

## On theory and theorizing

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As a novice qualitative research student in the 1990s, I eagerly read as many books in qualitative inquiry as I could. What disappointed me, though, was the lack of detail in those materials about codes and coding. I consider myself a “how to” person who needs and learns best through step-by-step methods. I found no specific guidance (to my satisfaction) on coding in 20<sup>th</sup> century textbooks, so I was motivated to write the resource I wish I would have had as a student: *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Sage Publications, 2016).

As I continued my readings of the voluminous literature in qualitative research and data analysis, I noticed a second void: a lack of detail about theory and theorizing. Virtually every book assumed the reader knew the definition of theory and examples of theories. But in the 1990s I was an outsider to the social sciences and, as an artist, versed primarily in literary and dramatic theory—different constructs altogether.

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most methods books in qualitative research skirt the definition of theory and provide no concrete examples for readers. So, I assembled and consolidated from different publications my own understanding of theory. I do not consider myself qualified to write an entire book on social science theorizing, but I do offer beginning researchers clarity of the term and specific examples in my recent publications. Also, “To Theorize” is one of the topics I did not have space to discuss in my *Oxford Handbook* chapter, “Qualitative Data Analysis Strategies,” so I present a brief overview in this blog.

A theory (in traditional social science research) is a generalizable statement with five properties and an accompanying explanatory narrative. A theory, most often,

1. expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts;
2. predicts and controls action through if-then logic;
3. accounts for parameters of or variation in the empirical observations;
4. explains how and/or why something happens by stating its cause(s); and
5. provides insights and guidance for improving social life. (Saldaña & Omasta, *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life*, Sage Publications, 2018)

It’s a formidable charge for just one sentence to possess all five properties listed above. Many solid theories overtly contain just three of them while the other two are implied. That’s why an accompanying narrative is necessary to unpack and describe the condensed meanings of a rich theoretical statement.

Just some of the one-sentence theories I extracted from *The Sociology Book* (Thorpe & Yull, eds., DK Publishing, 2015) are:

- Masculinity is a social construct that reinforces a patriarchal society. (R. W. Connell, p. 65)

- Rather than being caused by anything innate, crime is a product of the environment. (W. E. B. Du Bois, p. 73)
- Schools play a crucial role in reproducing cultural values, economic divisions, and working-class trajectories. (Paul Willis, p. 293)
- The emotions of workers have become marketable commodities sold for a wage: emotional labor. (Arlie Russell Hochschild, p. 239)
- Gender roles are not natural but created by society. (Margaret Mead, p. 299)

Concepts, the first component of a theory, are abstractions composed of constituent elements that can be observed. *Masculinity*, for example, might consist of such things and actions as muscularity and dominance over others. A *patriarchal society* is another concept consisting of constituent elements such as predominantly male ownership of property, and few women in leadership roles. These two concepts formulate the first criterion of a theory.

The second part of a theory, predicting and controlling action through if-then logic, is overtly stated in R. W. Connell's "Masculinity is a social construct that reinforces a patriarchal society": masculinity reinforces the patriarchy.

The third part of a theory, which expresses parameters or variation, is not overtly stated but implied in Connell's statement: masculinity, not femininity, is the topic and thus the parameter of the theory.

The fourth part of a theory—explaining how and/or why something happens by stating its cause(s)—is directly evident in Connell's statement: What accounts for the presence of a patriarchal society? Masculinity.

The fifth criterion, in which a theory provides insights and guidance for improving social life, is implied in the statement: If we wish to eliminate a patriarchally-dominated society, then the social construct of masculinity should be re-envisioned (if not eliminated altogether) to promote gender equity.

Theories do not emerge from formulaic approaches. They are insightful statements about social life, composed by the researcher after deep analytic reflection on and synthesis of the consolidated meanings of the data. A theory summarizes the totality of the research experience into at least one sentence that holds transferable applications to other settings, contexts, populations, and possibly time periods. It is, for lack of a better phrase, a "big truth" based on perceptive observations of repeated patterns of specific actions, reactions, and interactions.

I have presented just the briefest explanation of theory in hopes that it clarifies for newcomers to qualitative research an understanding of a sometimes elusive construct. Continue to explore other types in the social science literature such as feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory.

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