

A Book Review: Anfara, V. A., & Mertz, N. T. (Eds.). (2006). *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Abstract

This review describes a recent book on qualitative research by Anfara and Mertz concerning the important task facing academic researchers to properly relate their study to theoretical frameworks. Thanks to this collection of ten actual studies by respected academics, it becomes possible for novice researchers to see how the process of aligning theoretical frameworks with qualitative research endeavours should unfold. This will no doubt lessen angst about accomplishing their work. Readers will find at least one chapter in this book that is similar enough to their own chosen research topic to serve as a very useful guideline in choosing and working with theoretical frameworks.

Introduction

Overview

Understanding the connection between a theoretical framework and a research topic may be one of the most difficult connections doctoral students, who intend to undertake qualitative research, will have to make. This was certainly my own experience and that of my colleagues in a recently completed doctoral research course. The importance of understanding this aspect of doing academic research was underscored by Bailey (1997) when she stated that “no study, naturalistic or otherwise, can be conducted without an underlying theory or model” and that “theory is crucial in the definition of the problem and in deciding how to tackle it” (p. 135). *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research* by Anfara and Mertz goes a long way to increase our understanding of the proper use of theoretical frameworks in research, thereby diminishing the frustration many students often feel about using them. This book offers examples of studies and dissertations that demonstrate the compelling reasons for making this link to theoretical frameworks and shows how researchers have gone about discovering these connections between a particular research study case and an overarching theory.

Content of Book

Edited by two professors of Higher Education from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, USA, this book provides examples of genuine studies in which the process of selecting and applying the appropriate underlying theoretical models to research are clearly shown. The book contains 10 contributions by 11 writers, all of whom are professors from the United States, except for one of the contributors, Carol Mutch, whose base is in New Zealand. All of these writers highlighted the significance of finding the right theoretical framework and they explained exactly how to go about it. Worthy of special note is Bettis and Mills in Chapter Four, who cautioned that a framework “is not meant, however, to be a straitjacket into which the data is stuffed and bound” (p. 68). Similar useful words of wisdom about the craft of doing good research are plentiful throughout this book.

The content of the various chapters will be of particular interest to readers depending upon their specific topical areas of research. However, the greater value-added of this book is to be found in the well-described process of cognitive discovery that each author goes through in choosing and then using a theoretical framework. In most cases, the process of tying the research to its theoretical base is so clearly described that it can be used as a template to overlay onto the kinds of study that doctoral students will become engaged in during their own dissertation research.

In their preface, Anfara and Mertz provided a useful chart of the 10 chapters that outlines the name of the theoretical framework, the field of study, and the focus of the study for each contribution. The range of topics exemplified is broad enough to include something akin to everyone’s research interest. For instance, a theoretical framework of particular relevance to me concerns Pierre Bourdieu’s constructs of *habitus* and *field*. Therefore, Carol Mutch’s Chapter Nine about adapting Bourdieu’s field theory to explain decision making processes in educational policy serves as a precise model in operationalizing a theoretical framework that I might use for my own work in executive education.

Format of Book

Each chapter contains a stand-alone story of actual research. Not including the reference list that is a veritable goldmine of relevant educational literature at the end of each piece, the chapters vary in length from 10 to 18 pages. As such, chapters can be read in any order and in one short sitting. However, for those more voracious readers who enjoy longer sittings, this is possibly the closest thing to a real page turner that one is likely to come across in how-to academic writing.

Each chapter also provides complete and valuable descriptions of the data gathering and analysis research phases. Concerning the use of theoretical frameworks, each of the 10 studies presented provides an excellent checklist for graduate students to use in their work. That checklist includes the following topics:

1. First encounters with and locating a theoretical framework
2. Description or explanation of the theoretical framework
3. Reasons for choosing the framework
4. Effects of the framework on the study

5. Critique of the framework
6. Description of related frameworks
7. Discussion of other frameworks that were considered but rejected.

Such detail provides the reader with a metacognitive view of qualitative research in general, and of how to work with a theoretical framework. In other words, the contributors were thinking aloud about their process; they told us how they ‘got there’. There is an invitation here for us to learn from their thought models as we proceed through the crucial stage of working with theoretical frameworks and begin to develop our own modes of discovery in advanced academic research.

Thematic Highlights

The Role of Timing

The question of whether to formulate a theoretical framework prior to or after field research very much depends on the methodology being used, and there are many examples of either format. On this issue, Anfara and Mertz outlined various approaches that include, for example, their description of Robert Yin’s argument that “case study research, in contrast to other qualitative research designs like ethnography, requires identifying the theoretical perspective at the outset of the inquiry, since it affects the research questions, analysis, and interpretation of findings” (p. xxii). However, Anfara and Mertz also gave examples of John Creswell’s contentions that in grounded theory, theory is the outcome of the research, and similarly in phenomenological studies “no preconceived notions, expectations or frameworks guide researchers” (p. xxii). Nevertheless, in nine of the 10 studies selected for this book, the theoretical framework was chosen before proceeding with the fieldwork and data collection.

This pre-selection was portrayed as a weakness in the excellent chapter by Kearney and Hyle that used the Kubler-Ross theoretical lens to look at organizational change. Here the authors stated that “qualitative purists believe that notions flow only from the data and analysis is done with a completely open mind” (p. 125). It would be interesting to validate whether the 90% weighting among the chapters in this book in favour of pre-selecting a theoretical framework is par for the course in qualitative studies. However, even if it were, some researchers of the interpretivist leaning (myself included) might benefit from seeing more examples of instances in which the theoretical framework emerges more naturally out of the fieldwork as it progressed. The nine authors who were unapologetic about choosing their theoretical frameworks before doing their research gave various reasons for that decision. For example, in Chapter Two, “Transformational Learning and HIV-Positive Young Adults”, Merriam stated that “our interest in the theoretical framework of transformational learning drove all aspects of our study” (p. 26), and in Chapter Four, Bettis and Mills stated that “the theoretical frameworks came from the discipline orientation of the lead author” (p. 64). Perhaps readers will want to let their own research preferences or backgrounds dictate this decision about when to choose a theoretical framework; whether as rationalists they may prefer things to be neatly laid out ahead of time, or whether as members of the interpretivist persuasion they might prefer to let things unfold more emergently.

Using More Than One Framework

Nine of the 10 chapters in this book feature the use of only one theoretical framework. Although in Chapter Three where Fowler used one theoretical framework, she stated that “it is not uncommon for qualitative studies to be based on more than one theoretical framework, as researchers often find that no single framework adequately explains their data” (p. 55). Once again, it would have been a better balanced read to have witnessed more examples of the use of two frameworks for the same study, especially given that the use of more than one framework is not uncommon in qualitative studies. Nevertheless, even though it may be a more common practice to employ only one theoretical framework, the researcher has the option of using more than one.

Self-Critiquing Choice

In using a theoretical framework in a study, it is important for researchers to expose both the weaknesses as well as the strengths of that framework. More than half of the contributors in this book described weaknesses as well as strengths of their chosen theoretical frameworks. Those examples are ones we can emulate in our own work as we ensure a spirit of balanced criticism within our research.

Conclusion

By rallying together 10 superb stories about qualitative research studies under one cover, Anfara and Mertz have accomplished exactly what they intended. They have effectively explained, “through discussion and example, what a theoretical framework is, how it is used in qualitative research, and the effects that it has on the research process” (p. xiii). In *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, Anfara and Metz have assembled pertinent and passionate examples of how senior academic researchers have selected and applied appropriate theoretical frameworks. These frameworks have informed, catalyzed and enhanced their qualitative research endeavours over a wide spectrum of studies. Thanks to this collection, it becomes possible for novice researchers to see just how this process works, and it will no doubt lessen their angst about performing their own work. I suspect that this lively portrayal of how to align theoretical frameworks within a research study will be of considerable value to any researcher who faces the challenge of integrating theoretical frameworks into their research efforts.

Reference

Bailey, D. M. (1997). *Research for the health professional: A practical guide*. (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: F.A. Davis.