

Exercise 5.2: strategies for kitchen-sinkers

- 1 Draw a flow chart of no more than one page, setting out your key concepts and how they relate.
- 2 Review your area of research interest in terms of the following questions and formulate your research problem in terms of one kind of puzzle:
 - How or why did *X* develop? (a developmental puzzle)
 - How does *X* work? (a mechanical puzzle)
 - What causes *X* or what influence does *X* have on *Y*? (a causal puzzle) (Mason, 1996: 14)
- 3 Use the zoom lens technique to focus in on some manageable 'unit of one' which might serve as an initial dataset to resolve your puzzle.

6

Theory in Qualitative Research

Some people become qualitative researchers for rather negative reasons. Perhaps they are not very good at statistics (or think they are not) and so are not tempted by quantitative research. Or perhaps they have not shone at library work and so are not tempted to write a purely theoretical dissertation.

However, the latter disposition begs the question of the relevance of theory to research. In part, this varies between social science disciplines. For, at least until recently, the different social sciences seemed to vary in the importance that they attached to theory. To take just two examples, psychologists and anthropologists, for all their differences, seemed to downplay theory.

In psychology, the benchmark was the laboratory study. For psychologists, the motto seemed to be: 'demonstrate the facts through a controlled experiment and the theories will take care of themselves'. Anthropologists were just as interested in 'the facts'. However, their most important facts were revealed in observational case studies of groups or tribes usually found in faraway lands. Nonetheless, until recently, most English-speaking anthropologists followed psychologists in elevating 'facts' above 'theories'.

By contrast, generations of sociology students have been made very aware of the primary importance attached to theory in their discipline. For instance, although undergraduate sociology courses tend to be split into three main areas (the 'holy trinity' of social theory, social structure and research methods), it is the course in social theory which is usually given the most prestige. Moreover, theory has recently become much more important in psychology and anthropology, as battles have commenced between traditionalists and qualitative 'discourse analysts' (in psychology) and 'post-modern' and gender theorists (in anthropology).

The social sciences' concern with theory is reflected in how PhD dissertations are assessed. As we saw in Chapter 4, 'the discovery of new facts' is rarely an important or even a challenging criterion in the assessment of most qualitative research. Any scientific finding is usually to be assessed in relation to the theoretical perspective from which it derives and to which it may contribute. This means that, while 'facts' are never unimportant, they are always subsidiary to theories. Successful dissertations display 'independent critical thought' (in the words of the University of London PhD regulations) by engaging with theory.

However, this begs an important question. What is 'theory'? In the following section I show why, for qualitative researchers, theory is altogether more interesting than the dry pages of theory textbooks.

WHAT IS THEORY?

Martin O'Brien (1993) has used the example of a kaleidoscope to answer this question. As he explains:

a kaleidoscope . . . [is] the child's toy consisting of a tube, a number of lenses and fragments of translucent, coloured glass or plastic. When you turn the tube and look down the lens of the kaleidoscope the shapes and colours, visible at the bottom, change. As the tube is turned, different lenses come into play and the combinations of colour and shape shift from one pattern to another. In a similar way, we can see social theory as a sort of kaleidoscope - by shifting theoretical perspective the world under investigation also changes shape. (1993: 10-11)

How theory works as a kaleidoscope can be vividly seen in a concrete example taken from Eric Livingston (1987). Livingston asks us to imagine that we have been told to carry out some social research on city streets. Where should we begin? Some alternatives are set out in Table 6.1.

As Livingston points out, each of these different ways of looking involves basic theoretical as well as methodological decisions. Very crudely, if we are attached to social theories which see the world in terms of correlations between social facts (think of demography or macroeconomics), we are most likely to consider gathering official statistics (option 1 in Table 6.1). By contrast, if we think that social meanings or perceptions are important (as in certain varieties of sociology and psychology), we may be tempted by the interview study (option 2). Or if we are anthropologists or those kinds of sociologists who want to observe and/or record what people actually do *in situ*, we might elect for options 3 or 4. But note the very different views of people's behaviour we get from looking from on high (3), where people look like ants forming geometrical shapes like wedges, and from street level (4), where behaviour seems much more complex.

The point is that none of these data are more real or more true than the others. For instance, people are not really more like ants or complex actors. It all depends on our research question. And research questions are inevitably

TABLE 6.1 Viewing a street: data possibilities

1	Official statistics (traffic flow, accidents)
2	Interviews (how people cope with rush hours)
3	Observation from a tower (viewing geometric shapes)
4	Observation/video at street level (how people queue/organize their movements)

Source: adapted from Livingston, 1987: 21-7

theoretically informed. So we *do* need social theories to help us to address even quite basic issues in social research.

However, O'Brien's analogy of a kaleidoscope and Livingston's example of viewing a city street only take us so far. What precisely is a 'theory'? And how does it differ from a 'hypothesis'?

Questions like this mean that I can no longer postpone the potentially tiresome business of defining my terms. Once I have completed these definitions, I will, once again, provide a set of concrete examples to clarify what I mean.

THEORIES, MODELS AND HYPOTHESES

In this section, we shall be discussing models, concepts, theories, hypotheses, methodologies and methods. In Table 6.2, I set out how each term will be used.

As we see from the table, *models* provide an overall framework for how we look at reality. In short, they tell us what reality is like and the basic elements it contains ('ontology') and what is the nature and status of knowledge ('epistemology'). In this sense, models roughly correspond to what are more grandly referred to as 'paradigms' (see Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

In social research, examples of such models are functionalism (which looks at the functions of social institutions), behaviourism (which defines all behaviour in terms of 'stimulus' and 'response'), symbolic interactionism (which focuses on how we attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations) and ethnomethodology (which encourages us to look at people's everyday ways of producing orderly social interaction).

Within the narrower sphere of qualitative research, Gubrium and Holstein (1997) use the term 'idiom' to encompass both the analytical preferences indicated by 'model' and tastes for particular vocabularies, investigatory

TABLE 6.2 Basic terms in research

Term	Meaning	Relevance
Model	An overall framework for looking at reality (e.g. behaviouralism, feminism)	Usefulness
Concept	An idea deriving from a given model (e.g. 'stimulus-response', 'oppression')	Usefulness
Theory	A set of concepts used to define and/or explain some phenomenon	Usefulness
Hypothesis	A testable proposition	Validity
Methodology	A general approach to studying research topics	Usefulness
Method	A specific research technique	Good fit with model, theory, hypothesis and methodology

Source: revised version of Silverman, 1993: 1

styles and ways of writing. They distinguish (and criticize) four different 'idioms':

- *Naturalism* A reluctance to impose meaning and a preference to 'get out and observe the field'.
- *Ethnomethodology* Shares naturalism's attention to detail but locates it in talk-in-interaction.
- *Emotionalism* Desires 'intimate' contact with research subjects and favours the personal biography.
- *Postmodernism* Seeks to deconstruct the concepts of the 'subject' and the 'field'.

Concepts are clearly specified ideas deriving from a particular model. Examples of concepts are 'social function' (deriving from functionalism), 'stimulus/response' (behaviouralism), 'definition of the situation' (interactionism) and 'the documentary method of interpretation' (ethnomethodology). Concepts offer ways of looking at the world which are essential in defining a research problem.

Theories arrange sets of concepts to define and explain some phenomenon. As Strauss and Corbin put it: 'Theory consists of plausible relationships produced among concepts and sets of concepts' (1994: 278).

Without a theory, such phenomena as 'death', 'tribes' and 'families' cannot be understood. In this sense, without a theory there is nothing to research.

So theory provides a footing for considering the world, separate from, yet about, that world. In this way, theory provides both:

- a framework for critically understanding phenomena
- a basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized (Gubrium, personal correspondence).

By provoking ideas about the presently unknown, theories provide the impetus for research. As living entities, they are also developed and modified by good research. However, as used here, models, concepts and theories are self-confirming in the sense that they instruct us to look at phenomena in particular ways. This means that they can never be disproved but only found to be more or less useful.

This last feature distinguishes theories from *hypotheses*. Unlike theories, hypotheses are tested in research. Examples of hypotheses, discussed in Silverman (1993), are:

- How we receive advice is linked to how advice is given.
- Responses to an illegal drug depend upon what one learns from others.
- Voting in union elections is related to non-work links between union members.

In many qualitative research studies, there is no specific hypothesis at the

outset. Instead, hypotheses are produced (or induced) during the early stages of research. In any event, unlike theories, hypotheses can, and should be, tested. Therefore, we assess a hypothesis by its validity or truth.

A *methodology* defines how one will go about studying any phenomenon. In social research, methodologies may be defined very broadly (e.g. qualitative or quantitative) or more narrowly (e.g. grounded theory or conversation analysis). Like theories, methodologies cannot be true or false, only more or less useful.

Finally, *methods* are specific research techniques. These include quantitative techniques, like statistical correlations, as well as techniques like observation, interviewing and audio recording. Once again, in themselves, techniques are not true or false. They are more or less useful, depending on their fit with the theories and methodologies being used and the hypothesis being tested and/or the research topic that is selected. So, for instance, behaviouralists may favour quantitative methods and interactionists often prefer to gather their data by observation. But, depending upon the hypothesis being tested, behaviouralists may sometimes use qualitative methods – for instance in the exploratory stage of research. Equally, interactionists may sometimes use simple quantitative methods, particularly when they want to find an overall pattern in their data.

The relation between models, concepts, theories, hypotheses, methodology and methods can be set out schematically as in Figure 6.1. Reading the

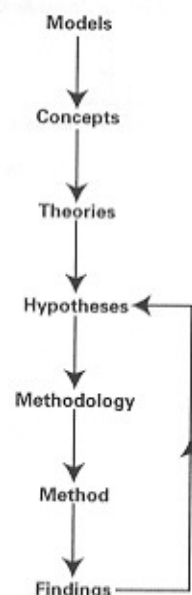


FIGURE 6.1 Levels of analysis

figure downwards, each concept reflects a lower level of generality and abstraction. The arrow from 'findings' to 'hypotheses' indicates a feedback mechanism through which hypotheses are modified in the light of findings.

Let me now try to put flesh on the skeleton set out in Figure 6.1 through the use of some concrete examples. Imagine that we have a general interest in the gloomy topic of 'death' in society. How are we to research this topic?

Before we can even define a research problem, let alone develop a hypothesis, we need to think through some very basic issues. Assume that we are the kind of social scientist that prefers to see the world in terms of how social structures determine behaviour, following the sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1951) injunction to treat social facts as real 'things'.

Such a model of social life will suggest concepts that we can use in our research on death. Using such a model, we will tend to see death in terms of statistics relating to rates of death (or 'mortality'). And we will want to explain such statistics in terms of other social facts such as age or social class.

Armed with our concepts, we might then construct a theory about one or other aspect of our topic. For instance, working with our assumption that death is a social fact, determined by other social facts, we might develop a theory that the rate of early death among children, or 'infant mortality', is related to some social fact about their parents, say their social class. From this theory, it is a quick step to the hypothesis that the higher the social class of its parents, the lower the likelihood of a child dying within the first year of its life. This hypothesis is sometimes expressed as saying that there is an 'inverse' relationship between social class and infant mortality.

As already implied, a model concerned with social facts will tend to favour a quantitative methodology, using methods such as the analysis of official statistics or the use of large-scale social surveys based on apparently reliable fixed-choice questionnaires. In interpreting the findings of such research, one will need to ensure that due account is taken of factors that may be concealed in simple correlations. For instance, social class may be associated with quality of housing and the latter factor (here called an 'intervening' variable) may be the real cause of variations in the rates of infant mortality. This overall approach to death is set out schematically in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.3 sets out a very different way of conceiving death. For certain sociologists, social institutions are created and/or stabilized by the actions of participants. A central idea of this model is that how we label phenomena defines their character. This, in turn, is associated with the concept of 'definitions of the situation' which tells us to look for social phenomena in how meaning gets defined by people in different contexts. The overall message of this approach is that 'death' should be put in inverted commas and hence leads to a theory in which 'death' is treated as a social construct.

Of course, this is very different from the 'social fact' model and, therefore, nicely illustrates the importance of theories in defining research problems. Its immediate drawback, however, may be that it appears to be counter-intuitive. After all, you may feel, death is surely an obvious fact. Either we are dead or not dead and, if so, where does this leave social constructionism?

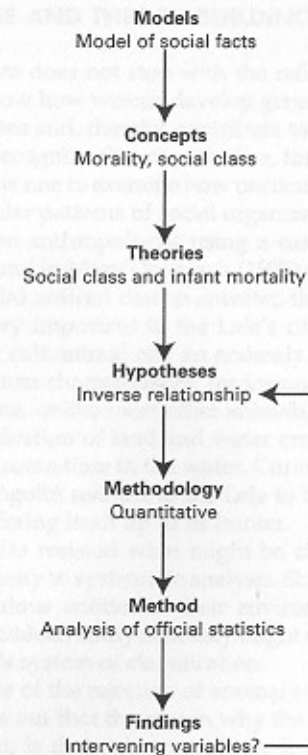


FIGURE 6.2 *Death as a social fact*

Let me cite two cases which put the counter-argument. First, in 1963, after President Kennedy was shot, he was taken to a Dallas hospital with, according to contemporary accounts, half of his head shot away. My hunch is that if you or I were to arrive in a casualty department in this state, we would be given a cursory examination and then recorded as 'dead on arrival' (DOA). Precisely because they were dealing with a President, the staff had to do more than this. So they worked on Kennedy for almost an hour, demonstrating thereby that they had done their best for such an important patient (cf. Sudnow, 1968a).

Now think of contemporary debates about whether or when severely injured people should have life-support systems turned off. Once again, acts of definition constitute whether somebody is alive or dead. And note that such definitions have real effects.

Of course, such a way of looking at how death is socially constructed (sometimes called 'social constructionism') is just one way of theorizing this phenomenon, not intrinsically better or worse than the 'social fact' approach.