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Article

Novices' Struggles with Conceptual and Theoretical Framing in Writing Dissertations and Papers for Publication †

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Abstract: In this conceptual paper, we address the problem that novice scholars in social sciences sometimes have in constructing conceptual or theoretical frameworks for their dissertations and papers for publication. In the first part of the paper, we discuss why the topic is important in the high pressure environment that novice scholars face, in which finishing a doctoral degree and getting published can make a difference in career success or failure, and explain our understanding of theoretical/conceptual framing, including provisionally defining some key terms. We then elucidate ten problems that novice scholars have with theoretical/conceptual framing, using our own experiences as manuscript reviewers and writers as examples. The paper concludes with ways that novice scholars can address the task of framing their scholarly work conceptually and theoretically, on the understanding that the struggles continue over the lifetime of a scholarly career.

Keywords: theory; conceptual framing; theoretical framing; qualitative research; novice researchers

1. Introduction

Some years ago, Chris was attending the dissertation defense of one of her best doctoral students. As one of her two main advisors, she had watched the student develop a scholarly persona over the previous years and had watched, in particular, the development of her longitudinal qualitative project studying the language use of bilingual Japanese high schools students. Soon into the defense, about which Chris was not worried, believing this would be an interesting intellectual discussion about an interesting and well-done qualitative project, a committee member (the incoming director of the program) asked a question: "What is theory?" The other members sat in stunned silence for a moment, not sure what to say, given that this student had framed her study quite adequately in postmodern and sociocognitive concepts of language and culture. The student recovered before the rest of the committee did, came up with a decent response and was saved from further questioning of this type by the current (outgoing) director, who stepped in and shifted the topic.

At the end of this doctoral defense, Chris found herself reliving aspects of her own doctoral education two decades before. She had entered her doctoral program as a teacher (not researcher) of English as a second language in California. She loved the work, the people and the learning she had to do about her native language as part of learning how to teach it. In her first year of doctoral work, however, she faced mountains of readings, not about teaching and practice, but about theory and research. It was an odd experience for her, not to understand readings in her native language, to be confronted with terminology that she had never heard of and sometimes could not pronounce let alone understand and to become acquainted intimately with the infamous nominalized, jargon-filled, impersonal writing style of the social sciences [1]. She wondered if authors themselves understood well the theoretical foundations of their research or if she was seeing a mass epidemic of lip-service. One of her advisors in the department tried to help her lower her resistance to "theory." Theory in itself can be interesting, he said. Often, we cannot understand or interpret research findings without some theoretical lens; otherwise, we just end up describing things, not interpreting them or applying them to other contexts. Maybe, as Chris discovered much later, not everyone needs to become steeped in Theory (capital T, as Wolcott [2] noted, and who himself did a mainly descriptive doctoral dissertation in anthropology). Some less abstract and less pretentious conceptual thinking might do [3–5].

Now, after a decade of advising doctoral students on their qualitative dissertations in the same program that is featured in the introductory story and several decades of manuscript reviewing for five or six different journals, Chris is deeply familiar with the strict and ubiquitous structural requirement on Western English language dissertations and scholarly research articles that a theoretical or conceptual framework follow the introduction. It turns out that novice researchers are usually not very good at writing this chapter or section, for many reasons, including the fact that abstract thinking is difficult and that it takes a great deal of time to become familiar with theory at any level of depth. On top of these challenges is the persistent diversity among scholars in how they differentiate, or do not, theoretical and conceptual framing. After quite a bit of reading on and discussion of this topic, we settled in this paper for a loose distinction (described more below) and a plea to novices to come to their own decisions, as long as they are consistent, on how they frame their work.

Still, when both Chris and Yongyan began advising doctoral students, they realized that long before students write their dissertations and their first articles (we hope) from this huge project, they need

help recognizing how important it is to see beyond their concrete data to higher levels of abstraction, whether we call it theorizing or conceptualizing. It is not enough to drop a few names and terms; the higher levels of abstraction actually aid in interpreting data and provide needed links to other work. By the time students are drafting dissertation chapters and their first articles for publication, it is a bit late to start this foundational work. Additionally, by the time they finish the dissertation or first article, their struggles are invisible to others, having become obliterated or excluded by the need to present a polished and authoritative document to the gatekeepers and readers. In this paper, we review some of the invisible struggles that novices have framing their papers theoretically and conceptually and offer some strategies that they might draw on to address their difficulties.

2. Why We Feel This Topic Is Important

Recent pressures on novice scholars to publish in English in order to get or keep a job have created unprecedented stresses in their lives. Of the many difficulties they face writing a publishable article or book, the initial framing is one of the most challenging, particularly in qualitative inquiry [2,6]. For those novice scholars who are engaged in doctoral study in the social sciences, the challenge begins at the dissertation stage, where a theoretical or conceptual framework is usually a required chapter in the document [7] (much to the distress of Wolcott [2]) and follows them into their early publication efforts. Having been through these experiences ourselves and now advising our own doctoral students and serving on journal editorial boards, we find that the framing stands out as a common problem.

Views on theory differ. As Maxwell ([4], p. 46) pointed out, "for many students, the development and use of theory is the most daunting part of a qualitative study." Many of us feel intimidated by the notion of theory and anxious when we are told we need to frame our work theoretically. One reason for our anxiety is that "theory" is not something we can see concretely, in the way we can our data. Abstractions are always more difficult to think about and write about than are concrete empirical details, especially for people who are not inherently attracted to theory and who do not have theoretically-oriented minds. However, we do not need to be fearful of "theory"; it is our sense of how some aspect of the world works. As Anfara and Mertz ([6,], p. xvii) put it: "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." We "theorize" in daily life all the time, without calling what we are doing "theorizing." Theory can also be interesting in itself, but is particularly useful in helping you "think about your research while you're doing it", as Becker put it in the title of his book [3]. Additionally, even though Maxwell ([4], p. 46) says: "Every research design needs some theory of the phenomena in reality, to guide the other design decisions that you are going to make," there are many kinds and levels of theory, from "grand theory" (like Marxism) to middle and low level theory that appeals to common sense [5,8]. The authors of academic publications do not need to commit themselves to a grand theory, but can take a more middle ground.

Whether we pursue a grand theory or take the middle ground, we are all, including novices, probably at least vaguely aware that we need to frame our work theoretically as part of our research reports. If the notion of theory intimidates us, we might refer to conceptual, rather than theoretical, framing, possibly using the terms interchangeably, or distinguishing them by higher (theoretical) and lower (conceptual) levels of abstraction (see the next section). In either case, a framework helps us

interpret findings and connect our projects to other work. However, novices need to understand that a conceptual or theoretical frame is not something out there hidden intact in the literature waiting to be found or discovered. Instead, it is better seen as a verb, to frame, with the task of constructing a framework resting with us, based on our observing, reading, thinking and discussing and on our reflections on how a framework might connect to the specifics of our project.

3. What Theoretical or Conceptual Framing Does and Its Role in Scholarly Work

We often come across these two terms in reading: theoretical framework and conceptual framework. Different authors seem to favor one or the other of the two terms, e.g., with Merriam [9] sticking to "theoretical framework," while Maxwell [4] and Marshall and Rossman [10] consistently refer to "conceptual framework." Some other authors seem to advocate interchangeable use of the two terms and thus refer to "theoretical (or conceptual) frameworks" ([11], p. 101) or "a theoretical model/conceptual framework" ([12], p. 34) (cited in ([9], p. 67). In this paper, we use both terms, but consider a "theoretical framework" to be more formal and more abstract than a "conceptual framework." In research in education and applied linguistics, which tends to have a practical and descriptive purpose, formal theorizing is not always required, whereas some kind of conceptual framing usually is.

First, here are a few terms. These are working definitions, not fixed in stone:

A *frame* is a more or less abstract idea that encircles a study the way a frame encircles a picture and provides a space in which it is situated. It helps explain or justify why and how the study is being done, lets readers know what the study is and is not about and helps researchers support and interpret findings and connect them to other works and to larger ideas that are more general than the concrete particulars of a study.

A *concept* is an abstract idea based on phenomena in reality that constitute our data (an empirical generalization, in Becker's [3] terms). We can ask: what are our data examples of? One of Becker's "tricks of the trade" for framing is to respond to this question by not using any of the concrete terms in a study. For instance, from our field of second language education, we might not use concrete terms, like teacher, student, verb, essay and lesson, as concepts, but what those terms represent more abstractly (expert-authority figure, novice-learner, action, knowledge production, instruction). Linking the idea of concepts to that of a frame, it follows then that "…the conceptual framework of your study [is] the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research…." ([4], p. 33). We can note here that Maxwell, unlike some others, sees theories as part of a conceptual framework, not the other way around. The point is that the framework is a system.

A *theory* (in our view for this paper) consists of sets of related concepts; the theory makes clear how the concepts are related [4,7]. In this sense aspects of a theory can be presented in the form of models or networks that show relationships among concepts. Typically in relation to theory development, the literature talks about varieties of theory (e.g., [13,14]). O'Donoghue ([14], pp. 53–56), for example, outlines six varieties of theory: (i) description (or thick description); (ii) concepts; (iii) categories; (iv) propositions; (v) models; and (vi) typologies or classification schemes.

Theory can enter a project early (ethnography, phenomenology), late (grounded theory) or in the middle [15]. Framing thus consists of situating a study and interpreting data with ideas that are more abstract than the concrete particulars of a study itself or constructing theory by the end of a project

from the particulars of the study. To frame a study or to build a theoretical or conceptual framework for a study is a matter of addressing the question during data collection or analysis "What do you think is going on?" [4] or "What do you think this is an example of?" [3]. (This is why it is difficult to impose theory from the top down, before a study is underway; but see [9], cited below.) In qualitative inquiry, framing allows for some generalizing to other particular cases via the umbrella of the concepts in the framing. In this sense, theory allows us to escape the confining particulars of our data. Silverman ([7], p. 107) pointed out that "Without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, theory is mere armchair contemplation."

Merriam [9] is one who believes that some kind of "theoretical orientation" is needed even at early stages of inquiry before we are fully familiar with our data. Her observation helps to explain novices' confusion and uncertainty over the place of theory in qualitative research, especially when they are forced (e.g., by dissertation writing requirements) to consider theoretical aspects of a qualitative project before they have collected and thought about their data. In Merriam's words:

> Part of the struggle in identifying the theoretical framework in a qualitative study is that qualitative research is designed to inductively build rather than to test concepts, hypotheses, and theories. Because of this characteristic, many mistakenly believe that theory has no place in a qualitative study. (p. 64)

Merriam emphasizes, instead:

> The argument could be made, however, that most qualitative research inherently shapes or modifies existing theory in that (1) data are analyzed and interpreted in light of the concepts of a particular theoretical orientation; and (2) a study's findings are almost always discussed in relation to existing knowledge (some of which is theory) with an eye to demonstrating how the present study has contributed to expanding the knowledge base. (p. 70)

We quote Merriam at some length here to make the point that Merriam made: that a qualitative project is generally expected to fall between "deductive" and "inductive," to both draw upon existing theories and to add to them (although theory building through data analysis, as happens in grounded theory [16–18], falls out of the scope of the present paper). Tardy [19], in reflecting on her struggles with theory in her doctoral dissertation project, said something that echoes Merriam's [9] observation. We also quote Tardy here, to reinforce the point we are making:

> It seems to me now that the entire process of carrying out a qualitative study reflects the process of theory building. This process requires grounding ideas in prior research and theory, categorizing phenomena, and building models or narratives that explain or simplify details, perhaps leading to new or modified theories. (p. 123)

4. Problems That Novices Have

The theoretical or conceptual framework is a required element in most doctoral work that is supposed to demonstrate the knowledge and authority of the author, both of which are scarce assets in novice scholars. Our observations of novices' problems in theoretical and conceptual framing (as we mentioned earlier, the former "grander" and more abstract than the latter, in our definition) are based both on our readings and our experiences. In the following, the examples we provide come from reviews we wrote or received on submissions to journals or comments we wrote on student papers. From perusing our reviews and feedback to students, we identified the following types of problems that would-be authors, including ourselves, have in theoretical-conceptual framing:

(1) No framework: One of the things we look for in papers being prepared for publication is some kind of framework that would, at the very least, identify the author's assumptions that underlie the rationale for the paper, even if these are not couched in formal theory. From one of Chris's reviews of a journal manuscript is her comment to the author: "No conceptual framework: We do not know what theoretical, conceptual, or even methodological assumptions underlie this study." Particularly in qualitative inquiry, if there are no foundational concepts or frames, authors will have trouble connecting their work to that of others in the field or in conveying their interpretations of the findings, beyond the concrete particulars of a study.

In Yongyan's Faculty of Education where she now works, "the need for a theoretical/conceptual framework" has often been the most important first lesson that a doctoral student learns after entry into the doctoral program. Working out a theoretical framework is among the biggest challenges that the student is faced with, certainly before the confirmation of one's candidature (see [20] for a study of doctoral students' perspectives on the role of theory in dissertation research). Largely through peer interaction and observation of each other's presentations and sometimes through supervisors' teaching, doctoral students usually learn the lesson of the need for a theoretical/conceptual framework quickly. However, before novices start to develop a vague understanding of what a framework is, they can mistake "context" for "framing," and start off a paper or dissertation with lengthy descriptions of the events and changes in the educational environment being studied and, yet, fail to reach the essence of the study that is reported in the paper. Yongyan recalls how this problem was present in her own early attempts of paper submission. A paper of hers in its early version got this comment from a reviewer:

> However, in its present form, the paper is framed in the introduction as a study of Chinese researchers' contributions to publication in computer science. That is fine as a context for this study, but isn't the main issue one of a novice struggling to figure out different sets of conventions in Chinese and English? My suggestion, therefore, is that the author reframe the paper as an exploration of a novice writer's attempts to enter the community of professional Chinese scholars in computer science.

Years later as a supervisor, Yongyan has seen in doctoral students' early drafts of dissertations voluminous chapter-after-chapter presentation of contextual information (e.g., the medium-of-instruction policies in Hong Kong over time) in place of a theorized or conceptualized framing of the study. For

novices, it is much easier to see and describe the concrete particulars of a setting than to frame an inquiry more abstractly; they often need guidance to see beyond the concrete particulars.

(2) Inappropriate framework (does not suit the data or the purpose of a study): We have found that authors sometimes write a section on theory based on their readings or course work without knowing clearly how to connect the theory to the purpose or data of a particular study. This is a question of relevance, as these comments from two manuscript reviews that Chris wrote reveal: (i) "The introduction about the process approach doesn't work. It is not reflective of current thinking about process approaches or writing pedagogy or even very relevant to this study"; (ii) "I enjoyed reading the framework for this study of four L2 graduate students […] However, […] the rich framework did not match the data and analysis parts." We have also seen cases where a doctoral student falls in love with a particularly dense and complex theory during course work and then tries desperately to make the theory fit a far less grand empirical study. The same mismatch also sometimes happens when novice authors try to match one kind of theory with a different kind of study, seemingly through attachment to the theory.

(3) The framework does not link up with data: In other cases, the theory itself might be appropriate, but the author does not use it to help with interpretation and discussion of data. We would expect the initial framing theory to be drawn upon later in the discussion section of a dissertation or article as a way to bring everything in a study together. Chris wrote in a review: "In general, the results and the discussion do not match up. I was not able to read the observations and assertions in the discussion section and say to myself 'yes, I saw evidence of this in the results section.'" In numerous examples of her students' doctoral dissertation work, Chris has also found that even if a theoretical or conceptual framework chapter early in the work is both appropriate and quite strong, the discussion chapter often begins by merely repeating and summarizing the findings. In comments on a doctoral student's draft of a discussion chapter, Chris said: "As you revise, are you drawing on your reading notes and on the literature you reviewed in your conceptual-lit review chapters? […] What follows looks more like findings than discussion. Can you find a way to move some of the material into findings chapters and then revamp the discussion?"

A related problem for novice scholars is that their theoretical framework appears only in the introductory sections of a dissertation or article, without much further discussion at all. In other words, it seems to serve no purpose beyond display. Chris wrote in a review: "This section seems to present findings. Immediately following this section is the short Conclusion, without any real discussion that tied back to the framing in the first 6 pages of the paper (on discourse communities, social constructionism in academic literacy, and models of academic literacy). Make sure that a discussion section in a revision relates concepts and issues from the first part of the paper to what you found or did in this study."

On an early draft of a paper [21] targeted for a special issue of a journal that Chris and Xiaoming Li were guest-editing, Yongyan observed in an email to the guest editors: "I tend to feel that my Abstract, which only explains the way I use the term 'legitimate peripheral participation,' perhaps does not reflect well my focus in the paper." To this Chris responded sympathetically, emphasizing at the same time the importance of linking data with theoretical framework:

>We both recognize that you have a complex study, full of lots of qualitative and anecdotal material, which makes it quite difficult to narrow and focus for the purpose of producing one paper. We can continue discussing your revisions, so let us know what you decide to do. Whatever the direction, the important thing will be to link data clearly with your theoretical framework.

(4) Imbalance between a framework and data: There are two possible manifestations of this problem. In the first case, a data-rich project is presented in great detail with little or no theoretical or conceptual framing to assist readers in interpreting the study. This is a problem of "no conceptual framework" that we discussed at the beginning of this section. In the second case, a theoretical or conceptual framework might be presented with excessive detail relative to the presentation of data, which might be sparse. In one of her reviews, Chris wrote: "(In the revision) I still had a great deal of trouble figuring out what this paper was about. There were lots of big ideas and big concepts and big claims, and not enough data to support them." As we mentioned earlier, novice scholars might have learned about particular theories as part of doctoral course work and be less adept at conducting and writing up actual research that can be interpreted with the aid of those theories.

We suspect the problem can also occur when novices adapt materials from a dissertation to prepare a journal paper. In their dissertation, they might have more than enough discussion of theories and concepts to extract from their early chapters, yet have problems creating a clear focus and, at the same time, leaving enough space for presenting the study properly. The latter problem is perhaps partly a result of students' uncertainty over which part to present in the shorter journal article from the much larger study reported in the dissertation. In a review of a manuscript, Yongyan wrote: "On the whole, it seems the lengthy literature review section touches upon many things but does not signal strongly a focus for the study. Sorry but I got lost in the middle."

(5) Incomplete, superficial or inconsistent treatment of a framework: Unlike in some doctoral dissertations, where typically, an entire chapter can be devoted to a theoretical or conceptual framework, superficial or incomplete treatment of theory and related concepts is extremely common in journal article manuscripts, where there is little space for elaboration. However, novice scholars might treat theory superficially because, at the earliest stages of their professional development, they have not yet acquired the depth of understanding, through wide and deep reading, necessary for a more complete or knowledgeably succinct treatment of their framework. This problem is difficult to overcome at early stages, but tends to resolve itself over time as novice scholars develop experience and familiarity with sets of ideas and with a theorist's body of work.

Inconsistent treatment of theory can happen when novice or even experienced authors cannot find the theory or theories that work to support the main point of an article. Chris received a review of one of her manuscripts that pointed out this problem: "Theoretical focus not yet consistent. Seem to be five areas, the most salient of which is the notion of 'ecology of effort,' the strongest area of contribution in the paper. Develop further, situate in motivation research."

(6) Misinterpretation of a theory: Particularly, if several key concepts from a theory have become common parlance in academic work, novice scholars face the danger of adopting the buzzword without studying it thoroughly or fully understanding it, thus leading to misinterpretations. In a manuscript review, Chris wrote: "In the introduction to this paper, the authors imply that novices

move 'from marginal to legitimate participation.' However, in Wenger's view, at least in the 1998 book, marginality follows a trajectory to non-participation, whereas peripherality follows a trajectory to the 'inside,' to fuller participation. In his view, one is not marginal, then peripheral, then in; rather, one is marginal heading out, or peripheral, heading in" [22]. In another manuscript reviewed by Chris, the author did not seem fully familiar with the work of Vygotsky and his overarching sociocultural theory (e.g., [23]), whose concepts s/he was using to frame the paper: "... this author might have misread Vygotsky in a major way, by mistakenly using the term 'meditational' for Vygotsky's 'mediation/mediational.' This is not a typo, because 'meditational' is used throughout the manuscript. Vygotsky's work is not about meditation (reflection, or any other kind of meditation) but about mediation." Usually the problem of misinterpretation can be avoided if novice scholars study their theoretical sources more deeply and then share their pre-publication work with mentors or more experienced collaborators. Like several other problems we have mentioned, this one is difficult to resolve quickly, but tends to resolve itself over time with further study on the part of the authors.

(7) Lip service: Novice scholars are particular susceptible to name dropping or paying lip-service to a theory or conceptual frame, in which big names or big concepts are used with little apparent understanding [24]. Often used because they are currently popular (see (8) below), big names and concepts give the appearance that the author is knowledgeable and sophisticated, but more often reveal that s/he has felt obligated to cite certain names or theories rather than use them with understanding. In a review she wrote of a revised and resubmitted journal manuscript, Chris wrote: "I also had problems, as I think previous reviewers did, with some of the sentences expressing large concepts. Below I have copied numerous 'big-concept' phrases from the paper that I did not understand...And the statement from Bourdieu, though suggested by a previous reviewer, seems tossed in, without explication. Did you read Bourdieu?"

(8) Attraction to theories because they are currently popular: Authors sometimes select theories because they seem both attractive and popular. This is not the same as paying lip-service. We have both experienced what it is like to be caught up with an interesting theory or conceptual approach and to try to make it fit a potentially publishable manuscript, in part because we feel that linking our work to current fads will work in our favor with reviewers.

In the field of composition and second language writing, current discussions of the concept (not theory) of "translanguaging" reveal this tension: some scholars in second language writing find that the very familiar concepts they have been working with for decades have been taken over by the writing studies field and re-labeled "translanguaging," making it difficult for second language scholars to publish in composition journals without adopting this current buzzword [25,26]. A theory or approach that is currently popular must also fit the study that it frames and not be used if it does not. It is difficult, however, for novice scholars to resist the lure of faddish theories and concepts, which they can do only with great awareness and will power. How many of us have been lured by Wenger's [22] concept of communities of practice and Lave and Wenger's [27] legitimate peripheral participation, whether or not these concepts fit our study well?

(9) Influential name or concept missing: In some cases, novice scholars miss including an influential and appropriate theory or theorist, usually because they lack experience and have not read widely enough. Chris wrote in a review: "Is Thomas Kuhn not an appropriate source for this argument, particularly in the introduction where you discuss various relativist positions? Other citations from the

past are included in the introduction, but Kuhn's 1962/1970 work on 'scientific revolutions' and the incommensurability of disciplinary paradigms was oddly missing."

(10) Methodology missing: Specification of methodology means to go beyond describing what and how data were collected and analyzed, to specifying "why it was done that way" and to define one's "epistemological stance" ([28], p. 103). In other words, methodology is not a mere list of methods/techniques of data collection and data analysis used in a study, but an approach or perspective that then later determines what particular methods will be used. As Wolcott ([2], p. 93) put it, "[m]ethodology refers to the underlying principles of inquiry rather than to specific techniques."

An "ethnographic approach" or "narrative inquiry" as methodologies, for instance, harbors assumptions about how the world works and leads naturally to particular methods, *i.e.*, techniques for collecting and analyzing data. To give another example, in our experience with manuscript reviewing, we have found that novices may make a convenient claim of using a methodology of "grounded theory" without detailing how it was used in their study. They may not realize that the purpose of grounded theory is to build middle-range theories using data inductively in very specific ways as the source of theory building [16], not just to analyze qualitative data. Glaser and Strauss [29] originally referred to grounded theory as a "method", and later, Strauss and Corbin [17,18] also considered grounded theory to encompass particular procedures and techniques. Creswell [15] discussed "grounded theory" as one of the five traditions of qualitative research design, which implies that a claim of grounded theory is supposed to be about the whole design of research, rather than only concerning the data analysis (e.g., certain kinds of coding techniques).

Harklau and Williams [28] surveyed a corpus of journal articles reporting qualitative research on second language writing and found "[w]hile virtually all of the research studies elaborated on their content theory [*i.e.*, theory concerning the investigated subject matter], almost half did not identify a methodology" (p. 102). They specifically referred to a commonly found undesirable practice of mentioning research "methods" in the absence of "methodology," *i.e.*, researchers claiming the use of specific methods, such as "constant comparative method" [29], "analytic induction" [30] (cited in [28]) or "thick description" [31], typically with some "generic qualitative research textbooks" referenced (e.g., [29,32,33]), and yet "without elaborating on their underlying import for understandings of the social world or research methodology" ([28], p. 103). We believe novices need to guard against this undesirable practice. (Yongyan and Chris both feel guilty about this thinking back on their early publications; and from their experiences of manuscript reviewing, they feel that it continues to be an issue in texts authored by novices.)

In the above, we examined some problems that novices may have framing their study and analyzed possible reasons behind the problems. To start to address these problems, novices need to understand that the way a study is framed or what theoretical or conceptual framework is presented and how should affect all aspects of a study and the entire research process. A framework is not icing on the cake, but it provides the scaffold and structure of our study, whether the framework enters early or late in the research process. At the same time, it takes reiterative and prolonged efforts of working between the theory or concepts and one's own study to successfully achieve a linkage between the two, to avoid such problems as "the framework does not frame" and an "imbalance between a framework and data." We will return to this point again in the next section.

5. How Novices Can Begin to Address the Problems

In this section, we discuss briefly some ways that novice scholars can begin to address the difficulties they might have framing their work theoretically or conceptually. Whatever strategies they use, however, they face the constraints of all novices: insufficient time to have developed expertise in their doctoral work or in early stages of their publishing efforts. The time problem is solved only with patience and continued efforts over the many years (yes, years) that it takes to become comfortable within an academic specialization.

First, all scholars, novice and seasoned alike, need to read. Novice scholars can build familiarity with concepts and theories related to their interests by means of targeted reading of both conceptual-theoretical works (idea-think pieces) and of empirical (data-based) studies. One thing that both Yongyan and Chris do when they read empirical works related to our own interests, for instance, is to note whether and how the authors frame their studies with concepts and theories. If empirical studies are framed with named theories (e.g., activity theory, sociocultural theory) and with multiple references to the same (group of) theorists (e.g., Engeström, Vygotsky), this is a sign that we should probably read some theoretical and conceptual work by Engeström (e.g., [34]) and Vygotsky (e.g., [23]) in addition to empirical studies that are grounded in their work. In continuing to read multiple works related to our interests, we find over time that certain names and ideas reappear and start to feel familiar. This is a sign that we are beginning to develop enough knowledge of theories and theorists to be able to write about them more than superficially. We have found the same phenomenon repeatedly in our work with doctoral students and with authors of manuscripts submitted to journals. It is usually evident when doctoral students and authors have not become sufficiently familiar with the theories or theorists, but instead are citing Vygotsky (for example) second or third hand, possibly without even having read some of the scholarly work about such theories and theorists (e.g., studies of Vygotsky by Wertsch [35,36] and some other work [24,37–39]). All of this takes time, of course, and cannot be rushed. Therefore, all we can say is, be patient. We have to tell ourselves this all the time, as well, and somehow, no matter how much we read, it never seems to be enough.

Therefore, another way to approach the problem is to resist pressures to frame work in complex formal theories and, instead, to use lower level concepts or middle-range theories [40]. In other words, framing can consist of a set of propositions endorsed by a host of researchers (some of whom may be more influential than others). In Yongyan's report of the case of a chemistry professor eliminating textual borrowing from his students' drafts [41], she framed the study primarily through these two headings in the Introduction: "experts and novices in publication-oriented mentoring relationships" and "novice scientists' textual borrowing *vs.* experts' focus on rhetorical construction." Both headings draw on the novice-expert concept. In the first case, the concept of "mentoring" is also used and in the second, that of "textual borrowing." The paper is thus framed conceptually, but not by formal theory. Framing can take many forms, at many different levels of formality. "Grand theory" is not needed.

A third way to approach the problem of framing, as we have hinted at toward the end of the previous section, is for a researcher to go back and forth between the empirical and conceptual thinking for the entire duration of a project rather than feeling obligated to come up with a framing theory at the beginning of a project. Data in a project suggest concepts and theories, just as concepts and theories hint at what data and interpretations will be useful. As Becker [3] and Wolcott [2,5] among

others have suggested, too much early theorizing can distract researchers from their main job: that of looking closely and repeatedly at their data. To quote Wolcott's [2] advice: "…I urge you to hold off introducing theory until it is quite clear what you are interested in theorizing about and how that relates directly to what you have to report" (p. 75).

A fourth way to approach the framing problem is to play with alternative ways to view data. Different theories and concepts provide different perspectives on areas we investigate, and it can be both instructive and interesting to try out different lenses ([7], pp. 96–97). For example, if we are studying what happens in classrooms, we can see classroom activities in any of the following ways:

- As structured discourse between teachers and students;
- As linguistic repertoires;
- As the enactment (or not) of lesson plans;
- As a physical-artifactual space;
- As social interactions;
- As evidence (or not) of learning;
- As a microcosm of power relations.

There are no doubt other examples of ways to see a classroom in the education literature. The point is that we do not need to adopt one view, particularly early in a research project.

A fifth strategy is to look both inside and outside our particular fields or disciplines for theoretical perspectives. In the first case, as pointed out by Merriam ([9], p. 66), we can follow our disciplinary orientation as a way to identify our theoretical framework. Merriam suggested, for example, that in studying a classroom, an educator, a psychologist, a sociologist and an anthropologist will ask different questions, as these researchers have different disciplinary orientations. "The framework of your study will draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation", according to Merriam (p. 67). However, other authors have also emphasized the importance of looking outside one's own disciplinary field for theoretical possibilities [6,42,43].

Sixth, we can envision our conceptual or theoretical framing by means of "concept maps" in which various ideas and components of an evolving study are shown visually, in relation to each other, to help us understand "what [we] think is going on" ([4], pp. 46–55). Concept maps, a common and valuable tool featured in many research guides, stem from personal experience or from existing theories and research and help novices identify concepts in a study and speculate about their relationships. Concept maps "pull together, and make visible, what your implicit theory is, or clarify existing theory" (p. 47) and also help scholars actually develop theory by showing connections, contradictions and unexpected relationships (p. 47). One of the nice things about concept maps is that they can be sketched by hand, as well as by computer and re-done repeatedly as our thinking develops. As tools, concept maps do not necessarily end up in a final product, so they are among the least intimidating ways to play with concepts and theories.

Finally, a more elaborate strategy for novice scholars trying to find their way into theories that might help frame their own work is to conduct a pilot study and/or thought experiments ([4], pp. 56–59). Pilot studies and thought experiments have the advantage of being low-risk research activities, ones that will not end up as finished products for dissertations or publications.

To summarize the ideas we have presented so far, we encourage novice scholars, and continue to encourage ourselves, to do the following:

- Try to build a framework *à la* Maxwell ([4], Chapter 3), using strategies, such as: connecting with an existing research paradigm; using prior theory and research; making a concept map; using previous research to find tools and models; conducting a pilot study; doing thought experiments;
- Read both original sources and secondary sources;
- Talk with people more expert than you;
- Try not to bluff or name-drop;
- Think conceptually in relation to the particulars of a project;
- Play with alternate perspectives on what is possible at your research site (different ways of seeing and thinking);
- Blend ideas and theories; check for compatibility;
- Look outside your field for theoretical possibilities;
- Do not feel pressured to present big theory; try smaller ideas (concepts).

6. Coda: The Struggle Continues

This paper opened with a personal account by Chris of the issue of "theory" arising during the oral defense of a doctoral dissertation. The novice researcher in that account was able to handle the question on "theory" competently, while the faculty member who posed the question "what is theory" possibly embarrassed himself by asking a "test" or display question rather than one of substance. The scenario may not fit our common assumptions, but it indicates that novices can indeed rise above the confusions and complications, or at least be well on their way to scaling the heights of engagement with theories, through diligent reading, studying, discussing and studious reiterations between readings and their research. On the other hand, the personal account also seems to indicate that the issue of theory or conceptual and theoretical framing may vary in importance or meaning with people from different research traditions or training backgrounds. Our paper speaks in particular to academics (especially novices) following the qualitative paradigm in educational research, but even within this paradigm, no doubt many views exist. Novices need to consult their professors, advisors, editors, mentors and peers as needed.

We hope we are not giving a misconception that we, as a senior scholar and a junior researcher, are free from the struggle with theories and conceptual/theoretical framing. The truth is that the struggle and the confusion continue. There is always so much to learn and learn better. As we mentioned above, we have to tell ourselves all the time to be patient, to keep reading, to acknowledge the partial and imperfect knowledge of all scholars and to keep pushing at the boundaries of our knowledge base by asking what the concrete particulars of our data are telling us. That is what theorizing is all about.

Author Contributions

Yongyan Li initiated the topic. Christine Pearson Casanave and Yongyan Li jointly developed the ideas for a conference talk. Chris wrote the greater part of the article, and Yongyan added other parts. Chris and Yongyan jointly built on and revised the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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