

The Road Less Traveled: A Review of Anfara and Mertz's *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*

Candace H. Lacey

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida USA

*Editors Anfara and Mertz travel a new road with their tidy little book, *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*. This tightly edited book begins by providing an up-close look at the process of taking a book from the germination of an idea to the delivery of the final product. As noted in the introduction, "To understand a theory is to travel into someone else's mind." Most of the book clears the path toward that journey by presenting a sampler of chapters focusing on the use of theoretical frameworks in actual qualitative research studies. Finally, the editors bring the book full circle by summarizing the various roles theoretical frameworks played in the preceding chapters. This book provides a common basis for quantitative and qualitative researchers to continue the discussion about the role of theory in qualitative research. Key Words: Theory, Qualitative Research, and Theoretical Framework*

I teach a doctoral class entitled Methods of Inquiry. All doctoral students take "Methods of Inquiry" during their second term. This course provides students with an overview of both quantitative and qualitative research designs. However, only one page of the required textbook, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (Creswell, 2008), addresses the role of theory in research. And, the description of this use is highlighted by the following quote:

In quantitative research, researchers often test theories, broad explanations that predict the results from relating variables. In qualitative research, theories are typically not tested. Instead, the inquirer asks participants in a study to share ideas and build general themes based on those ideas. (p. 139)

While this comment did come from a guru of qualitative research, the statement was unsatisfying and did not provide a clear explanation for my novice researchers. This sent me on a quest to learn more about the potential role, or lack thereof, of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research. A quick Google search directed me to *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, a 2006 book edited by Vincent A. Anfara, Jr., and Norma T. Mertz. One click of the mouse and I was the proud owner of the book (in approximately seven to ten working days).

Within a scant 48 hours, the book was mine. The second line of the preface hooked me, "Graduate students seemed to lack an understanding of the role of theory in qualitative research, specifically the use of a theoretical framework" (p. ix). Hey, I wanted to yell, so do some of their professors! It seems that the editorial folks at Sage

also agreed. The remaining preface details how the book came to be. The call for manuscripts resulted in 90 chapter proposals. The editors honestly admit that, “many of the proposals did not ‘fit’ our definition of a theoretical framework...or did not provide evidence of any self-conscious understanding of the effect of a theoretical framework on the study conducted” (p. x). Ten authors made the final cut, and their studies provide the major content.

The introduction gives an inclusive look at the thought process that went into developing the book. The editors explain that their goal in writing the book was to use discussions and actual research studies to explore a road less traveled in qualitative research, namely how theoretical frameworks influences qualitative research. To start this journey they provide a comprehensive overview of the various definitions of theory found in the literature, culling their definition from the work of Silver.

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 theory, one needs to stretch one’s mind to reach the theorist’s meaning. (p. xiv)

They discuss the building blocks of theory, working from the idea of experiences which become concepts (words), which cluster and become constructs (units of thought), which become propositions (relationships among constructs) which finally develop into theories. The editors conclude that, “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” (p. xvii). This conceptualization of theory sets the tone for the remainder of the introduction linking theory to methodology.

The editors present a thorough review of literature from two groups of authors. The first group’s work focuses on linking theories in qualitative research to methodologies and epistemologies. The second group suggest “there is more that the researcher brings to the study, and it is all that the researcher brings, implicitly and explicitly, that affects all aspects of the study” (p. xxv). After examining both perspectives, the editors conclude their discussion of theory by defining a theoretical framework. “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, mid-range, and explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena” (p. xxvii). They dismiss post-positivist, constructivist, critical, and feminist paradigms from inclusion as well as methods such as, narrative analysis, systems analysis and symbolic interactionism. They prefer to scaffold their definition on what they refer to as lenses which for exploring phenomena. Examples cited in the book include Vygotskian learning theory, job choice theory, economic theory, transformational learning theory. In summary, it appears that for the editors a theoretical framework helped codify understanding.

In what might be interpreted as an effort to control the quality of the studies, the editors required that all authors address six criteria when producing their chapter, (a) an

overview of the study, (b) a detailed description of the theoretical framework(s) used in the study, (c) a discussion of how the theoretical framework was discovered, (d) a discussion of the impact of the theoretical framework on the study, (e) a discussion of alternative theoretical frameworks that might have been used, and (f) a presentation of other issues related to the use of theory in the study.

The ten chapters are compelling reading. Despite the criteria suggested by the editors, each study situated itself within a comfortable format. The content concerns are addressed, but the chapters are not “cookie cutter” images of each other. Henstrand uses Ward Goodenough’s cultural anthropology theory of culture in her ethnographic study of school culture. Merriam uses Mezirow’s transformational learning and adult development theories to look at how HIV-positive young adults construct meaning in their lives. Mazzoni’s arena model of policy innovation helped Fowler understand how the Ohio S.B. 140 comprehensive school reform bill was, “rammed through” (p. 41) the legislature. For Bettis and Mills, Turner’s liminality theory helped in making sense of the interaction between individual faculty members as they experience reorganization at their college. The same authors presented a second study or what they termed a “companion piece” (p. 73) using Hogg, Terry, and White’s social identity theory and self-categorization theory to examine the reorganization. Chaos/complexity theory as discussed by Prigogine and Stengers give Karpiak an interesting framework to explore how social workers experience mid-life transitions. Kearney and Hyle use Kubler-Ross’s grief model to study the impact of organizational change on individuals. Douglas’s Typology of Grid and Group guide Harris as he explores school culture. Mutch uses Bourdieu’s Field Theory to help explain decision-making processes in educational policy. And, Lugg uses her own queer legal theory as she presents what she describes as, “a historical approach to educational research” (p. 176).

The reflective discussion within each chapter provides a clear insight into how each of the authors’ use of a theoretical framework impacted their research study. Probably not by chance, all of the authors discussed how the theoretical framework permeated all aspects of their study including data analysis.

The editors end the book with a chapter they entitle “Conclusions: Coming Full Circle.” They use this opportunity to remind the reader that they believe that a theoretical framework is critical in qualitative research. They cite the use of terms such as lens, roadmap, and sieve within the chapters as metaphors to describe the importance of theoretical frameworks as guiding forces in qualitative studies.

So, was my goal of understanding the role of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research reached? Well, yes and no. I certainly know how and why they are useful. What I do not know is the other side of the story. What do researchers say about not using a theoretical framework? Is there a body of work that presents the other side of the story with such clarity? Now I have to cross the road and explore the other side of the street. To be fair to my students, I have to learn why using a theoretical framework in qualitative research might not be a good idea. I wonder what I will find on Google?

Reference

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Author Note

Candace Lacey is a Program Professor in the Fischler School of Education and Human Services (FSEHS) at Nova Southeastern University. She is a former fellow at the National Center for Education Statistics and current President of the Consortium of State and Regional Educational Associations SIG of the American Educational Research Association. She can be reached at FSEHS, Nova Southeastern University, 1750 NE 167 St., North Miami Beach, FL 33162; Telephone: 954-262-8575; E-mail: lacey@nova.edu

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