# Use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in qualitative research

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## Abstract

**Aim** To debate the definition and use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in qualitative research.

**Background** There is a paucity of literature to help the novice researcher to understand what theoretical and conceptual frameworks are and how they should be used. This paper acknowledges the interchangeable usage of these terms and researchers' confusion about the differences between the two. It discusses how researchers have used theoretical and conceptual frameworks and the notion of conceptual models. Detail is given about how one researcher incorporated a conceptual framework throughout a research project, the purpose for doing so and how this led to a resultant conceptual model.

**Review methods** Concepts from Abbott (1988) and Witz (1992) were used to provide a framework for research involving two case study sites. The framework was used to determine research questions and give direction to interviews and discussions to focus the research.

**Discussion** Some research methods do not overtly use a theoretical framework or conceptual framework in their design, but this is implicit and underpins the method design, for example in grounded theory. Other qualitative methods use one or the other to frame the design of a research project or to explain the outcomes. An example is given of how a conceptual framework was used throughout a research project.

**Conclusion** Theoretical and conceptual frameworks are terms that are regularly used in research but rarely explained. Textbooks should discuss what they are and how they can be used, so novice researchers understand how they can help with research design.

**Implications for practice/research** Theoretical and conceptual frameworks need to be more clearly understood by researchers and correct terminology used to ensure clarity for novice researchers.

**Keywords** Theoretical framework, conceptual framework, case study, conceptual model, qualitative research, research design, case study research.

## Introduction

THIS PAPER aims to help the researcher to understand the nature of theoretical and conceptual frameworks and how they can be used to help give direction to a study, or be identified as an outcome. The use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks is part of research, but is relatively obscure among the myriad of literature available. In published research reports, there is often no explanation as to what theoretical and conceptual frameworks are, and they are mentioned in many popular research textbooks at best minimally and often as terms in a glossary. There appears to be no manual about how theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks should be used.

This paper examines what the literature says in relation to theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks and considers how researchers seem to be using them. It also shows how a conceptual framework was used in case study research to determine the professional jurisdictions of doctors and nurses in the supply and prescription of medicines, and ultimately to the development of a conceptual model.

## Definitions of frameworks

Fain (2004) defined theory as 'an organised and systematic set of interrelated statements (concepts) that specify the nature of relationships between

two or more variables, with the purpose of understanding a problem or the nature of things' and concepts as 'symbolic statements describing a phenomenon or a class of phenomena'.

It is a matter of interpretation as to when concepts become organised and interrelated enough to be deemed theories, which might explain why the two terms are used interchangeably when referring to frameworks. However, Parahoo (2006) suggested that 'theoretical framework' should be used when research is underpinned by one theory and that a 'conceptual framework' draws on concepts from various theories and findings to guide research. This is a slightly different interpretation to that of Fain (2004) because, instead of suggesting that the concepts have been built into a theory, it suggests that parts of multiple theories have been taken.

Whether these distinctions matter is questionable. Parahoo (2006) implied that it is fruitless to consider whether a researcher has used the correct terminology and it is far more important to consider how theory has been used to underpin the study.

Authors use the terms 'conceptual framework' and 'theoretical framework' interchangeably (Fain 2004, Parahoo 2006). Some authors only refer to one. For example, Lacey (2010) referred to conceptual frameworks, suggesting that they identify researchers' 'world views' of their research topics and so delineate their assumptions and pre-conceptions about the areas being studied. Fain (2004) suggested that where a framework is based on concepts, the framework should be called a conceptual framework, and where it is based on theories it should be called a theoretical framework.

Given that there is confusion between theoretical and conceptual frameworks, it could be argued that they are of questionable value. However, frameworks have been described as the map for a study, giving a rationale for the development of research questions or hypotheses (Fulton and Krainovich-Miller 2010). LoBiondo-Wood (2010) similarly said that the framework is the design and added that the research question, purpose, literature review and theoretical framework should all complement each other and help with the operationalisation of the design.

It can be seen that the authors are saying that the framework should be there to assist researchers in ensuring that their research projects are coherent and to focus their minds on what the research is trying to achieve. Rathert *et al* (2012) illustrate this confusion. In the title, the authors suggest they have tested a theoretical framework but then discuss a conceptual model. However, they use

the term 'conceptual framework' as a title for its diagrammatic representation. There is no discussion of what these terms mean.

Robson (2002) suggested that a conceptual framework is often developed as a diagram, whereas Parahoo (2006) refers to this as a conceptual model, although again believes that researchers should not get hung up on terminology.

It could be concluded that a diagrammatic representation of a theoretical framework might therefore be termed a theoretical model. It is, however, less likely that one would diagrammatically represent a single theory rather than concepts, which either are being used to build up to a theory or are taken from different theories.

While the confusion around the use of conceptual and theoretical frameworks and models may be understandable, a similar laissez-faire approach to accuracy would not be considered acceptable for other parts of research design. More discussion in textbooks and journal articles about how to use frameworks might allay some of the confusion.

## Using a framework

Some research approaches appear not to use a conceptual or theoretical framework in their design. 'Grounded theory', for example, is an inductive method in which theory generation comes from the data. It was an approach that went against the accepted wisdom of the 1960s that a study should have a definite theory before it begins (Robson 2002). It is an example of a methodological approach that is based on a specific epistemology or philosophy of knowledge (Avis 2003). Corbin and Strauss (2008) discussed the epistemology of grounded theory in some detail. However, as this methodology has developed, the epistemology has also developed (Hall *et al* 2013).

The development of theoretical or conceptual frameworks can be undertaken as an outcome of the research but it is unlikely that one will be stated as part of the design. However, projects using these methods do have a theoretical framework: that of the philosophy or epistemology on which the research approach is based. For example, Curtis *et al* (2012) discussed how grounded theory methodology is based on the epistemology of symbolic interactionism and so they did not identify a theoretical or conceptual model in the design of their research. In their findings, they discussed the concept that emerged from their research of the dissonance for students of professional ideals and the reality of practice. They then showed this diagrammatically in a conceptual model.

There appear to be two main ways in which researchers who use other qualitative methods use theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

The first is in the design of the study where, if it is explicit, the framework can often be found as a section in the literature review (Fulton and Krainovich-Miller 2010). However, many authors (Polit and Tatano Beck 2004, Parahoo 2006, Fulton and Krainovich-Miller 2010) have found that researchers often do not make the theoretical or conceptual frameworks of studies explicit in relation to how these guided their studies. This does not mean that they did not have such frameworks, simply that they may be embedded in the literature review (Fulton and Krainovich-Miller 2010).

Somekh and Lewin (2005) suggested that most social science research starts with a theoretical framework, goes on to analyse the data, before developing new theories or variations of existing theories as outcomes.

Robson (2002) suggested that most new researchers find it useful to develop a conceptual model – the diagrammatic form of a conceptual framework – and refine it as data collection and analysis takes place. LoBiondo-Wood (2010) felt that the fit between the theoretical framework and the other steps of the research after the design strengthens the study and gives the researcher confidence in the evidence provided by the findings.

Even where theoretical or conceptual frameworks are mentioned in the title of an article, it is unusual for there to be a discussion of what these are in the article itself. However, Goddard *et al* (2013) used a theoretical framework in the design of their randomised controlled trial and Smith *et al* (2012) identified a theoretical framework before researching the knowledge base of screening tools.

The second way in which researchers use theoretical and conceptual frameworks is in developing a framework. Parahoo (2006) argued that generating theory is the purpose of most qualitative research. Polit and Tatano Beck (2004) suggested that the role of conceptual and theoretical frameworks is to make the research findings meaningful and generalisable. They suggested that the linking together of findings into a coherent structure can make them more accessible and so more useful to others.

Fletcher *et al* (2012) used grounded theory in relation to the organisational factors that cause sports performers stress. They then used their findings to develop a conceptual framework. Again, although 'conceptual framework' is in the title of their article, there is no explanation of what such a framework is.

Fulton and Krainovich-Miller (2010) acknowledged that many researchers do not bother to use a theoretical framework and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) does not make any mention of trying to identify a theoretical or conceptual framework in a research article (CASP 2010). This suggests that it does not see the presence of one as crucial to the generation of good qualitative research.

Nevertheless, it is not unusual for those undertaking research as part of a programme of learning to be asked to include such a framework in their projects, usually at the proposal stage. Because so little is written about frameworks, this can confuse students trying to understand what is being asked of them. Books written to support students in achieving a PhD may not provide much help, as some do not mention the use of theory in study design (Phillips and Pugh 2005).

At this point in time, finding a theoretical or conceptual framework can be seen as another hurdle to overcome, rather than something to assist researchers in keeping their projects focused and on track.

## Use of a framework in a PhD project

A PhD study by Green (2008) used a case study approach to consider the professional jurisdictions of nursing and medicine in relation to the supply and prescription of medicines by nurses in the acute hospital setting. The study was undertaken over a period of time when the supply and prescription of medicines by nurses was relatively new but the regulations set by the Department of Health (DH) were being relaxed (DH 2005).

The study aimed to examine the attitudes of doctors and nurses in relation to their professional boundaries in the light of the legalising of prescribing for nurses. At this time, there was some research evaluation of prescribing but this tended to focus on the prescribing rather than what professionals thought about the notion. Where professional attitudes of doctors or nurses were mentioned, it was as a secondary outcome, rather than the main focus (Latter *et al* 2004, Bradley and Nolan 2007, Courtenay 2007).

It terms of a framework to guide the study and aid the way it was organised, the body of work that has been undertaken in relation to the Sociology of Professions appeared relevant to the project. The theories of two sociologists were used (Abbott 1988, Witz 1992). The focus of the research was new work for the profession of nursing and in an area that had been a monopoly for doctors previously.

**Figure 1**  Workplace authority for the supply and prescription of medications by nurses
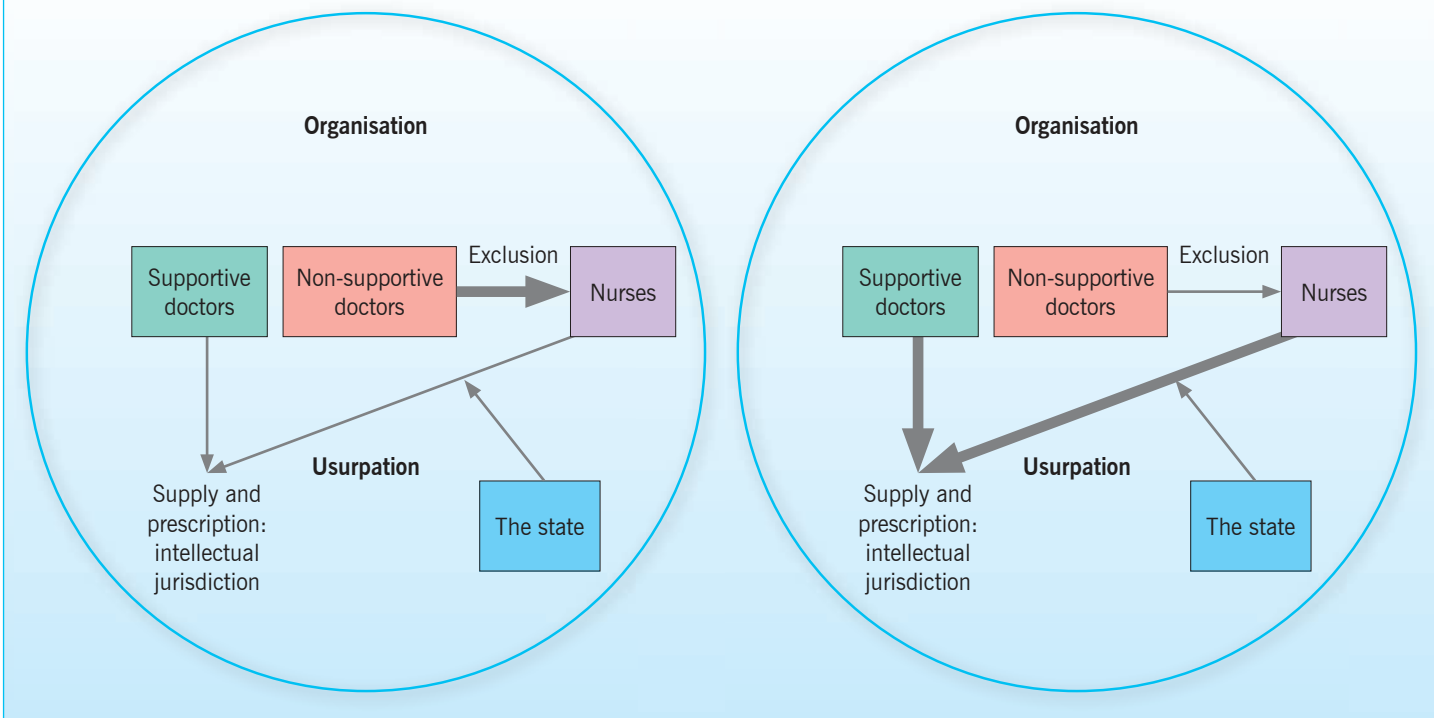


Abbott (1998) and Witz (1992) had both looked at the movement of work from one profession to another. However, concepts from their theories were used, rather than the full theories. The research was based on the following concepts (Abbott 1988):

- Professional jurisdictions: the boundaries of work 'owned' by a profession.
- Authority: the type of authority that a profession has to undertake its work.

And from Witz (1992):

- Exclusion: attempts to ensure that members of a profession are prevented from undertaking specific aspects of work.
- Usurpation: attempts to include specific aspects of work normally carried out by another profession.

These concepts were used to frame the research questions and were also used to develop a model to try to explain the past and present situation in relation to doctors, nurses and prescribing.

The research data were then collected through observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis at two case study sites. Categories and sub-categories were identified from the data and described as part of the study.

The discussion could have centred on the categories identified. However, it was at this point the data were brought back to what the categories had to say about the above concepts and how the research questions centred on these concepts were answered. There were new conceptual models developed from the data that represented variation between the two sites in terms of the concepts identified at the beginning of the research.

An example of a conceptual model can be seen in Figure 1. As this shows, the weight of intervention by the management of the organisation to support nurse prescribing seemed to have an effect on its introduction to the organisation but the main concepts are visible in the model.

A conceptual framework was present throughout the research project and report. It helped frame the research's questions, design and outcomes. The same data may have been collected if a different theoretical or conceptual framework had been used or if no framework had been there, but it is likely that it would have been represented differently. The use of a framework helped the researcher to order her thoughts and organise the way the data would be represented.

The use of a conceptual framework had started as an academic exercise to fulfil the demands of an academic supervisor and the expectations of a PhD project. It is probably only now, looking back at the project, that the extent to which the conceptual framework pervaded it is apparent. The existence of the conceptual framework was helpful in ensuring the research was given order and achieved completion in a way that could clearly be communicated to its readers.

## Conclusion

As with many topics, in research there is a language to be learned by those who are going to become expert researchers. Much of this is explicit and can be read about in research texts and published papers. Although researchers can read extensively about research methodologies and data collection methods, this is not the case for theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This may be because, to seasoned researchers, it is so ingrained that it is unworthy of comment, or perhaps it is because these concepts are not overtly discussed and many researchers are confused about the correct terminology. Certainly, it might be expected that where a term – such as conceptual or theoretical framework – was included in a title of a published research paper there would be an explanation of it somewhere in the paper. However, this rarely occurs.

If the apparent mysticism of theoretical and conceptual frameworks is to be debunked, then they need to be included as significant sections in publications. The focus of the frameworks as an aid to researchers to help ensure that they have framed their research coherently throughout their design should be ensured. For those who find diagrammatic representation helpful, the use of models as a way of illustrating the framework for others should be encouraged.

It would be good to see the nuances of differences between concepts and theories discussed more regularly so all researchers understand their meaning or why variation in meaning is acceptable when using different approaches. This occurs with other parts of research and if we are to assist future researchers, it needs to happen with theoretical and conceptual models and frameworks. Novice researchers need to know that frameworks and models are there to help them and are not just another hurdle to be overcome to in the battle to achieve accreditation as a researcher.

### Online archive

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**Conflict of interest**
None declared

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