

# 2 Theory, grounded theory and analysis

This chapter discusses the following issues:

- Theory and theorization in social research
- Theory and data analysis
- Top-down theory
- Bottom-up theory
- The intersection of theory and data

## Introduction: the practice of theory

We make a distinction between two approaches to theory: ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ theory. Much of the time, researchers use some preformulated theoretical and conceptual schema and commitments to classify, characterize and make sense of the social world – we call this ‘top-down’ theory. In other instances, researchers describe themselves as *creating theory* through their research, of generating and clarifying concepts through the analysis of data – i.e. ‘bottom-up’ theory. These terms are not intended to set up a dichotomy of practices, but merely to describe two aspects of research. Social research typically involves *both* of these practices – a specification of theoretical ideas in relation to an existing body of work, and the working out of these ideas in relation to data. We will return to discuss this point in more detail later in this chapter.

### Box 2.1 Terms and definitions

**Metatheory** is the study of theory. George Ritzer (1990) has been influential in the developments of discourse around metatheory as a means of making sense of sociological theory. Ritzer uses the term **meta-data-analysis** to describe the process of aggregating the analyses conducted by other researchers.

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**Grand theory** refers to broad-ranging theoretical systems that are developed to give accounts of very generalized social practices or forms of social organization. A distinctive aspect of grand theory is that it is not just about a specific, localized, empirical domain or setting, but about the creation of theoretical accounts for understanding more general practices.

**Top-down theory** – theoretical components that are specified prior to empirical work and are put to use in data work. While this is, in principle, distinct from bottom-up theory, the two usually work hand in hand, with some conceptual features being brought to data, and others being generated and modified through data work.

**Variation theory** – Tannen (2007) has used this term to describe ‘a particular combination of theory and method employed in studying a particular kind of data’ (2007: 5). So, any well-defined theory that is typically used in relation to a well-specified set of methodological procedures in order to produce a particular kind of data may count as an example of ‘variation theory’. The discussion of critical discourse analysis that we provide in this chapter would be one such example.

**Bottom-up theory** is the creation of theory through the exploration of data. **Grounded theory** is the best known articulation of this view, but this is just one articulation of a general approach to conceptual and theoretical work through data.

There are other useful distinctions and descriptors that are important for reflecting on the various roles that theory can play in research. Grand theory and metatheory are both orientated towards examining and creating theory rather than being concerned with theory as a tool for doing empirical work. **Grand theory** refers to the process of theorizing, usually in overarching and very general ways (such as outlining a system of social organization) rather than in terms of a theory of a specific aspect of social life. C. Wright Mills (1959) famously warned against grand theory as a distraction from the real business of social science – namely, empirical investigation. As he put it: ‘The basic cause of grand theory is the initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation ... get down from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts’ (Mills, 1959: 23).

The term **metatheory** is used to describe the study of theory (Ritzer, 1990). Metatheory is typically directed towards improving our understanding of theory itself, to generating new theory, or to creating an overarching theoretical perspective. As George Ritzer makes clear, however, maintaining a hard distinction between grand theory and metatheory is not easy. In this text, we are not concerned with the development of theory in abstraction from data, but in the practical relation between theory and data.

It is common for researchers to situate their theoretical position within or in relation to specific **subject disciplines**. Researchers who identify themselves as cognitive

psychologists, for example, identify with a defined area of interest that is likely to lead them to define their research questions (and, therefore, their research *answers*) in terms of, say, 'internal mental operations'. But while this may provide access to a range of concepts for making sense of the questions, and implies a particular level of explanation (in this instance, explanation at the level of the 'cognitive'), further conceptual specialization is required to be able to engage with the practical task of working with and analyzing data. A given discipline may delimit one's theoretical 'focal range', but it does not specify a particular focal point.

Of course, not all researchers are in the position of having such easily identifiable allegiances, and in such instances it can be difficult to find one's way through the very complex sets of strongly demarcated academic interests and concerns. It is important to emphasize that working with data is not contingent on being able to state a disciplinary orientation. Data analysis is undertaken through the use of very specific analytic tools, much more localized than general disciplines. A *discipline* only provides quite a general research orientation whereas *specific analytic tools* function as mechanisms for analysis. We will return to this point when we begin to look at particular examples of analysis.

## Theoretical concepts

Specific theoretical concepts offer a much more focused route to conducting analysis. There is something of a definitional problem in describing what counts as a concept as the term simply refers to *a word or phrase that gives meaning to something*, and since all words give meaning it is not possible to separate out some words as constituting concepts and others that do not. Rather, in social research, a word becomes a concept when it is treated as such – i.e. when it is used to do some analytic work. The term 'concept' in the social sciences, then, means something like *a word or phrase that has been specially selected to make sense of a particular empirical area*. This is still not a particularly satisfactory definition, but hopefully things may become a little clearer as we move through this chapter.

By this definition, the use of concepts (or *words*) is not unique to the kinds of work that social researchers do, but is also a characteristic of normal everyday life. All language (be it the professionalized discourses of academia and research communities, or 'ordinary language' spoken in non-academic contexts) is made up of concepts/words that structure the ways that we make sense of the world: 'fast', 'policeman', 'pyjamas', 'brunch', 'mother', 'secondary school', 'newspaper', 'message', 'song', 'meeting', all serve as interpretive frames for labelling, categorizing, telling people about, analyzing and variously *giving meaning* to the world.

When social scientists speak of 'theorizing', they are talking about giving sense to a particular setting of investigation – and, ultimately, to their data – through some concept or set of concepts. While these concept often look like the kinds of concept that ordinary people might use in their everyday language (think of concepts like 'reliable', 'identity', 'role', 'space', 'distribution' – all of which have some counterpart meanings in ordinary language and academia), their use in these professionalized discourses may or may not be similar to these everyday applications. Words provide us with ways

## 18 Working with qualitative data

of labelling and describing things, but they also *constitute* our world – as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously remarked, ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world’ (Wittgenstein, 1961: 5.6). One way of characterizing what theoretical concepts do is; *offering a way of providing a description of things, or an approach to constructing a language for giving new and different meaning of events or settings* (see Denzin, 1989, on this view). Box 2.2 provides a very brief example of the ways in which a conceptual language can help to re-present data and empirical settings in new ways for the purpose of analytical description. The point is much more general than the example of Erving Goffman that is provided here though, which relates to the ways in which researchers can use concepts to create different perspectives and views of the world.

### Box 2.2 Conceptual language in Goffman’s work

Goffman’s (1959) work on the presentation of self has been particularly influential in qualitative social research, and provides a nice example of the ways that concepts can offer re-descriptions of the world. One of Goffman’s interests was in the ways that people manage their social identity – the impression that they give of themselves to other people. A frequently used analytic trick for Goffman was to use metaphors to make comparisons between different social situations. One such metaphor is that of ‘performance’, and the ways in which a theatre stage is organized into a ‘front stage’ performance area and a ‘back stage’ area that is not visible to the theatre audience. Goffman used this to describe the ways that people organize their behaviour in other contexts, such as waiters in a restaurant. When they are working in front of customers (front stage), the waiters orientate to the production of a professional self, using particular kinds of language, forms of address, ways of walking, and so on. However, when the waiters are in other parts of the restaurant, such as the kitchen (or ‘back stage’), they may well behave in very different ways in order to display other sorts of social status (e.g. as being ‘a part of a working team’ or ‘good fun’ or ‘someone who takes their job seriously’ or ‘a boss’ or ‘a low status employee’, and so on). Through analogies such as this, Goffman is able to give new ways of seeing particular forms of social life that, he suggests, may not have been evident otherwise.

Denzin’s view of the role of theory is analogous to the role of some forms of psychoanalysis, where a patient’s language is seen as constituting the ‘problem’ being dealt with, and the role of the analyst is to find a new language to use that alleviates the symptoms. As Brown et al. have put it, this form of analysis ‘...is achieved through the production of narrative in which the subject re-writes the story line of his or her life’ (2004: 67). Here, the idea is that language can lead us to view ourselves in non-productive terms, and that by changing our language we may reach a more positive view of our lives. Heaton’s (2000) comparison between Wittgenstein and Freud draws out nicely the ways in which these two very different approaches may be viewed as offering emancipation

through their emphasis on language. Weiner (1995) has pointed out that this process of substituting an analytic language is also a good way of characterizing what social anthropologists do when they write ethnographies. Ethnographies are partial, culturally framed readings and renderings of views of the world (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Ethnographic analysis involves providing substitute readings and 'tellings' that re-present the world in new ways.

## Is one theory as good as another?

The description we provided in the previous paragraph quickly starts to sound very relativistic. Are we to say that 'one concept/theory is as good as another' or that 'theories merely offer different ways of looking at the same world'? Concepts in academia exist within particular paradigms or communities of understanding. Sets of theoretical practices converge around particular interpretations of concepts and preferences for ways of making sense of things. Answering the question 'Which theory is best?' inevitably involves invoking community-bound preferences of theoretical practice. While we certainly have our own preferences within these debates, this book is not an evangelizing endeavour (or at least not a disciplinary one); our aim here is to show how theory can be *put to work* or *built-up* in and through the processes of working with, and analyzing, data. We do not agree that all the analysis we present here is 'as good as each other' or even 'correct', but it would get quite tiresome pretty quickly if we kept drawing attention to our own preferences. The reader is encouraged to make their own mind up about the persuasiveness and value of the various examples we include in this chapter, and indeed in the rest of the book.

## Characterizations of the role of theory

There are a number of metaphors that try to outline the relationship between theory and data. Brown and Dowling (1998) refer to theoretical and empirical fields, and describe the process of research in terms of a dialogue between these fields: theoretical resources are specialized in defining a particular problem, and localization of the wider empirical field delineates the particular empirical setting in which the research is realized. Robert Alford (1998) refers to the movement between theory and data in terms of 'tracks of analysis', where researchers shuttle between theory and data in a mutually informative process. Howard Becker (1998) talks about a preference for thinking of theory as a trick (or set of tricks) for helping gain insights into the empirical world. For Becker, a 'trick' is 'a specific operation that shows a way around some common difficulty, suggests a procedure that solves relatively easily what would otherwise seem an intractable and persistent problem' (1998: 4). In this approach, theory is a practical activity and a way of thinking through problems or of looking at things in different ways. In all of these approaches, though, theory is a resource for doing things with data.

**Box 2.3 Howard Becker's Interactionist approach**

**Howard Becker** is an extremely influential sociologist whose analytic concerns and approach are derived from the Chicago 'interactionist' tradition of sociology. Becker's work exemplifies nicely the ways that particular academic concerns and disciplinary foci can be used in relation to different empirical domains. For example, one of the key concerns in this approach is with the analysis of work (see particularly E.C. Hughes, 1984). Becker can be seen to use this general topic of enquiry to examine areas such as drug taking (1953); musical performance (1974, 2000); and medical education (Becker et al., 1997). These various studies have much in common in terms of the application of a distinctively sociological perspective on the organization (and negotiation) of professionalized knowledge. Much of this work can be read as having a consistency in its commitment to the examination of 'conventions' of social practice.

To take an example, Becker's study of the 'career' of marijuana smokers was, in part, a reaction to psychologistic studies that characterized marijuana users as possessing distinctive psychological *traits*, which predispose them to such drug habits. In contrast to this view, Becker sought to show how the 'dispositions to engage in' (1953: 235) the use of marijuana are learnt through a process of socialisation, through which the user comes to view the taking of drugs as 'ordinary'. Becker employs a notion of 'career', as developed by Hughes (1984b) to characterize this process of learning to use and to account for differences in and changes in the perspectives and practices of drug users over time. Fundamental to the argument is that learning to become a drug user involves gaining knowledge about how to experience the drug's effects.

The intention of the preceding discussion has been to clarify some terms, and to describe the quite complex and diverse sets of theory-orientated practices in which social researchers engage. In what follows we offer some more focused reflection on these different conceptions of the relationship between theory and analysis. In the first section we describe some of the key issues involved in translating specific theoretical models into practical analytic strategies, and in the second we think about how to use data itself to generate theoretical ideas.

## Top-down theory

To refer to 'top-down theory' is simply to describe any theory that has been formulated prior to empirical work, either by other theorists or by the researcher themselves. Theory in this sense may provide a way of posing empirical questions. For example, the famous social anthropologist Margaret Mead's (2001) interest in childhood among the Manus tribe of Papua New Guinea was framed by her reading of the psychologist Jean Piaget's writing on cognitive development. Piaget described the differences between

the approaches to understanding the world of western children and adults, drawing attention to the ways in which children frequently invoke 'magical' causes as explanations (e.g. 'The water monster makes it rain', Mead, 2001: xvii), and 'animistic' explanations ('The clock ticks because it wants to', Mead, 2001: xvii).

Mead was interested in exploring how these ways of making sense of the world of western children may compare to the ways in which Manus children made sense of the world, and whether or not Piaget's ideas represented cross-cultural properties of childhood. For Mead, this theoretical interest presents a clear theoretical frame and an analytic focus for the examination of data. Animism, for example, was a clearly defined concept that could be explored in relation to specific sets of practices, and used as a way of categorizing certain features of observed behaviour for comparison with Piaget's observations. The pre-formulated theoretical frame, then, was a mechanism for categorizing, comparing and talking about the social world she was investigating.

Below we present an extended example of the use of theory in the development of analysis.

## The example of critical discourse analysis

The following extended quote from Norman Fairclough (1995) provides a concise outline of his view of the some of the key theoretical constituents of his interpretation of critical discourse analysis (CDA):

I view social institutions as containing diverse 'ideological-discursive formations' (IDFs) associated with different groups within the institution. There is usually one IDF which is clearly dominant. Each IDF is a sort of 'speech community' with its own discourse norms but also, embedded within and symbolized by the latter, its own 'ideological norms'. Institutional subjects are constructed, in accordance with the norms of an IDF, in subject positions whose ideological underpinnings they may be unaware of. A characteristic of a dominant IDF is the capacity to 'naturalize' ideologies, i.e. to win acceptance for them as non-ideological 'common sense'. It is argued that the orderliness of interactions depends in part upon such naturalized ideologies. To 'denaturalize' them is the objective of a discourse analysis which adopts 'critical' goals. I suggest that denaturalization involves showing how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse in turn determines social structures. (Fairclough, 1995: 27)

The principal analytic moves that we identify in this text are the following:

- 1 Ideology and language are intertwined.
- 2 Language may be used by people *uncritically*, without reflection on its ideological character.
- 3 Within a given institution there is usually one *dominant* ideology/language.
- 4 These ideologies often become 'the normal way of thinking' and are not usually regarded as ideological, but rather simply as 'the way things are'.

## 22 Working with qualitative data

- 5 'Order' (which means here something like 'continuing as people expect things to continue') within an organization is a result of the dominance of a particular discourse.
- 6 CDA aims to show how this normalization of ideology and language occurs.
- 7 The explanation for this 'naturalization' uses a theory about the relationship between macro and micro social structures – the former relating to recognizable social institutions (such as 'schools' or 'the police force' or to 'systems of governance', etc.) and the latter to the ways in which people interact. In particular, the theory aims to show how language is conditioned by macro social structures and, at the same time, how language conditions those structures.

Fairclough approaches his analysis by examining transcribed sections of interactive talk and looking for the types of assumption and 'social bias' that can be seen within the exchanges. He does this by looking at the 'levels of naturalization' that can be found within the talk, i.e. the extent to which they may be unproblematically 'accepted' by members of a given community (which would count as 'high naturalization') or may, in contrast, be contested ('low naturalization').

### Applying Fairclough's ideas to other empirical domains

In what follows we discuss the ways that a researcher may use Fairclough's ideas and approach as a means of investigating a particular empirical context.

The data extract below is taken from an ethnographic study of gender equality in the context of free primary education (FPE) in Lesotho in Southern Africa. This study is part of a postdoctoral research project conducted by Pholoho Morojele at the Institute of Education, University of London. The study aimed to examine ways of improving gender equality within FPE. Two important aspects to the context of this desire for improvement are the intersection of extremely patriarchal indigenous practices, which place tangible restrictions on the nature and level of women's participation within society, and the very high rates of HIV and AIDS infection within the region. The research aimed to empower women to be able to resist the forms of patriarchy that both limited their life chances and heightened their risks of HIV contagion.

The extract comes from a focus group that Morojele undertook with a group of girls in a co-educational primary school; the children are describing their participation in an after-school Christian group called 'Pledger's Group' that is organized by the school. The aim of the group was to provide moral education that could enable the girls to avoid the problems described above. The transcript is translated.

#### DATA EXTRACT 2.1

1	Int	What do you do during lunch time?
2	Girl 1	Me, every Friday after school there is an organization in the
3		school called <i>Maila-thoabalano</i> [Pledger's Group]. We have joined it
4		and our teacher Ms. Mary teaches why these people who fall in
5		love why they do so. And then we tell her.
6	Int	Okay she asks you why?



- 7 Girl 1 Yes, sometimes we do it in groups and tell her why when we  
8 have sports trips girls like to walk with a boy.  
9 Int Okay when you have sports, boys like to go with girls?  
10 All Yes sir  
11 Int And girls like to go with boys too?  
12 All Yes sir  
13 Int Why?  
14 Girl 2 Its because they were being persuaded by love  
15 Int Okay, is that so?  
16 All Yes sir  
17 Int Who are being persuaded by love? Boys or girls?  
18 All Boys [Girls say in a chorus]  
19 Girl 3 But no sir, girls also are persuaded by love [the girls laugh and  
20 hide their faces]  
21 Girl 1 Yeah even girls do  
22 Int Mamello, tell us how does this happen?  
23 Girl 4 You see when one girl has a boyfriend and they go together  
24 during sports and the friends of the girl also want to have a  
25 boyfriend and so they don't come empty.  
26 Int Oh, girls are also like that?  
27 All Yes sir  
28 Int So when the teacher asked you [why people fall in love] what do  
29 you tell her?  
30 Girl 5 Me, I said its because these boys they only want to fall in love  
31 with girls for a short while not for a long time.  
32 Int What about girls?
- [Long silence]
- 33 Girl 4 No all of them they are the same  
34 Girl 5 Yeah that is true (group laughter)  
35 Int Why do you think boys want to go out with girls for a short  
36 while?  
37 Girl 1 Its because they like girls  
38 Girl 3 Yeah they [boys] won't go out with one girl  
39 Girl 2 It's not like they [boys] love them [girls], they [boys] only lust  
40 after them only. They want to misuse them so they become  
41 miserable.  
42 Int Okay, what do girls think?  
43 Girl 2 Girls think that boys really love them but its not like that  
44 Girl 4 They deceive them  
45 Int Oh girls don't deceive boys?  
46 Girl 1 Yeah  
47 Girl 5 But there are others .....
- 48 Girl 3 There are those who deceive them (boys) and those who  
49 don't.  
50 Girl 1 Yeah, there are those who don't deceive them (boys)  
51 Int Those girls who deceive them why do they do so?  
52 Girl 2 It's because they have seen that boys deceive them  
53 Int If boys don't deceive girls, girls also don't deceive them?  
54 All Yes sir [in chorus]

'go with' here means not only 'be accompanied by' but has strong connotations of sexual intercourse.

## 24 Working with qualitative data

If we were to apply the analytic framework used by Fairclough, we might reach the following analysis:

The formal institutional discourse of the Christian group (the dominant IDF) positions girls as abused and mistreated by boys (interjection 40 – ‘they want to misuse them so they become miserable’ and interjection 43 and 44 on boys’ deception). However, the girls also display their own discursive frame, which positions themselves as operating with the same socially mediated desires as the boys for having a partner (interjection 24 – ‘the friends of the girl also want to have a boyfriend’).

Within the text there is a strong subtext, much more evident in the original language, that the discussion here is about sexual intercourse and not just ‘being accompanied by boys’. Participating in the Pledger’s Group involves learning, and becoming conversant with a discourse that positions boys as ‘immoral’ and ‘deceptive’, who are driven by this sexual desire. The aim of this discourse is to generate a change in the girls’ sexual practices. While the girls show a conversance with this discourse, they also display an alternative ideology which positions themselves as operating with the same sexual desires as boys, as able to distinguish between deceptive boys and non-deceptive boys, and which comprises its own morality of retribution in which girls can be as deceptive as boys (interjections 46–54).

We may pose the following as questions for exploring other data within this study:

- 1 Is the Pledger’s Group generally the subservient discourse, with the girls’ own discourses operating as the dominant ones? How does context effect ‘what is treated as ‘dominant’ or ‘subservient’ discourse?
- 2 Do the girls’ discourses here display any similarity with wider discursive practices in other formal and informal settings?
- 3 Are there other instances of talk between girls within the school that also hint at the subservience of school discourse?

As with Mead’s application of Piaget’s theoretical orientation, the above example illustrates how the ideas presented in CDA offer a way of categorizing, describing and *talking about* data. CDA provides a conceptual framework for making sense of the data, and for working through it in a focused way. It provides particular concepts (e.g. ‘ideology’ or ‘institutionalized discourse formation’) and a particular set of aims (e.g. ‘the ideological ideas implicit in language’) that can be put to use to make distinctions, create categories, specify relations, make claims to the formations of tacit knowledge, or define sets of interest groups or typologies of interests.

In the analysis presented above, the concepts of ideology, dominance, ideological discourse formation, agency, and power serve as a ready-made system of concepts for exploring the research question. Language becomes the central focus for exploring the question of gender equality, and the analytic concern becomes understanding how that language, as crystallized in forms of discourse and particularly institutionalized discourse, serves to define the parameters of participation for women.

## The relationship between forms of data and forms of theory

The analysis of extract above is useful for highlighting that particular theoretical/analytic frameworks imply preferences for certain sorts of data and certain forms of research design. The ideas that constitute the theoretical orientation of CDA cannot be pursued 'any old how', but require particular kinds of data – in the example above, questionnaires would not provide the level of detail needed to be able to answer questions about forms of discourse and specific discursive relations. This does not mean that only one kind of data can be valuable as there are very often alternative data forms that one could use. However, the practicalities of research usually reduce these down to a small number of tangible alternatives. In the above example, then, the researcher might have asked the girls to record themselves talking about these issues, or he may have conducted interviews with individual girls instead of groups of girls. In each case, though, all kinds of ethical, methodological and practical issues would arise that would make such alternatives more or less doable or attractive. *Working with theoretical ideas, then, involves specifying a methodological framework in which such ideas may be taken forward.* We discuss this matter in more detail in Chapter 4).

## The iterative nature of analysis and research practice

The analysis we provided of the data extract above shows also that, through analysis, researchers can specify new questions for further exploration. The analysis outlined implies that the institutional discourse of the Pledger's Group is competing with other forms of discourse that the girls use to make sense of and make decisions about sexual practices. Questions arise, therefore, about the origins and prevalence of these other discursive forms; these questions direct the researcher to investigate further forms of discourse through the collection of new data.

Analytic frameworks do not only provide possible concepts for shaping engagement with the data, but also offer mechanisms for designing, conducting and developing one's research. The analysis of data informed by a particular theory can impact on the whole research process and lead to new research questions and research designs. These points are explored in more detail in Chapter 4, when we turn attention to the role of research design in the specification of analysis.

It is very hard to talk in the abstract about the ways in which theory can be used in analysis, as theorization is always a contextual activity. The example of CDA provided above shows how that specific orientation might work in relation to a particular data set. Different data will offer alternative forms of application. Different theories will provide different conceptual specifications and analytic aims. The pre-specification of theory is not the only way in which theoretical frameworks may be used or developed. Just as theory is a resource for analyzing data, so data is a tool for the development and refinement of theory. In the next section we look at these issues in relation to grounded theory.

## Bottom-up theory

Arguably one of the most influential discussions of theory in qualitative research came with the publication of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1999 [1967]), which proposed a move from what they saw as the 'testing' of theory in social research to the *creation* of theory. Indeed, grounded theory became so influential that it has almost become synonymous with theory-orientated work in qualitative research. The central thrust of the argument in *Discovery* was that theory that is developed in relation to a data set is more likely to do justice to that data than theoretical concepts that are imposed on data.

### Box 2.4 Grounded theory

**Grounded theory** refers to the process of developing theory through analysis, rather than using analysis to test preformulated theories. Barney Glaser and Anselms' Strauss pioneered the approach in their early collaborative work, but the authors later parted company in quite dramatic fashion as their opinions and descriptions of grounded theory diverged. It is important to be aware, however, that the term 'grounded theory' is frequently used in a much looser sense to simply refer to the process of analyzing qualitative data. It is advisable, therefore, to reflect carefully on the particular claims that are being made in studies that describe themselves as using 'grounded theory'.

While the authors are clear that they intend their approach to be applicable to qualitative researchers in general, they do on occasion use the term 'sociology' instead of 'social research'. This is not surprising perhaps as the authors are both sociologists by training (although from very different stock). This slip-page in terminology can be off-putting for those who would not regard themselves as sociologists.

As many authors have pointed out (e.g. Goulding, 2002; Charmaz, 2003; Grbich, 2006), grounded theory is not a unified approach to analysis as, after the publication of their extremely successful text, Glaser and Strauss developed distinctive approaches. The publication of Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990) led Glaser (1992) to claim that the book represented a fundamental departure from the original grounded theory thesis. Glaser argued that Strauss and Corbin's text involved not the pursuit a *grounded* analytic orientation through the careful development of concepts from data, but that it advocated the imposition of a priori analytic frames. Such was the intensity of Glaser's claim that he called for the withdrawal of the book and the wholesale reworking of the text. While there are indeed some clear differences in the author's later works, we are not particularly concerned here with outlining them in detail. Without wishing to deny the importance of their distinctive approaches, we want to suggest that there are also important similarities between the authors' various publications. Our discussion below deals primarily with what we see as the similarities within grounded theory.

A further area of debate within grounded theory has concerned the extent to which it can be seen to represent an interpretivist approach to research. Kathy Charmaz (2003) has argued that both Glaser and Strauss display positivistic tendencies within their work, evident in what she characterizes as a naïve epistemology in which the social world is regarded as being readily available for ‘discovery’ by researchers. Charmaz suggests that this position does not fit easily with interpretivist views of the constructed and contested nature of the social world. While we do not explore this issue in detail here, Charmaz’s argument presents an important caveat for anyone working with grounded theory as it highlights a tension between the frequently cited methodological underpinnings of qualitative research and the implicit aims of grounded theory.

## Key features of grounded theory

Grounded theory is essentially an approach to creating theory from research and data analysis. Its basic principle is that all concepts and hypotheses, which are the key elements of theory within the approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1999 [1967]), should be generated from, rather than produced prior to, research – theory ought to result from an engagement in research, rather than being imposed on it. In their original text, Glaser and Strauss (1967) made heavy use of the distinction between theory **verification** – the approach normally taken in positivistic/hypothetico-deductive paradigms – and theory **generation**. They suggested that, until their commentary on grounded theory, even within qualitative research the weight of emphasis had been on the former rather than the latter; on *testing* or at least examining/applying existing theories rather than on creating new ones. Strauss (1987: 12) later suggested that the emphasis on this distinction led some people to interpret grounded theory as involving disinterest in theory verification. This is a slight misreading of their argument, though, as the verification of any theory generated through research is a key aspect of grounded theory.

### Box 2.5 Processes and concepts in Grounded Theory

Grounded theory can be characterized by the following processes:

- **Concepts and hypotheses** should be generated *through* the analysis of data.
- Theory development should involve the use of **coding**, **memo writing**, **theoretical sampling**, **triangulation** and the **constant comparative method**.
- These processes and procedures should be used to develop **categories**, **properties** and **theoretical relations**.
- **Hypotheses** should then be formed through both **theoretical induction** and **deduction**.
- Theory work should continue until **data saturation** has been achieved.

Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach to grounded theory specified the following procedures for dealing with data: **coding** (the specification of categories within data); writing **memos** (keeping notes on what you are doing); **theoretical sampling** (choosing

new sources of data or sites of data collection according to your theoretical interests); and **triangulating methods** (using different methods to investigate the same idea or concept from different viewpoints). All of these aspects are used within the **constant comparative method**, as outlined in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. The constant comparative method involves comparing findings or observation with other instances in which those findings might be applicable. Glaser and Strauss (1999 [1967]) characterize the constant comparative method in terms of four stages. We regard the first and second of these stages as overlapping, so we have condensed these 'stages' into three:

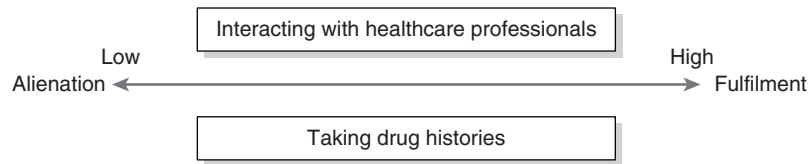
- Creating categories, properties and theoretical relations
- Solidifying the theory
- Writing.

### *Creating categories, properties and theoretical relations*

This entails the generation of codes (or categories) that can be compared with other instances of their appearance. For example, Gibson's (2005) study of pharmacy practice entailed the creation of the category 'skills alienation' to describe the feeling of being overqualified for a particular task. When a particular section of data within an interview transcript suggested itself as an instance of this category, it was compared to other instances. This was not only to make sure that it was 'an instance of a similar type', but also to flesh out the **properties** of the category.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define properties as the characteristics of a category. Properties can typically be described in terms of variations along a scale, i.e. in terms of the variation of particular dimensions, such as how long they take, how far away the deadlines typically are, or how difficult they are. For example, one of the aspects of pharmacists' work that was typically associated with 'skills alienation' was that of dispensing drugs. However, this work varied quite considerably depending on the setting in which the work was carried out. For those working in high street shops, there was little account taken of patient drug history within this process, and typically little interaction with other healthcare professionals. However, for those in hospitals, this could be a more involved role, in which the pharmacists may have been brought into contact with doctors or nurses within the hospital in order to build up quite detailed patient histories. These properties of the category of alienation ('interaction with professionals' and 'taking drug histories') became viewed as a sliding scale, at the most passive end of which professionals experienced alienation, while at the other professionals experienced fulfilment (see Figure 2.1).

The creation of **hypotheses** is also an important part of theory development and comprises the expression of relationships between categories and their properties. This is undertaken through the processes of **induction** and **deduction** – i.e. by pursuing intuitions about, say, the relationships between different categories (induction), and then formulating those intuitions in formal relational terms as hypotheses (deduction). Glaser and Strauss (1999 [1967]) emphasize that all of this 'theory work' ought to involve the use of memos – notes on how particular categories or properties relate, or explorations of a particular hypothesis or other theoretical specification.



**Figure 2.1** Theoretical relation between the properties and characteristics of pharmacists' work

### *Solidifying the theory*

This entails the 'firming up' of a theory and its constitutive components (categories, properties and hypotheses). Here, the analyst begins to discard non-relevant properties and categories. A fundamental aspect of this later stage of theory development is that of **theory saturation**. A key concept in grounded theory, saturation refers to the point at which theoretical work (like applying a category) routinely involves seeing the same thing. Where an instance of a particular code comprises nothing new in the form of properties but simply reaffirms what is already known, then the data is seen as having reached saturation.

### *Writing*

Glaser and Strauss propose that writing ought to be undertaken only once a theory has been fully developed. It comprises the collation of memos and data exemplars to *write up* a theory. In this model, then, writing very much involves the presentation of ideas rather than the exploration of them, which, the authors suggest, is much better accomplished through memos.

## **An important criticism of grounded theory**

As we have seen, one of the key and defining feature of grounded theory is the emphasis on generating theory through research rather than prior to research. One of the strongest examples of this view in Glaser and Strauss's work (both in their early work and in their subsequent divergent writings) is in terms of the uses of literature. For example, Strauss and Corbin make a distinction between technical literature and non-technical literature, the former referring to published academic work such as books and journal articles and the latter to diaries, documents, reports, etc. As with Glaser and Strauss (1999 [1967]) and Glaser (1978, 1992), Strauss and Corbin argue that for the purposes of grounded theory it is best to avoid using literature to generate theoretical or conceptual ideas for pursuit in relation to the research. In a particularly telling statement they argue that:

...if you begin with a list of already identified variables (categories), they may – and are indeed very likely to – get in the way of discovery. Also, in grounded

theory studies, you want to explain phenomena in light of the theoretical framework that evolves during the research itself; thus, you do not want to be constrained by having to adhere to a previously developed theory that may or may not apply to the area under investigation. (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 49)

An example of this view in practice comes from Weider's study of a drug addiction in a half-way house. Weider's aim was to understand why parolees who stayed in the house did not recover from their addictions. Weider notes that he had no knowledge of such environments when he began his study: 'I had read none of the literature in this area, and at that point decided ... that it would be desirable, at least at first, for me to remain ignorant in that regard. We felt that my ignorance was desirable because, equipped with the literature, my observations might be pushed in the direction of the results of previous studies' (Weider, 1983: 79). Weider's study is a good example of why this approach can be useful, as his research resulted in a very nuanced understanding of the 'subculture' of the institution, and the maxims by which the residents orientated to their daily life.

Both Glaser and Strauss (1999 [1967]) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) also argue that it may be useful to use literature *subsequently* to compare the categories that the research has generated with other research in the field (see Goulding, 2002, on this point). In this respect, then, literature may be a good way of generating ideas in subsequent analytic 'phases', but not in the first instance.

A strong criticism that has been levelled at this version of grounded theory is that it represents something of a disingenuous view of how research typically proceeds. Goulding (2002), for example, argues that as experienced researchers, Glaser and Strauss's characterization of their research as closed off from other research belies the level of their research knowledge. Further, since the authors do not preclude the use of externally derived concepts at other stages of the research, their insistence on avoiding them at earlier stages can seem a little strange. It is particularly difficult to align this process with contemporary social research practices, where research is usually only permitted where researchers can show how their work fits within broader theoretical frameworks. Researchers are often required to explain in some detail the types of conceptual apparatus that they might use to analyze their data before funding, ethical approval or institutional agreement will be given for it.

This criticism aside, grounded theory approaches demonstrate clearly the ways in which theoretical orientations, such as concepts, hypotheses, relations and so on, can emerge or develop through research.

## Generalized theory practices

On one level, grounded theory presents a strong alternative to 'top-down' theory orientations, where theory is used from the outset to inform or guide research design and organize data work. However, the commitment to using theoretical orientations to structure one's design and analysis, and the aim of developing analytic frameworks and theoretical conceptions through analysis – or, more nebulously, of using *data* to interrogate *theory* – need not represent competing commitments. Indeed, the idea that *theory can be both a resource for and a product of research* is a useful guiding principle when conceptualizing the relation between theory and data. These two conceptualizations of theory are intended



as a resource for making sense of theory work. From these two positions we can generate the following list of practices which might be informed by theory:

- Formulating research questions
- Conceptualizing and critically engaging with relevant research literature
- Designing research
- Organizing data
- Analyzing data.

**Formulating research questions** – As we have seen with the examples of Mead's application of Piaget, and from our example of using critical discourse analysis in relation to a study of primary education in Lesotho, theory can inform the formulation of research questions. Through engagement with theory, researchers can create ways of asking questions by using the concepts and analytic focus specified by a given theoretical orientation. Where theory emerges through research – e.g. where concepts are created through the analysis of data – these theoretical orientations can be used to frame new research questions or to recontextualize existing ones.

**Conceptualizing and critically engaging with relevant research literature** – Because theory entails the specialization of interests, it can be used as a mechanism for defining what is to count as relevant research literature, and for developing a critical approach to managing that literature. Literature forms the context in which research is conducted, and so finding a way of sifting through and relating to this context is crucial. We will discuss this issue in more detail in the Chapter 3.

**Designing research** – The specification of theoretical concerns is strongly implicated in the development of research designs. This 'working through of theory and design' may come at the beginning of the research process, by identifying the kinds of data that are required in order to address particular theoretical concerns, or it may come later on in the research when new interests and concerns are generated. In either case, theoretical concerns have implications for what kind of data is required and, consequently, for the types of method that are best used to generate data. We will discuss these issues in Chapter 4.

**Organizing data** – Theoretical concerns may present researchers with particular data categories and offer possibilities for labelling that data in ways that correspond to those theoretical interests. They may lead researchers to want to adopt particular methods of transcription, and to organize those transcripts in particular ways. In the critical discourse analysis example we discussed earlier, the theoretical interests are likely to lead researchers to use detailed forms of transcription, where some of the nuances of speech are captured. The organization of data through transcription is the topic of Chapter 7.

**Analyzing data** – Processes such as categorizing, describing, relating and interpreting data can all be undertaken through the orientation to theory. Theory may offer concepts for creating, labelling, subdividing and relating categories. Similarly, it may help researchers to describe particular features of the data they are dealing with, by providing a language for 'carving up' the data terrain. As we have seen, however, analysis is a two-way process, and just as theory is a resource for interrogating data, so data is a

resource for interrogating theory. Whether those ideas are generated through the data or prior to it, data provide a way of working through theoretical ideas.

These processes represent some of the key ways that theory interfaces with the processes of working with and analyzing data. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, theory and analysis are contextually defined, so it is very difficult to create general statements of what these kinds of activities look like. In this chapter, we have presented two of the key ways in which theory is often thought of in research. The summary of practices presented above provides a way of moving beyond the confines of specific approaches, and to thinking about how to work through theory in particular contexts of operation. Where appropriate in this book, we will be giving examples of how theories may be worked out in relation to the contexts in which researchers work with data.

## Concluding remarks

We began this chapter reflecting on the diverse ways in which the word ‘theory’ is used, and to the range of practices that can be characterized as ‘theory work’. This diversity creates some ambiguity in decontextualized discussions about ‘the uses of theory’. When formulating and conducting research projects, part of the work that researchers face involves working out what the theoretical orientation of the project is, and how that relates to the design of research and the management of data. The aim of this chapter has been to help researchers to do this work of ‘contextualization’ by providing them with examples of how theory and data relate to each other, and in so doing, helping them to work towards the establishment of coherence in their research. The examples in our discussions of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ theory, and the summary of research practices in which analysis and theory interface, are intended as resources for these purposes. In the remainder of this book, we will be offering further discussion and examples of these particular ideas.

## Recommended further reading

- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage. A theoretically nuanced and practical outline of the central issues in grounded theory.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, W. (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. An influential reflection on the nature of ethnographic writing and analysis.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman. A detailed account of the practices and positions of critical discourse analysis.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1999 [1967]) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter. The original description of the rationale of the turn to grounded theory and its methodological procedures.