

1

DEFINING THEORY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading and reviewing this chapter, researchers should be able to

- 1.1 Describe the difficulties of and variations in defining theory
- 1.2 Define theory and restate the six properties of a theoretical statement
- 1.3 Summarize three conditional caveats of theory development
- 1.4 Articulate the qualities of and differences between idiographic, experiential, and nomothetic theories
- 1.5 List and identify twelve types of theories
- 1.6 Define assertion and describe how it differs from a theory
- 1.7 Define hypothesis and describe how it differs from a theory
- 1.8 Explain theory's contributions to scholarship and the public good

DEFINING THEORY

Several conceptual terms exist in scholarship that most people generally and intuitively understand but may be hard pressed when called upon to provide succinct and precise definitions. Among these elusive terms are *art*, *identity*, *culture*, *meaning*, *power*, and **theory**. Despite the latter term's ubiquity, I make no assumptions that each reader already knows what theory means. I make no assumptions that each reader already knows concrete examples of theories. And I make no assumptions that each reader already knows how to develop an original theory. The purpose of this textbook is to clarify what a theory is, what it can be, and how a qualitative researcher might construct an original one.

Access a dictionary (such as oed.com) and read its definitions for *theory*. You might observe that these presumably authoritative definitions are better suited for theories regarding the physical and natural sciences where experimental, statistically derived "rules" and "laws" suggest irrefutable patterns of observation and occurrence. For example, until proven otherwise, "In the theory of relativity there is no unique absolute time, but instead each individual has his own personal measure of time that depends on where he is and how he is

moving” (Hawking, 1988, p. 33). And unless proven otherwise, “Gene theory proposes that genes, composed of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), are the basic unit of heredity” (Crabtree & Miller, 2023, p. 14).

Qualitative inquiry focuses on the lived experiences of humans and their products for investigation. But the idiosyncrasy of life and the sometimes-unpredictable actions of people interacting in the world make it difficult if not impossible to formulate unwavering “rules” and “laws” that govern and predict social action. One of astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson’s oft-quoted tweets reads, “In science, when human behavior enters the equation, things go nonlinear. That’s why Physics is easy and Sociology is hard.”

Swedberg (2014) reminds us that the Greek origin of the word *theory* (*theōrein*) means “to observe and contemplate” (p. 19). Every field of study has developed theories for centuries through contemplation, **quantitative**, qualitative, and **mixed methods** research. And with that have emerged several operating definitions of theory from and for multiple disciplines. There are no standardized, universally accepted definitions of terms such as *theory*, *theoretical*, and *theorize* (Abend, 2008), but here is a short, diverse sampling of them from qualitative methodologists:

- “Theory is a way to take the findings of research projects and turn them into more general statements.” (Dingwall & Staniland, 2021, p. 6)
- “Theory is a unified, systematic causal explanation of a diverse range of social phenomena.” (Schwandt, 2015, pp. 301–302)
- “*Theory*: An explanatory scheme comprising a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns of connectivity.” (Birks & Mills, 2023, p. 249)
- “*Theory*: A substantiated explanation of some aspect of the world. A proposed explanation of a phenomenon. It is not a fact, but an attempt to explain facts.” (Lichtman, 2023, p. 380)
- “Theory can simply be seen as a thinking tool we use in our attempts to explain human behaviour. . . . It is a guide to help us understand why humans do and think the things they do.” (Madden, 2023, p. 23)

These definitions are elegant, but there is much more to defining and developing a theory.

THE SIX PROPERTIES OF A THEORY

Some terms hold such conceptual magnitude that they defy a concise definition. Saldaña (2011b, 2021) and Saldaña and Omasta (2022) discuss theory in qualitative research as a summative, culminating formulation from fieldwork and data analysis. But there is no foolproof algorithmic path to creating a theory, just **heuristics** (methods of discovery) that may lead to constructing one. And, there are so many different types, genres, and levels of theories that a perfect, all-encompassing definition is virtually impossible to formulate.

My definitional framework of theory is still evolving, and at the time of this writing and after a review of the qualitative methods literature and a cursory content analysis, I propose that there are six essential **properties** inherent in a theory:

A theory, in traditional social science, is a research-based statement with six properties and an **accompanying explicating narrative**. A theory, most often,

1. Expresses a patterned relationship between two or more **concepts**
2. Predicts and/or manages action through **propositional logic**
3. Accounts for **parameters** of and/or **variation** in the empirical observations
4. Explains how and/or why something happens, sometimes by stating its cause(s)
5. Suggests **generalizability** and/or **transferability** to related social contexts
6. Provides insights and/or guidance for improving social life (adapted from Saldaña & Omasta, 2022; reproduced with permission)

Each of these properties will be discussed in separate chapters. For now, I present a few theoretical statements from various disciplines as concrete examples of theories:

- “Children come to define themselves in terms of how they think their parents see them.” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 195)
- “A barrier is only possible if enough gather; you can only counter a momentum by achieving a countermomentum.” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 83)
- “Fiction is rooted in play and virtual reality, which allow people to imagine themselves as they would like to be, fear to be, or have repressed.” (Daiute, 2004, p. 115)
- “The act of telling someone a secret identifies her or him as special and contrives to strengthen the relationship by creating greater trust, greater intimacy, and a preference for being agreeable and accepting of the orientation of the secret teller.” (Rodriguez & Ryave, 2002, p. 33)
- “When racialized actors, including educators, parents, and community members, have empathy and love for each other, they can develop a shared consciousness, and their collective struggles can work to destabilize polarization.” (Alvarez, 2023, p. 241)

CAVEATS ON A THEORY'S PROPERTIES

There are three major caveats on a theory's six properties that should be understood and accepted.

Systematic Analysis

First, most social science theories as research-based statements are composed from the systematic analysis of **empirical materials**—that is, data. Multifaceted researcher W. Edwards Deming

is known for his claim, “Without data, you’re just another person with an opinion.” Miles and colleagues (2020) add, “Without verification, you’re just another researcher with a hunch” (p. 274). Granted, an **armchair theory** can be formulated from experiential reflection and contemplation alone. But if research is an act of persuasion, a body of evidence will more likely support your claims and convince your audiences. Make no mistake: Theory development requires not just good data but good thinking as well. Foster (2002), an anthropologist of long-term ethnographic fieldwork, admits, “Theoretical insights do not come to me in one massive package; they develop slowly, over time, often triggered by serendipitous observations, as I turn from one theme to another” (p. 276).

Maxwell (2009) asserts, “There is no such thing as evidence in general; evidence is always evidence *relative to* some particular claim, account or theory” (p. 112, emphasis in original). Since a unit of **evidence** from data is not necessarily a fact but an **interpretation** by a researcher, evidence can be a contested matter. Thus, Maxwell adds that evidence is a persuasive argument made by the researcher in support of their theory. Becker (2017) reminds us that all the information humans have accumulated is still incomplete, and for our own research studies we must make informed judgment calls that we have learned not all there is to know but all that we *can* learn at the time we must reasonably conclude and document our analytic work.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s astute detective Sherlock Holmes mused, “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.” Proverbs and folk wisdom passed down through the generations in literature and the oral tradition (e.g., “Slow and steady wins the race”) may not have been systematically and empirically tested, but they have emerged from centuries of human experience and many will testify to their truth value and applicability today. To add another witticism of uncertain origin, “In God we trust; all others must have data.” See Becker (2017), Booth et al. (2016), and Erickson (1986) for an overview of composing an evidentiary **warrant** for claims.

The Eye of the Beholder

For the second caveat, I assert that theory is in the eye of the beholder. A statement claimed by one researcher as a theory might be considered flawed by a peer reviewer or an audience of colleagues. If social scientists cannot even agree on a definitive meaning for theory, then they most likely will disagree on what is and what is not an acceptable theoretical statement. Since research is an act of persuasion, it is incumbent on the theoretician to phrase the theory carefully and provide evidence of a theoretical statement’s veracity (truth value) through supporting data and an accompanying explicating narrative.

And since theory is in the eye of the beholder, what I myself consider a valid theoretical statement broadens into other representations aside from those systematically derived. I consider selected philosophical statements, proverbs, selected quotations from actual persons and fictional literature, and even some contemporary social media memes insightfully theoretical. If we subscribe to Friedrich Nietzsche’s “There are no facts, only interpretations,” then, by extension, there are no theories, only subjectively derived insights. Dozens of words in English may be considered part of theory’s family tree:

Words Comparable to Theoretical Thinking			
adage	advice	aphorism	apothegm
argument	assertion	assumption	axiology
axiom	belief	bon mot	claim
code	conception	conclusion	conjecture
contention	corollary	counsel	deduction
dictum	directive	doctrine	dogma
educated guess	effect	epistemology	explanation
exposition	fact	feeling	finding
folk wisdom	gnome	guess	guidance
hunch	hypothesis	idea	insight
interpretation	judgment	law	life lesson
mandate	maxim	model	moral
notion	observation	ontology	opinion
outlook	perspective	philosophy	postulate
precept	premise	presumption	presupposition
principle	property	proposition	proverb
recommendation	rule	saying	speculation
stance	supposition	suspicion	teaching
tenet	theorem	thesis	truism
understanding	wisdom	witticism	worldview

There is a saying (from a composite of other sayings) that goes, “I can’t explain what great ‘art’ is, but I know it when I see it.” I sometimes admit to myself, “I can’t explain what a great ‘theory’ is, but I know it when I read it.” A theoretical statement stands out from its surrounding prose. It is a significant sentence, written in the present tense, with magnitude and a rich accompanying narrative that transcends descriptive facts because it is perceived as an insightful **idea**. If I finish reading a sentence and I must stop and think about what I just read; or if I am intrinsically motivated to reread the sentence because its vocabulary and syntax are fairly complex; or if the sentence makes me think, “Hm, I never thought of that before”; or if I react with “Wow” or “Great idea!” at the power of the sentence’s social insight; then what I just read and interpreted was most likely a theory.

On the Six Properties

For the third caveat, it is unlikely that a one-sentence theoretical statement will possess all six properties listed earlier. Most theories will overtly include at least three to four properties, while

the other two to three may be implied or inferred. Since a one-sentence theory usually contains density and richness as a topic sentence, its accompanying explicating narrative ranging anywhere from a few sentences to an extended essay to a book-length treatise (e.g., Graeber, 2018; James, 2012; Wolcott, 2003) is a necessary argument to unpack the theoretical statement's meanings and implications.

Fisher (2022), in his synthesis of social media research's detrimental effects on humans, proposes the theory, "The single most powerful force on social media is identity" (p. 31). Let's examine this claim for how it embodies or implies the six properties of a theory. Recall that a theory, most often,

1. Expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts
2. Predicts and/or manages action through propositional logic
3. Accounts for parameters of and/or variation in the empirical observations
4. Explains how and/or why something happens, sometimes by stating its cause(s)
5. Suggests generalizability and/or transferability to related social contexts
6. Provides insights and/or guidance for improving social life

First, the concepts of Fisher's theory include "force," "social media," and "identity." Concepts will be detailed in Chapter 2, but for now, we can confidently claim that Fisher's theory includes three concepts—that is, abstractions—which are the essential elements or building blocks of conventional social science theories.

The second property, **predicting** and/or **managing** action through propositional logic, will be discussed in Chapter 3. A **proposition** is structured at its most basic as an $A \rightarrow B$ or $\text{if } \rightarrow \text{ then}$ connective statement. The theory "The single most powerful force on social media is identity" meets this property for it suggests process in that one thing strongly **influences and affects** another. ("Influences and affects" is my qualitative equivalent of quantitative research's "cause and effect.") As for prediction, that element of the property is inferred in the statement, as it suggests and foreshadows that social media will influence and affect personal identity.

The third property, parameters and/or variation (discussed in Chapter 4), is boldly claimed by Fisher through the use of "*the single most powerful force.*" Although theories should be constructed to accommodate their boundaries of applicability (e.g., populations, settings, time), claiming that something is "the single most" of something else is a strong parameter-setting phrase. Another conceptual parameter is "social media," meaning that the theory applies to those who use it.

The fourth property, **explaining** how and/or why something happens (discussed in Chapter 5), is not overtly stated in Fisher's theory. Though **causation** is suggested, the statement itself offers no reason or rationale. That will be the necessary function of the accompanying explicating narrative. (Elsewhere in his book, Fisher [2022] explains that social media "exerts such a powerful pull on our psychology and our identity, and is so pervasive in our lives, that it changes how we think, behave, and relate to one another" [p. 11].)

The fifth property, generalizability and/or transferability (discussed in Chapter 6), is limited to those who use social media, albeit over half the world's population accesses it daily (N. Taylor & Nichter, 2022, p. 2). A theory that applies to over four billion people is certainly noteworthy and may be comfortably assumed as generalizable.

The sixth property, improving social life (discussed in Chapter 7), is also not overtly contained in the theory, and must therefore be relegated to the accompanying explicating narrative. If social media is the single most powerful force affecting people's identities, is that for the better or for the worse? Fisher claims in his book-length work that it is unfortunately the latter.

The data analysis needed to reach a theory does not always adhere to the linear, numeric order of the six properties profiled earlier. Chapters 2–7 will discuss each property separately with a review and synthesis of the properties in Chapter 8. Theorizing is a systematically holistic venture consisting of rigorous analysis coupled with creative thought and assemblage.

To summarize the three caveats:

1. Conventional social science theories are composed from the systematic analysis of empirical materials (i.e., data).
2. Theory is in the eye of the beholder.
3. Most theories will overtly include at least three to four of six properties, while the other two to three may be implied or inferred.

THREE LEVELS OF THEORY

“Theories come in all shapes and sizes” (Richards, 2021, p. 167). Several methodologists write about “little *t*” and “BIG *T*” theories—the former theorizing about the case, the local, or what has been termed the substantive; and the latter theorizing in a more formal, grand, and universally applicable way. There are also midrange theories that fall arbitrarily between the two extremes. I myself prefer to employ three other terms from the literature regarding the magnitudes or levels of theory.

Idiographic

Idiographic theory (also known in the literature as *substantive theory*, *case theory*, *local theory*, *minitheory*, or *microtheory*) accounts for a single case, a theoretical statement that applies to particular contexts bounded by population, setting, time, and so on. An example comes from Saldaña's (2005) field experiment using Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) approaches to teach bullying-reduction strategies to fourth- and fifth-grade children at one suburban elementary school. The data analysis and interpretations were based on participant observation field notes, interviews with students and teachers, videos of classroom sessions, research team journals, and children's writings. One of the primary theories developed was based on extensive amounts of data, but the theory's applicability was limited to this particular

project's residency: "Theatre of the Oppressed overtly reveals the interpersonal social systems and power hierarchies within a classroom microculture" (Saldaña, 2005, p. 131). The accompanying explicating narrative explains:

To Boal, TO is "rehearsal for the revolution." With ages 9–11 children, however, TO seems more like an "audition" for preadolescent social interaction. . . . [Theatre of the Oppressed] shows which children are leaders, followers, and resisters; who is influential and who is ignored; which children may continue to assert dominance in later grade levels; and which children may succumb to those with more authority in later grade levels. (p. 131)¹

The research team for this project developed this conclusion based on their experiences at one elementary school with a particular number, grade range, and demographic of children. Since we did not conduct this field experiment at multiple sites with different school cultures, our idiographic theory cannot credibly claim generalizability to other classroom contexts. As C. Frank (1999) cautions with a methodological theory, "Classrooms are *particular* social settings, mini-cultures in themselves, that are *not* universal" (p. 7, emphasis in original). But idiographic theories from case studies *can* contribute incrementally to the support of existing and forthcoming theories. Readers of idiographic theories might also infer transferability of the study's unique findings to other comparable contexts.

Experiential

Experiential theory (also called *practitioner theory* and somewhat comparable to what is termed *personal, midrange, or middle theory*) is generated from the accumulation of personal-practical and lived experiences gained through time. Professionals in certain applied fields, such as teaching, nursing, management, social work, and counseling, cultivate "insider" ways-of-working knowledge based on frequent interactions with students, patients, employees, clients, customers, and so on. Psychotherapists may anecdotally share among themselves practitioner theories formulated from years on the job, such as "Some people don't want to be healed." Kindergarten through twelfth-grade teachers learn from mentors and from their own work with young people the theory, "The more that students are engaged with the content of the lesson, the less management and discipline problems that may occur in the classroom." High school educator Anthony Arena shared in one of his webinars a practitioner theory that virtually every veteran teacher also knows: "All students can love learning if they just find something they love learning about." To be sure, research has been conducted that corroborates most practitioner theories developed from contemplation—that is, reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987).

Experiential theories also include the accumulation of personal insights and wisdom and philosophical life lessons, plus guidance and counsel gained from and shared through lived experiences across time. The experiential can be found in selected cultural, social, and religious

¹ From "Theatre of the Oppressed With Children: A Field Experiment," J. Saldaña, *Youth Theatre Journal*, 19(1), 117–133, copyright © 2005 American Alliance for Theatre and Education, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd., <http://www.tandfonline.com> on behalf of © 2005 American Alliance for Theatre and Education.

traditions, codes, and tenets. These theoretical statements closely align with what most people commonly term as morals, proverbs, folk wisdom, or street theory. A contemporary experiential theory is “Keep your head down”—generally meaning “Be cautious and don’t bring attention to yourself to avoid getting into trouble”—a cautionary theory adults may profess to young people, particularly youth of color in the United States, for their personal safety in potentially dangerous social environments. Classic morals, proverbs, and selected themes from literature and the oral tradition can also function as experiential theories:

- Once bitten, twice shy.
- The one with enemies gets little sleep.
- There is pattern and purpose to everything.
- “If we are true to ourselves, we can not be false to anyone.” (William Shakespeare)
- “The Possible’s slow fuse is lit / By the Imagination.” (Emily Dickinson)

Some scholars may not acknowledge folkloric or fictional literary materials as rigorously theoretical. But the examples just listed, plus many others, meet most of the six properties of a social science theoretical statement.

Nomothetic

Nomothetic theory (also known as *formal*, *general*, *grand*, and *macro theory*) accounts for many cases. This is a theoretical statement with broad applicability that sometimes embodies dense concepts. One example is psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s observation of how the child learns through the social worlds of teachers, parents, and generations past through the developmental theory, “We become ourselves through others.” Another is philosopher Michel Foucault’s well-known social theory, “Where there is power, there is resistance.”

Nomothetic theory attempts to transcend bounded contexts such as populations, settings, and time in order to posit, for lack of a better phrase, a “semi-universal truth” applicable to a variety of contexts. Nomothetic theories for any discipline are the most challenging to develop, but they are the ones that make a substantial contribution to the literature and the ones that most scholars and practitioners will remember and utilize.

The academic literature varies in terms and definitions for levels of theory. Some writers label nomothetic theory *metatheory* or *grand theory*, while others assign the label *grand* to major genres such as Marxist theory, feminist theory, and the like. Kelle (2019) explains, “*Grand theories* relate to all social phenomena regardless of time and space and make universal claims applicable to all societies at all times” (p. 82, emphasis in original), though these sweeping statements are moderate in number. Qualitative researcher Paul Mihás labels a significant participant quote *qua* (in the role of) nomothetic theory a “power statement,” while my students and I playfully call grand and nomothetic statements “rockstar theories.”

Other interchangeable terms to some for a grand theory are *paradigm* or *worldview*, which selected writers refer to as ontological, epistemological, axiological, and philosophical

approaches to inquiry such as postpositivism, constructivism, and poststructuralism—which yet other methodologists label *perspectives*. I will maintain a streamlined and consistent vocabulary by referring to idiographic, experiential, and nomothetic theories throughout this book. I reserve a discussion of paradigms for the final chapter.

Most often, researchers will not begin their investigations with the goal of developing a particular level of theory. Theory development from case studies and a relatively small number of participants tends to remain at the idiographic level, but the ability of the researcher to transcend the case toward the experiential or even nomothetic level is a matter of writing a persuasive argument for generalizability and/or transferability (discussed further in Chapter 6).

The section just completed referred to *levels* of theory, not disciplinary categories or genres of theory (e.g., Indigenous, queer, border, feminist), to be discussed in later chapters. *Types* of theories are addressed next.

TYPES OF THEORIES

The varieties of theories in the social sciences can be classified in several ways—paradigmatically, epistemologically, intradisciplinarily, and so on. Fetterman (2010, p. 7) differentiates between a “static” theory that presents a “snapshot” of a moment and a “dynamic” theory that purports action and change through time. I prefer to categorize theoretical statements according to their primary structural *purposes* in order to enhance the typology’s applicability to multiple disciplines. But this is an admittedly fluid typology with porous borders, for a theory can be both explanatory and predictive or both evaluative and moral. It is not essential that your own theory restrict itself to just one of these purposes. The following list serves as a palette of possible templates for composing your own theoretical statements.

What follows is a general typology of twelve theory *types* with representative examples. This is intended not to standardize the classification of theories, but to illustrate theories’ various functions as a result of data-analytic outcomes:

1. *Theories of Description or Cataloguing*: “Love can be understood as comprising three components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment.” (Sternberg, 1997, p. 313)
2. *Theories of Method or Technique*: “Case studies can be used to confirm or refute theory.” (Mukherji & Albon, 2023, p. 179)
3. *Theories of Sequence, Action, or Process*: “Post-traumatic stress arising from chaotic war experiences can lead to feeling trapped with no exit.” (Padgett, 2017, p. 154)
4. *Theories of Correlation or Interrelationship*: “Social media is often equated with triviality and narcissism.” (Carrigan, 2020, p. 25)
5. *Theories of Explanation or Rationale*: “Control is why brains are on constant alert for the unexpected.” (Storr, 2020, pp. 12–13)
6. *Theories of Change or Development*: “Life stories are not static; memories and meanings of experiences change as time passes.” (Riessman, 2008, p. 198)

7. *Theories of Causation or Consequence*: “Slavish attention to procedure shackles the imagination.” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2014, p. 35)
8. *Theories of Prediction or Caution*: “Female employees may face barriers of empathy from male executives.” (Tracy, 2022, n.p.)
9. *Theories of Assessment or Evaluation*: “Not everything that’s measurable is important, and not everything that’s important is measurable.” (Jensen, 2001, p. 112)
10. *Theories of Social Commentary or Critique*: “Perhaps poverty is neither cause nor effect but rather a reflection of an underlying social disease—namely, inequality and economic segregation.” (Conley, 2020, p. 406)
11. *Theories of Philosophy, Guidance, or Counsel*: “When you know better, you do better.” (Antoni Porowski, *Queer Eye*)
12. *Theories of Morality, Justice, or Policy*: “Without humanity, we lose our ability to understand others.” (Agar, 1996, p. 65)

The preceding list is not exhaustive but serves as an initial repertoire of purposes for composing your theoretical statements. If theories are analytic outcomes, then consider how your research methodology influences the type of theory you construct. Grounded theory approaches suggest strings of theories about process and causation. Critical ethnography or action research will most likely create theories of change, social commentary, and justice. Of course, your central research question is answered not just through qualitative data analysis but with a culminating theory. From Charmaz’s (2011) detailed case study analysis of an opera singer who lost her voice after a surgical procedure:

Central Research Question: “What is loss of self?”

Answer qua (in the role of) Theory: “Loss of self means at least relative permanence, if not lasting change.”

Accompanying Explicating Narrative (excerpts): “Life is irrevocably altered. No possibilities of regaining the loss of self exist. No alternative paths to realizing it appear. The force, intensity, and uncertainty typifying loss of self distinguish it from experiencing a disrupted self.” (p. 184; reproduced with permission)

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AN ASSERTION AND A THEORY

Since there is no official standardization of qualitative research terminology, it is important to distinguish between somewhat comparable terms that appear in the literature and the ways they will be used in this text.

An **assertion** is a descriptive or interpretive statement/claim of what the researcher believes to be true based on an evidentiary warrant. Erickson (1986) composed an influential handbook chapter for qualitative researchers, outlining heuristics for fieldwork observations and the

systematic documentation of them with the support of confirming and disconfirming evidence from the **data corpus** (the body of data). Assertions can range from low-level (the local and particular social milieu under investigation) to high-level (the larger social world or the “bigger picture”). Erickson also advises the development of a **key assertion**—an all-encompassing statement that summarizes the totality of fieldwork experiences and data analysis. The key assertion is comparable to a theory and can, in fact, be phrased as one.

Here is an example of an assertion I developed from my state’s online health data and reportage on local television news broadcasts: “In 2021, many Arizonans found it difficult to schedule COVID-19 vaccine appointments online through the state’s Department of Health Services’ website.” This low-level assertion is an evidence-based fact for a specific geographic region and time period. But it does not meet the minimum property requirements to be considered an idiographic theory that is generalizable and/or transferable to other contexts.

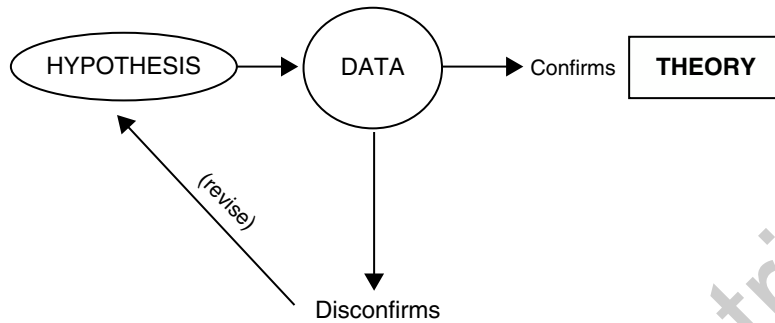
High-level assertions elevate the observations by plausibly transcending the local and particular of a study through inference and additional research. A key assertion *that could also double as a theoretical statement* based on the low-level Arizona assertion (and other data) might read: “Government’s technological infrastructures are ill prepared for pandemic response and management.” Notice how this key assertion *qua* (in the role of) theory meets several properties of a theory with its concepts (government, technological infrastructures, pandemic response and management), prediction, propositional logic, parameters, and generalizability, with causation and improvement of social life suggested.

A key assertion as promoted by Erickson (1986) can reach the status of a qualitative social science theory. But the local and particular of assertions and their constituent subassertions do not always rise to the generalizable and/or transferable (which is actually the inference-making responsibility of the reader, according to Erickson). The primary takeaway on the interchangeability of terms is this: All theories are key assertions, but not all key assertions are theories.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A HYPOTHESIS AND A THEORY

A **hypothesis** is a tentative statement whose veracity is tested through empirical methods (e.g., participant observation, interviews, documents, naturalistic field experiments). This is “pre-theory” or “theory in progress” speculation that will be confirmed or disconfirmed through ongoing data generation (i.e., collection) and analysis, then revised as needed to accommodate the evidence for a theoretical statement (see Figure 1.1).

This does not suggest that qualitative inquiry follows quantitative research’s null hypothesis testing for an either–or determination of effects through experimentation and statistical reasoning. Naturalistic methods sometimes proffer predictions of what will most likely happen in the field or appear in the data. The evidence generated will suggest if the predictions the researcher makes are supported by the findings. If not, the hypothesis is revised to accommodate the previous findings, then tested again in the field for corroboration or continued revision. The qualitative analysis process is cyclical. Each iteration of hypothesis revision should come closer and closer to confirmation and thus toward a potential theory.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ A Hypothesis-to-Theory Model

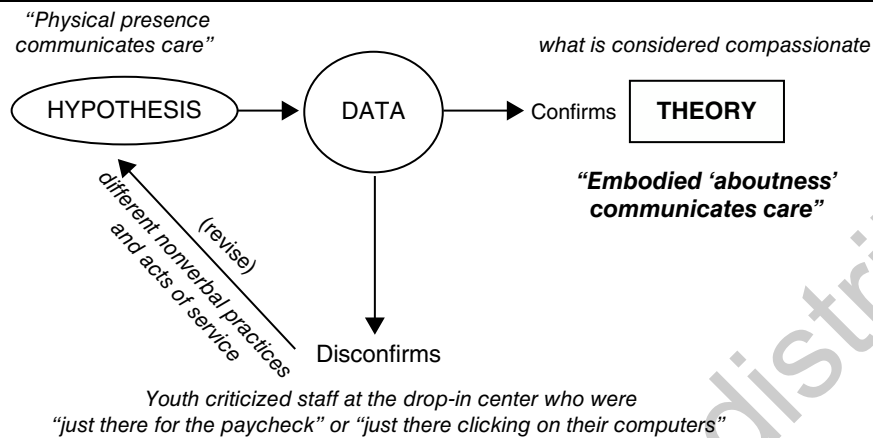
As an example, Huffman (2022) worked as a volunteer in an outreach program with a weekend drop-in center for unhoused youth. He observed, “I was surprised by how often homeless young adults referred to volunteers’ physical presence and embodied acts when talking about care. Thus, I conjectured: ‘Physical presence communicates care’” (p. 317). This claim *qua* hypothesis was tested in the field by Huffman, who later learned that the youth criticized staff at the drop-in center who were “just there for the paycheck” or “just there clicking on their computers.” Since physical presence alone did not communicate care, Huffman conducted additional research at the drop-in center and made a discovery:

It turns out there is an embodied enactment of care traceable through different non-verbal practices and acts of service. So, I revised the [hypothesis] to suggest that what is considered compassionate is when people make their body *about* the other (as opposed to merely being present). Hence, a new claim [i.e., theory] arose: “Embodied ‘aboutness’ communicates care.” (pp. 317–318; reproduced with permission)

Figure 1.2 illustrates Huffman’s hypothesis-to-theory trajectory.

Assertions, hypotheses, and theoretical statements can be tested and revised through five ways of analyzing and thinking about the data:

1. **Inductively**—open-ended, emergent construction and discovery through observation, reflection, and data analysis
2. **Substructively**—examining smaller sections of the data corpus separately for detail and nuance
3. **Abductively**—considering an array of possibilities for the most likely or plausible answer
4. **Retroductively**—the reconstruction of and reflection on past events and generated data
5. **Deductively**—final conclusion-making from the data as evidence

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Huffman's (2022) Hypothesis-to-Theory Trajectory

Your mind will quickly reverberate from one thinking process to another as you analyze qualitative data and use logical reasoning to transition from tentative hypothesis to theory confirmation. It is not important that you know the label of which thinking process you are using at any given moment, but if you feel stalled with an analysis, consider strategically employing a different approach (e.g., thinking substructively rather than retroductively).

Several methodologists posit that thinking abductively is perhaps the most important heuristic for theory development, because it requires the theorist to leave no stone unturned when searching for the most appropriate and plausible answer among multiple options, or what is generally known in investigative terms as *evidentiary adequacy* to make an *inference to the best explanation* with *reasonable certainty*. Bryant (2021) conceives abduction as a problem-solving challenge when the researcher “cannot explain a finding by invoking [existing] theories that account for other patterns in the data” (p. 21), while Birks and Mills (2023) offer that abduction is a process of hypothesizing as data analysis and theory development progress.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THEORY

Why theorize? Tracy (2022) outlines four contributions that theory offers. First, new theories contribute substantially to the body of knowledge in a discipline. New theories bring concepts together in undiscovered and unique ways. Theories become a scholarly repertoire of ideas that accumulate over time to enhance the knowledge base and practice of professionals and academics. Good theories advance the field.

Second, a theory can motivate other researchers to test and/or revise the theory through empirical methods. In a later chapter you will learn that theories are always works in progress. An intriguing theory you develop might be taken up by a future researcher as part of their conceptual framework and research design to explore and possibly fine-tune the theory with different participants and contexts.

Third, theory can make research relevant and applicable to the general public—that is, it is “portable” and “resonates.” And fourth, theory helps people make sense of life. Theory should not be limited to the academic communities and published only in peer-reviewed journals. Public scholarship (Leavy, 2019) can disseminate theoretical ideas in accessible forms to everyday citizens through social media and trade books and to news outlets for reportage and promotion. As research continues and new discoveries are made, previously established theories will be continuously revised. Anecdotally, news reports about the benefits *and* hazards of drinking coffee, and frequency recommendations for medical diagnostic testing, seem to change every year or so. Multiple and sometimes contradictory findings and thus theories exist for particular phenomena. And we ourselves recently witnessed in real time the fluctuating, ever-evolving scientific hypotheses and theories about the COVID-19 pandemic, including variants, management, and treatment of the coronavirus.

Intriguing discoveries by researchers in politics, popular culture, interpersonal relationships, education, health care, and other fields have relevance for virtually everyone to better understand themselves and to improve the social world. Theorists who talk only among themselves have little to offer for the public good. Innovative ideas are worth sharing with others.

In addition to developing new theories, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) and Salmons (2019) offer accessible overviews of how preestablished theories can assist a forthcoming research study. Theories constructed by other researchers provide paradigmatic lenses, filters, and angles for a study’s conceptual or theoretical framework, and they can even influence the eventual development of the researcher’s new theories (Bernard et al., 2017). Established theories (also known as *formative theories* for the researcher) contribute to the literature review and research design, influencing decisions ranging from participant sampling to data generation to data analysis methods. Several qualitative methodologists attest that our preliminary design choices are influenced by theory whether we are aware of it or not: “One cannot not have a theory” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 28). Thus, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on what tacit theories might underpin the project’s design and execution. Qualitative methodologist Lorien S. Jordan insightfully observes, “I think theories come to you when you need them the most.”

Theory: Another Definition

Throughout this book I present additional definitions of theory from selected scholars to provide readers options for ultimately constructing their own understandings. Shoemaker and colleagues (2004) offer that

a theory is simply one’s understanding of how something works. . . . The goal of theory is not so much to explain things as to use explanations to predict things. . . . Theory building requires excruciating attention to detail coupled with wild flights of imagination. (pp. 6, 10)

The final requirement suggests that theory development is both craft and art. The “excruciating attention to detail” applies to rigorous fieldwork and qualitative data analysis, and

“wild flights of imagination” to the creativity necessary for thinking conceptually, symbolically, and metaphorically for composing the theory itself.

Composing an original theory seems like a herculean task to some, but from my own experience it consists primarily of two skills: (1) the ability to synthesize the multiple findings generated from data analysis, and (2) careful attention to every word selected for the theoretical statement. “Theories need not be elaborate juxtapositions of constructs, assumptions, propositions, and generalizations; they can be midlevel or personal theories about how the world or some small part of it works” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 7).

CLOSURE AND TRANSITION

To recap the working definition of theory for this textbook:

A theory, in traditional social science, is a research-based statement with six properties and an accompanying explicating narrative. A theory, most often,

1. Expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts
2. Predicts and/or manages action through propositional logic
3. Accounts for parameters of and/or variation in the empirical observations
4. Explains how and/or why something happens, sometimes by stating its cause(s)
5. Suggests generalizability and/or transferability to related social contexts
6. Provides insights and/or guidance for improving social life

Most theories will overtly include at least three to four of six properties, while the other two to three may be implied or inferred (adapted from Saldaña & Omasta, 2022).

The next chapter examines the property of concepts and their central role in theory development.

KEY TERMS INTRODUCED IN THIS CHAPTER

abductively

accompanying explicating narrative

armchair theory

assertion

causation

concepts

data corpus

deductively

empirical materials

evidence

experiential

explaining

generalizability

heuristics

hypothesis	properties
idea	proposition
idiographic	propositional logic
inductively	qualitative inquiry
influences and affects	quantitative
interpretation	retroductively
key assertion	substructively
managing	theory
mixed methods	transferability
nomothetic	variation
parameters	warrant
predicting	

RECOMMENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Individually or in small-group discussion, explore how one or more of these theoretical statements possesses some or all six properties (overtly or implied) of a theory; also interpret whether each statement is a particular type(s) of theory (Description or Cataloguing; Causation or Consequence; Philosophy, Guidance, or Counsel; etc.):
 - a. “An individual’s morals may change over their life span.” (Reid, 2023, p. 62)
 - b. “The college years are a time of identity exploration and formation.” (N. Taylor & Nichter, 2022, p. 14)
 - c. “Communication is the most important aspect of the doctor-patient relationship.” (Fetters, 2020, p. 46)
 - d. “Men can be insecure, anxious, and afraid even while striving to construct a self that is supposedly the antithesis of these emotions.” (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002, p. 205)
 - e. “There exists a dominant caring approach to people with a disability in the workplace, which results in an unintentional othering, or a process of stigmatisation and marginalisation.” (Mik-Meyer, 2020, p. 67)
 - f. “Rich, well-educated managers and their company shareholders profit off poor, often less-educated people through the purposeful fabrication of fiction packaged as fact.” (Hadley, 2019, p. 568)
 - g. “Evidence of the corporate takeover of higher education is manifest in governing structures that imitate the culture of business and modes of leadership defined almost entirely in entrepreneurial terms.” (Giroux, 2019, p. 37)
 - h. “People create their cultures, or manage their social relationships, partly through the design and usage of material (including digital) artifacts.” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 282)
 - i. “There is an old psychoanalytic maxim that what we lose in reality we re-create in fantasy.” (Kimmel, 2008, pp. 155–156)

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- j.** “In a big data society, the distinction between public and private has increasingly become blurred.” (K. A. Mills, 2019, p. 50)
- 2.** If you have a Facebook or other comparable social media account, scroll through your friends’ recent posts and look for memes with statements or captions that could function as theories—for example, “Life humbles you so deeply as you age.” Specify whether the statement/caption could be considered an idiographic, experiential, or nomothetic theory.
- 3.** Identify which of the following statements might be appropriately considered a theory, assertion, and/or hypothesis (or none of them):

 - a.** Every problem has a solution.
 - b.** Gender roles are not natural but socially constructed.
 - c.** Rote memorization leads to vocabulary retention and mastery.
 - d.** We all make mistakes.
 - e.** It is what it is.

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