QR

Aim Workshop: discussing the three levels related to the role of theory in QR:

- 1) Conceptual and/or theoretical framework
  - 2) Role of research paradigm and qualitative research approach
  - 3) Role of data collection and data analysis
- ▶ Formation of 6 groups of 3-4 persons
  - ▶ Exploring: discussion on the three levels: questions in ppt
  - ▶ Practicing: with an example of recent qualitative research (see hand out):
    - ▶ selection of qualitative research approach
    - ▶ Role of data collection and data analysis
  - ▶ Connecting: plenary discussions on the issues discussed in the subgroups.

15

## Discussion on the conceptual and/or theoretical framework (15.20 - 15.50)

Explore:

- ▶ What is unclear in the presentation on the role of theory in qualitative research?
- ▶ What is your position on the role of theory in qualitative research? Explain and give arguments.
- ▶ The definitions of conceptual and theoretical framework differ from each other. What is the relevance of making a distinction between these two frameworks? Or is it not relevant?

16

## Discussion on the role of research paradigm and qualitative research approach (15.50 - 16.20)

**Practice:** Handout: please read the sections **Background, Objective and Design**.  
Discuss the following questions:

- ▶ What could be the **research paradigm** of this research?
- ▶ When carrying out a qualitative research is it necessary to make your research paradigm clear?
- ▶ What is the **qualitative research approach** of this research?
- ▶ Is it necessary to make your qualitative research approach clear (in the article/to the scientific audience)?

17

## Role of data collection and data analysis (16.20 - 16.40)

**Hand out:** please read the sections on **Data collection and data analysis**.

- ▶ The type of data collection contributes to the results of the research: how will it impact the results of this study?
- ▶ The type of data analysis also has its impact on the results of the research: how will this **this style of data analysis** impact the results/
- ▶ What is the role of theory in this qualitative research?

Thank you for attending this workshop!

18