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PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where do philosophy and interpretive frameworks (theory) fit into the overall process of research?
- Why is it important to understand the philosophical assumptions?
- What four philosophical assumptions exist when you choose qualitative research?
- How are these philosophical assumptions used and written into a qualitative study?
- What interpretive frameworks are commonly used in qualitative research?
- How are interpretive frameworks written into a qualitative study?
- How are philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks linked in a qualitative study?

Whether we are aware of it or not, as researchers, we always bring certain beliefs and **philosophical assumptions** to our research. These philosophical assumptions come from a researcher's beliefs and values about conducting research. Sometimes they are deeply ingrained views about the types of problems that we need to study, what research questions to ask, or how we go about gathering data. These beliefs are instilled during our educational training through journal articles and books, through advice dispensed by our advisors, and through the scholarly communities we engage with at conferences and scholarly meetings. The challenge lies in becoming aware of these assumptions and beliefs and then in deciding whether we will actively incorporate them into our qualitative studies.

Often, at a less abstract level, these philosophical assumptions are *applied* through interpretive frameworks or theories in our research. These interpretive frameworks come from the literature where researchers form interpretations to explore individuals (e.g., women, or persons with disabilities) or frame approaches to conducting research (e.g., social constructivism). Interpretive frameworks or theories are more apparent in our qualitative studies than are philosophical assumptions, and researchers, often trained in the use of frameworks or theories, typically make them explicit in research studies.

Qualitative researchers have underscored the importance of not only understanding the beliefs and theories that inform our research but also actively writing about them in our reports and studies. This chapter highlights various philosophical assumptions that have occupied the minds of qualitative researchers for some years and the various interpretive and theoretical frameworks that enact these beliefs. A close tie exists between the philosophy brought to research and how one proceeds to apply a framework to inform their inquiry. Making explicit the philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks for a qualitative study is essential yet is not always done. Caine et al. (2022) describe a concerning trend they see

that often makes research a technical exercise focused on methods. There is an absence of philosophical discussion, in both academia and the public realm, about the ways in which we take methodological turns as well as about the multiple ways to think about, and see, the world. (p. 3)

Qualitative researchers benefit from opportunities to reflect upon and make explicit the experiential and theoretical influences on their designs.

This chapter will help you begin to explore your philosophical assumptions and inform decisions about the influence of theories in your qualitative research. We do this by presenting a framework for understanding how both philosophy and theory fit into the large schema of the research process. Then we present details about philosophical assumptions common to qualitative researchers, consider the types of philosophical assumptions, and explore how they are often used or made explicit in qualitative studies. Finally, various interpretive frameworks are suggested that link back to philosophical assumptions with embedded commentary related to how these frameworks play out in the actual practice of research.

SITUATING PHILOSOPHY AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

To examine the influence of philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks in qualitative research, we restate our working definition from Chapter 1 here:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (Creswell, 2013, p. 44)

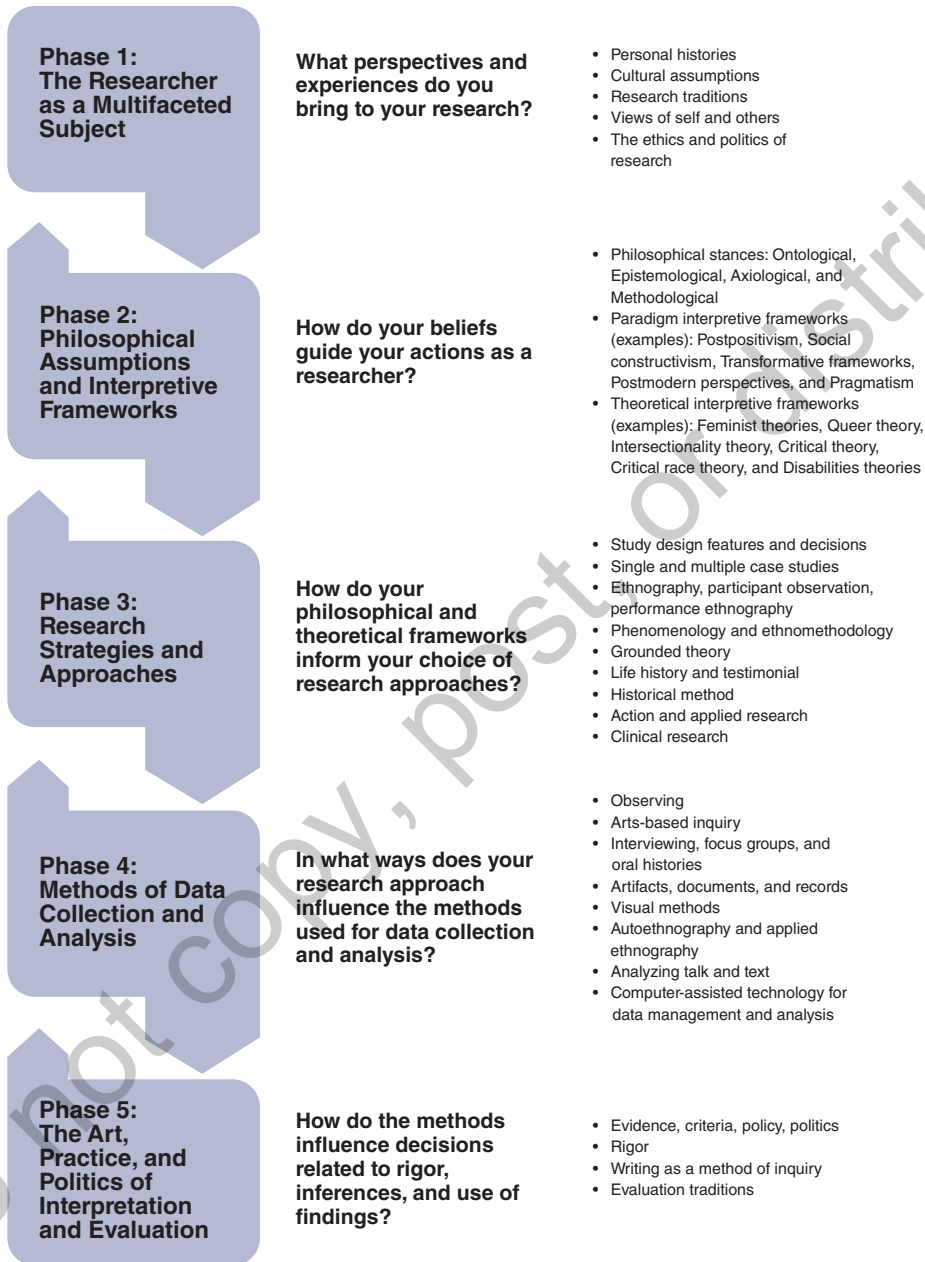
Notice in this definition that the *process* of research is described as flowing from philosophical assumptions to interpretive lens, and on to the procedures involved in studying social

or human problems. Developing an understanding of the philosophical assumptions behind qualitative research begins with assessing where it fits within the overall process of research and considering how to write it into a study design. To help in this iterative process, we use a framework to guide understanding of how philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks (paradigm perspectives and theoretical orientations) are situated within and influential to the research process. It is here that adapting an overview of the process of research compiled by Denzin and Lincoln (2018a, p. 17), as shown in Figure 2.1, helps us situate philosophy and interpretive frameworks into perspective in the research process. The questions embedded within each phase help you begin to explore the philosophical assumptions you bring to research. Notice in Figure 2.1 that the phases tend to build upon each other (as indicated by the larger arrows), yet it is also possible for answers to invite a revisit of a previous phase (as indicated by the smaller arrows).

This conceptualization of the research process begins in Phase 1 with the researchers considering the **multifaceted experiences** that they bring to the inquiry, such as their personal histories, cultural assumptions, research traditions, views of themselves and others, and ethical and political beliefs. Researchers often overlook this phase, so it is helpful to have it highlighted and positioned early in the research process. In Phase 2, the researcher brings to the inquiry certain philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks. These are stances taken by the researcher that provide direction for the study, such as the researcher's view of reality (ontology), how the researcher knows reality (epistemology), the value-stance taken by the inquirer (axiology), and the procedures used in the study (methodology). These assumptions, in turn, are often applied in research through **paradigms** and theories (or, as we call them, interpretive frameworks). Paradigms are a "basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17). These beliefs are brought to the process of research by the investigator and they may be called world-views (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). **Theories or theoretical orientations**, on the other hand, are found in the literature and they provide a general explanation as to what the researcher hopes to find in a study or a lens through which to view the needs of participants and communities in a study. Granted, the difference between the philosophical assumptions, paradigms, and theoretical orientation is not always clear, but sorting out what exists at a broad philosophical level (assumptions) and what operates at a more practical level (interpretive frameworks) is a helpful heuristic.

In Phase 2, we find the philosophical and paradigm/theoretical interpretive frameworks addressed in this chapter. The following chapters in this book are devoted, then, to the Phase 3 **research strategies**, called approaches in this book, that will be enumerated as they relate to the research process. Finally, the inquirer engages in Phase 4 **methods of data collection** and analysis, followed by Phase 5, the **interpretation** and **evaluation** of the data. Taking Figure 2.1 in its entirety, we see that research involves differing levels of abstraction from the broad assessment of individual characteristics brought by the researcher through the researcher's philosophy and theory that lay the foundation for more specific approaches and methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Also implicit in Figure 2.1 is the importance of having an understanding of philosophy and interpretive frameworks that inform a qualitative study.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Situating Philosophy and Interpretive Frameworks Within the Research Process



Source: Adapted from Denzin and Lincoln (2018a), Table 1.1, p. 18, and from Crotty (1998). Used with permission from Sage.

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Why Philosophy Is Important

Philosophy refers to the use of abstract ideas and beliefs that inform our research. We can begin by thinking about why it is important to understand the philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research and to be able to articulate them in a research study or present them to an audience. Huff (2009) is helpful in articulating the importance of philosophy in research.

- *Philosophy provides direction for research goals and outcomes.* How we formulate our problem and research questions to study is shaped by our assumptions and, in turn, influences how we seek information to answer the questions. A cause-and-effect type of question in which certain variables are predicted to explain an outcome is different from an exploration of a single phenomenon as found in qualitative research.
- *Philosophy relates to training and research experiences.* These assumptions are deeply rooted in our training and reinforced by the scholarly community in which we work. Granted, some communities are more eclectic and borrow from many disciplines (e.g., education), while others are more narrowly focused on studying specific research problems, using particular methods, and adding certain research knowledge.
- *Philosophy informs evaluative criteria for research-related decisions.* Unquestionably, reviewers make philosophical assumptions about a study when they evaluate it. Knowing how reviewers stand on issues of epistemology is helpful to author-researchers. When the assumptions between the author and the reviewer diverge, the author's work may not receive a fair hearing, and conclusions may be drawn that it does not contribute to the literature. This unfair hearing may occur within the context of a graduate student presenting to a committee, an author submitting to a scholarly journal, or an investigator sending a proposal to a funding agency. On the reverse side, understanding the assumptions used by a reviewer may enable a researcher to resolve points of difference before they become a focal point for critique.

The question as to whether key assumptions can change and/or whether multiple philosophical assumptions can influence a given study needs to be addressed. Our stance is that assumptions can change over time and over a career, and they often do, especially after a scholar leaves the enclave of their discipline and begins to work in more of a trans- or multidisciplinary way. Whether multiple assumptions can be written into a given study is open to debate, and again, it may be related to the research experiences of the investigator, their openness to exploring differing assumptions, and the acceptability of ideas in the larger scientific community of which the investigator is a part. Looking across the four philosophical assumptions described next can be helpful for monitoring individual changes over time.

Four Philosophical Assumptions

What are the philosophical assumptions made by researchers when they undertake a qualitative study? These assumptions have been articulated throughout the past 20 years in the various editions of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011b, 2018b) as guiding the philosophical stances behind qualitative research. These stances relate beliefs about ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values and ethics in research), and methodology (the process of research). We will next discuss each of these four categories of philosophy, detail how the philosophical assumptions might be used and written into qualitative research, and then link them to different interpretive frameworks that operate at a more specific level in the process of research (see Table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1 ■ Practical Implications of Philosophical Assumptions for Qualitative Researchers

Philosophical Assumption	Guiding Questions	Belief Characteristics	Practical Implications for Qualitative Researchers (Examples)
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Multiple realities can be seen through many views; researchers conduct the study with the intent to report these multiple realities.	Researchers report different perspectives as themes develop in the findings.
Epistemological	What counts as knowledge? How are knowledge claims justified?	Subjective evidence is obtained from participants; researchers attempt to lessen the distance between them and those being researched.	Researchers rely on quotes as evidence from participants as well as collaborate, spend time with participants in their natural setting, and make sense of what is shared with them.
Axiological	What is the role of values and ethics?	Research is value-laden; researchers acknowledge that biases are present in relation to their role in the study context.	Researchers openly discuss values that shape the narrative and include their own interpretations in conjunction with those of participants.
Methodological	What is the process of research? What is the language of research?	Procedures are inductive and emergent; researchers use inductive logic, study the topic within its context, and use an emerging design.	Researchers work with particulars (details) before generalizations, describe in detail the context of the study, and continually revise questions from experiences in the field.

Ontological assumptions relate the nature of reality and its characteristics. When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities. Different researchers embrace different realities, as do the individuals being studied and the readers of a qualitative study. When studying individuals, qualitative researchers conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities. Evidence of multiple realities includes the use of numerous forms of evidence through themes, using the actual words of different individuals, and presenting varying or multiple perspectives. For example, when writers compile a phenomenology, they report how individuals participating in the study view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative researcher's ontological assumptions can impact the topic they choose to study, the focus of the research questions, and the approach they select for guiding the study (Hesse-Biber, 2016).

At the core of **epistemological assumptions** is relating what counts as knowledge. Conducting a qualitative study means that researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a, p. 10). Therefore, subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views. This is how knowledge is known—through the subjective experiences of people. It becomes important, then, to conduct studies in their natural setting, where the participants live and work; these are important contexts for understanding what the participants are saying. The longer researchers know the participants and their natural setting, the more they “know what they know” from firsthand information. For example, a good ethnography requires a prolonged stay at the research site (Wolcott, 2008a). In short, qualitative researchers try to minimize the “distance” or “objective separateness” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94) between them and those being researched to accurately represent what is shared with them.

All researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study. **Axiological assumptions** relate the values and ethics that characterize qualitative research. In a qualitative study, the inquirers admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from participants and their natural settings. We say that researchers “position themselves” by identifying their “positionality” in relation to the context and setting of the research (see Chapter 1). Among the aspects described are the researchers' social position (e.g., gender, age, race, immigration status), personal experiences, and political and professional beliefs (Berger, 2015). In an interpretive biography, for example, the researcher's presence is apparent in the text, and the author admits that the stories voiced represent an interpretation of the author as much as the subject of the study (Denzin, 1989).

The procedures of qualitative research, or its methodology, are characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing the data. **Methodological assumptions** relate how researchers go about their qualitative study. The logic that the qualitative researcher follows is inductive, from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory or from the perspectives of the inquirer. Sometimes the research questions change in the middle of the study to reflect better the types of questions needed to understand the research problem. In response, the data collection strategy, planned before the study, needs to be modified to accompany the new questions. During the data analysis, the researcher follows a path of analyzing the data to develop an increasingly detailed knowledge of the topic being studied.

TRY THIS NOW 2.1

UNPACKING YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER

Philosophical assumptions relate beliefs about ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values and ethics in research), and methodology (the process of research). What are some key aspects of your ontological and epistemological assumptions that may influence your work as a qualitative researcher? Use the guiding questions in Table 2.1 to get you started.

Writing Philosophical Assumptions Into Qualitative Studies

One further thought is important about philosophical assumptions. In some qualitative studies they remain hidden from view; they can be deduced, however, by the discerning reader who sees the multiple views that appear in the themes, the detailed rendering of the subjective quotes of participants, the carefully laid-out biases of the researcher, or the emerging design that evolves in ever-expanding levels of abstraction from description to themes to broad generalizations. In other studies, the philosophy is made explicit by a special section in the study—typically in the description of the characteristics of qualitative inquiry often found in the methods section. Here, the inquirer talks about ontology, epistemology, and other assumptions explicitly and details how they are exemplified in the study. The intent of this discussion is to convey the assumptions, to provide definitions for them, and to discuss how they are illustrated in the study. References to the literature about the philosophy of qualitative research round out the discussion. Sections of this nature are often found in doctoral dissertations, in journal articles reported in major qualitative journals, and in conference paper presentations where the audience may ask about the underlying philosophy of the study. While there are infinite ways for authors to go about describing their philosophical assumptions and implications for research practice, we offer three descriptions from journal articles to examine in Example 2.1.

EXAMPLE 2.1 DESCRIPTIONS OF UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Notice how each of the four major philosophical assumptions (ontology—what is reality? epistemology—how is reality known? axiology—how are values of the research expressed? and methodology—how is the research conducted?) are made explicit in the following journal articles:

1. Healey, G. K. (2014). Inuit family understandings of sexual health and relationships in Nunavut. *Canadian Journal of Public Health, 105*(2), e133–e137. <https://doi.org/10.17269/cjph.105.4189>
 See the “methods” section (pp. e134–e135) in Healey (2014) for the full description of the five Inuit concepts informing the research approach for the *Piliriqatigiinniq*, the Partnership Community Health research model, calling “attention to indigenous ways of knowing and the research approaches that grow from an indigenous worldview” (p. e135), and emphasizing connections between people in all aspects of the research:
Piliriqatigiinniq (the concept of working together for the common good); *Pittiarniq* (the concept of being good or kind); *Inuuqatigiinniq* (the concept of being respectful of others); *Unikkaaqatigiinniq* (the philosophy of story-telling and/or the power and meaning of story); and *Iqqaumaqatigiinniq* (the concept that ideas or thoughts may come into “one”) (p. e135)
2. Brown, J., Sorrell, J. H., McClaren, J., & Creswell, J. W. (2006). Waiting for a liver transplant. *Qualitative Health Research, 16*(1), 119–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305284011>
 See the “phenomenological approach” section (p. 122) inspired by Frankl (1997) in Brown et al. (2006) for the full description and rationale of the choice of qualitative approach for the study examining the meaning that people with liver failure ascribe to the experience of waiting for a liver transplant:
 Living with ESLD [end-stage liver disease] and waiting for a transplant become experiences in and of themselves as the illness progresses and outcomes are not known. It is with this understanding that we chose phenomenology as the tradition of inquiry. (p. 122)
3. Jungnickel, K. (2014). Getting there . . . and back: How ethnographic commuting (by bicycle) shaped a study of Australian backyard technologists. *Qualitative Research, 14*(6), 640–655. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113481792>
 See the “positioning the mobile ethnographer” section (p. 642) in Jungnickel (2014) for the full statement of the researcher positionality description for the study of Australian backyard technologists:
 Regardless of the nature of distance (physical, virtual or symbolic), movement and travel are deemed vital to the development of an authentic ethnographic presence and authoritative voice . . . In this section, I attempt, by no means exhaustively, to categorise four types of ethnographer mobility and attending issues of positionality with the aim of locating the case study and a discussion of the ethnographic commute. (p. 642)

INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

As shown in Figure 2.1, philosophical assumptions are often applied within interpretive frameworks that qualitative researchers use when they conduct a study. Thus, Denzin and Lincoln (2018a) consider the philosophical assumptions as key premises that are folded into interpretive frameworks used in qualitative research. What are these interpretive frameworks? They may be paradigms or beliefs that the researcher brings to the process of research, or they may be theories or theoretical orientations that guide the practice of research. Paradigm interpretive

frameworks may be **postpositivism**, **social constructivism**, transformative, and postmodern. Theories may be **social science theories** to frame their theoretical lens in studies, such as the use of these theories in ethnography (see Chapter 4). Social science theories may be theories of leadership, attribution, political influence and control, and hundreds of other possibilities that are taught in the social science disciplines. On the other hand, the theories may be **social justice theories** seeking to bring about change or address social justice issues in our societies. John W. Creswell and his coauthor J. David Creswell (2023) state, “researchers increasingly use a theoretical standpoint in qualitative research to provide an overall orienting lens for the study questions about gender, class, and race (or other issues of marginalized groups). This lens becomes a transformative perspective to bring about change, lift the voices of underrepresented groups, and uncover largely hidden assumptions of individuals” (p. 60).

The interpretive frameworks are ever expanding, and the list in Figure 2.1 does not account for all that are popularly used in qualitative research. Other approaches that have been extensively discussed elsewhere involve the realist perspective and intersectionality. The realist perspective combines a realist ontology (the belief that a real world exists independently of our beliefs and constructions) and a constructivist epistemology (knowledge of the world is inevitably our own construction; see Maxwell, 2012).

Intersectionality helps qualitative researchers generate nuanced understandings of social relations and structural inequalities by examining how an array of socially constructed dimensions of difference shape experiences and actions (see Abrams et al., 2020; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Consequently, any discussion (including this one) can only be a partial description of possibilities, but a review of several commonly used interpretive frameworks can provide a sense of options. The participants in these interpretive, theoretically oriented projects often represent underrepresented or marginalized groups, whether those differences take the form of economic levels, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, immigrant or Indigenous status, sexual identity, disability, or geography or some intersection of these differences.

Postpositivism

Those who engage in qualitative research using a belief system grounded in postpositivism will take a scientific approach to research. They will employ a social science theoretical lens. We will use the term *postpositivism* rather than *positivism* to denote this approach because postpositivists do not believe in strict cause and effect but rather recognize that all cause and effect is a probability that may or may not occur. Postpositivism has the elements of being reductionistic, logical, empirical, cause-and-effect oriented, and deterministic based on a priori theories. We can see this approach at work among individuals with prior quantitative research training and in fields such as the health sciences in which qualitative research often plays a supportive role to quantitative research and must be couched in terms acceptable to quantitative researchers and funding agents (e.g., the a priori use of theory; see Barbour, 2000). Good overviews of postpositivist approaches are available in Phillips and Burbules (2000) and Mertens (2019).

In practice, postpositivist researchers view inquiry as a series of logically related steps, believe in multiple perspectives from participants rather than a single reality, and espouse rigorous methods of qualitative data collection and analysis. They use multiple levels of data analysis for rigor, employ computer programs to assist in their analysis, encourage the use of validity

approaches, and write their qualitative studies in the form of scientific reports, with a structure resembling quantitative articles (e.g., problem, questions, data collection, results, conclusions). We see a postpositivist approach in the constructivist grounded theory study example by Churchill et al. (2007) to develop a theoretical model from the mothers' perspective of what low-income rural families with young children do for fun. In this example, researchers used the MAXQDA computer software program to systematically analyze and generate themes from a database of 368 interviews. In their methods, the researchers described several validation strategies including purposeful sampling and debriefings.

Our approaches to qualitative research have been identified as tending toward postpositivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2011b, 2018b), as have the approaches of others (e.g., Taylor et al., 2015). We do use this belief system, although neither of us would characterize our research as entirely framed within a postpositivist qualitative orientation (e.g., see the constructivist approach in McVea et al., 1999; the social justice perspective in D. W. Miller et al., 1998; and the pragmatic approach in Henderson, 2011). This postpositivist interpretive framework is exemplified in the systematic procedures of grounded theory found in Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Corbin and Strauss (2007, 2015), the analytic data analysis steps in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), and the data analysis strategies of case comparisons of Yin (2017).

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism (which is often described as interpretivism, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2018b; and constructivism, see Mertens, 2019) is another paradigm or worldview. In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning. Examples of writers who have summarized this position are Burr (2015), Crotty (1998), Gergen (2023), Lincoln and Guba (2000), and Schwandt (2015).

In terms of practice, the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting. Thus, constructivist researchers often address the “processes” of interaction among individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they “position themselves” in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The researcher's intent, then, is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. This is why qualitative research is often called interpretive research.

The researchers make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background; for example, see study impetus described by Brown et al. (2006). In this phenomenological inquiry, the researchers identify one of the authors as a psychiatrist with responsibility “for the assessment and selection of all patients with end-stage liver disease who present as candidates for liver transplantation at a large midwestern transplant center” (Brown et al., 2006, p. 119). The nature of the relationship of one of the researchers to the research topic and context was important to disclose because of its usefulness for contributing to the data interpretation. Thus, we see the constructivist worldview manifest in phenomenological studies, in which individuals describe their experiences (Moustakas, 1994), and in the grounded theory perspective of Charmaz (2014), in which she grounds her theoretical orientation in the views or perspectives of individuals.

Transformative Frameworks

Researchers might use a **transformative framework** because the postpositivists impose structural laws and theories that do not fit marginalized individuals or groups and the constructivists do not go far enough in advocating action to help individuals. The basic tenet of this transformative framework is that knowledge is not neutral, and it reflects the power and social relationships within society; thus, the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society (Mertens, 2003). These individuals include marginalized groups such as Indigenous groups, lesbians, gay people, bisexuals, transgender persons, and societies that need a more hopeful, positive psychology and resilience (Mertens, 2009, 2019).

Qualitative research, then, should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives. Mavrogordato and White (2020) describe case studies examining the role school leaders play in enacting equity policies for historically marginalized groups such as students studying English as a foreign language. The findings were used to generate a framework for helping school leaders with important implications for students, schools, and communities. The issues facing marginalized groups are of paramount importance to study—issues such as oppression, domination, suppression, alienation, and hegemony. As these issues are studied and exposed, the researchers provide a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness and improving their lives. Mertens (2021) describes the transformative framework as characterized by

- An ethical stance that promotes social inclusion and challenges oppressive structures that sustain inequality and discrimination.
- A participatory and reflective entry process into a community, designed to build trust, address power differences, and make goals and strategies more transparent.
- The dissemination of findings in ways that encourage the use of results to enhance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.
- A commitment to addressing the intersectionality of relevant dimensions of diversity—such as gender, disability, indigeneity, poverty status, and language—by incorporating culturally responsive, equity-focused, feminist, and indigenous approaches. (p. 3)

Other research approaches are informed by this worldview including participatory action research (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998), Maori research based on the principles of “by Maori, for Maori, with Maori” (L. T. Smith, 2005, 2021), and action research (Bradbury, 2015; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). In practice, the transformative framework has shaped several approaches to inquiry. Specific social issues (e.g., domination, oppression, inequity) help organize the research questions. Not wanting to further marginalize the individuals participating in the research, transformative inquirers collaborate with research participants. They may ask participants to help with designing the questions, collecting the data, analyzing it, and shaping the final report of the research. It should be noted that the level and type of community involvement will vary depending on the research context but that the relationship with participants should be reciprocal (Mertens, 2009, 2021). In this way, the “voice” of the participants becomes heard throughout the research process and the research products are meaningful for all involved. It is encouraging to see guiding research resources emerge from the perspectives of marginalized groups (e.g., Lovren & Locust, 2013; Mertens et al., 2013). The research also contains an action agenda for reform, a specific plan for addressing the injustices of the marginalized group. These practices will be seen in the ethnographic approaches to research with a social justice agenda found in Denzin and Lincoln (2018a) and in the change-oriented (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004) and equity-seeking (Clandinin, 2023) forms of narrative research.

Postmodern Perspectives

Postmodernism (which is also described as poststructuralism, although the relationship between the terms remains under debate among scholars) might be considered a family of theories and perspectives that have something in common (Slife & Williams, 1995). Postmodernists advance a reaction to or critique of the 19th-century Enlightenment and early 20th-century emphasis on technology, rationality, reason, universals, science, and the positivist, scientific method (Bloland, 1995; Stringer, 1993). The basic concept is that knowledge claims must be set within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other group affiliations. These conditions are well articulated by individuals such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Giroux, and Freire (Bloland, 1995). These are negative conditions, and they show themselves in the presence of hierarchies, power and control by individuals, and the multiple meanings of language. The conditions include the importance of different discourses, the importance of marginalized people and groups (the “other”), and the presence of “metanarratives” or universals that hold true regardless of the social conditions.

As an example, Chipango (2021) adopts a postmodern perspective to examine the nature of the discourse surrounding Zimbabwe’s mismatch between energy supply and demand, also known as energy poverty. From her case study drawing upon interviews and documents, Chipango (2021) concludes that “energy poverty cannot be understood outside of the political-economic discourse that constructs and interprets it” (p. 1). Also included is the need to examine texts in terms of language, their reading and writing, and bringing to the surface concealed hierarchies as well as dominations, oppositions, inconsistencies, and contradictions (Bloland, 1995; Clarke, 2005; Stringer, 1993). Postmodernism highlights the usefulness of researcher reflexivity and creativity in representing the multiple voices and perspectives that have become

distinguishing characteristics in qualitative research (Christians, 2018; Clandinin, 2023). These practices are seen in Denzin's (1989) approach to "interpretive" biography, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) approach to narrative research, and Clarke's (2005) perspective on grounded theory. Postmodernism researchers study turning points, or problematic situations in which people find themselves during transition periods (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992). Regarding a "postmodern-influenced ethnography," J. Thomas (1993) writes that such a study might "confront the centrality of media-created realities and the influence of information technologies" (p. 25). Thomas also comments that narrative texts need to be challenged (and written), according to the postmodernists, for their "subtexts" of dominant meanings. These ways of knowing have been important for researchers who are open to uncertainty, plurality, and want to recognize the complexity inherent in their qualitative studies (O'leary, 2021).

Pragmatism

There are many forms of **pragmatism**. Individuals holding an interpretive framework based on pragmatism focus on the outcomes of the research—the actions, situations, and consequences of inquiry—rather than antecedent conditions (as in postpositivism). As a theoretical stance, pragmatism privileges practice and method over all else (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a). There is a concern with applications—"what works"—and solutions to problems (Patton, 1990). In Hammond et al. (2022), we see their choice of in-depth interviews with 15 women who were sutured following birth as the most appropriate method for improving women's experiences of perineal suturing. Cherryholmes (1992), Murphy (1990), and Rorty (1990) provide direction for the basic ideas of pragmatism:

- Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality.
- Individual researchers have a freedom of choice. They are "free" to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes.
- Pragmatists do not see the world as an absolute unity. In a similar way, researchers look to many approaches to collecting and analyzing data rather than subscribing to only one way (e.g., multiple qualitative approaches).
- Truth is what works at the time; it is not based in a dualism between reality independent of the mind or within the mind.
- Pragmatist researchers look to the "what" and "how" of research based on its intended consequences—where they want to go with it.
- Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts.
- Pragmatists have believed in an external world independent of the mind as well as those lodged in the mind. They believe (Cherryholmes, 1992) that we need to stop asking questions about reality and the laws of nature. "They would simply like to change the subject" (Rorty, 1983, p. xiv).

In practice, the individual using pragmatism will use multiple methods of data collection to best answer the research question, will employ multiple sources of data collection, will focus on the practical implications of the research, and will emphasize the importance of conducting research that best addresses the research problem. Not surprisingly, researchers often link pragmatism with mixed methods research, in which the inquirers integrate *both* quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell, 2021; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In the discussion here of the five approaches to research, you will see this framework at work when ethnographers employ both quantitative (e.g., surveys) and qualitative data collection (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and when case study researchers use both quantitative and qualitative data (Luck et al., 2006; Yin, 2017).

Feminist Theories

Feminism draws on different theoretical and pragmatic orientations, different international contexts, and different dynamic developments (Olesen, 2018). Brisolara (2014) describes most feminist theories as intending to contribute to ‘the promotion of greater equity, the establishment of equal rights and opportunities, and the end of oppression’ (p. 4). **Feminist research approaches** center on women’s diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations. Feminist research embraces many of the tenets of postmodern and poststructuralist critiques as a challenge to the injustices of current society. In feminist research approaches, the goals are to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative. Research topics may include a postcolonial thought related to forms of feminism depending on the context of nationalism, globalization, and diverse international contexts (e.g., sex workers, domestic servants); social disparities within and across nations; and specific issues such as sexual violence against women as instruments of war and the continued overrepresentation of women, women of color, and women-headed families in poverty rates. S. Harding (1990, 2012) documented the transformation of standpoint theories and their contributions to understandings about specific groups of women (e.g., lesbians, women with disabilities, women with tribal affiliations, and women of color).

The theme of domination prevails in the feminist literature as well, but the subject matter is often gender domination within a patriarchal society. One of the leading scholars of this approach, Lather (1991), comments on the essential perspectives of this framework. Feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle that shapes the conditions of their lives. It is “a lens that brings into focus particular questions” (Fox-Keller, 1985, p. 6). The questions feminists pose relate to the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness. Olesen (2018) notes the dominant, continuing theme in feminist research as the issue of knowledge: “Whose knowledges? Where and how obtained, by whom, from whom, and for what purposes?” (p. 152). The aim of this ideological research is to “correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Another writer, A. J. Stewart (1994), views women as having agency, the ability to make choices and resist oppression, and she suggests that researchers need to inquire into how women understand gender, acknowledging that gender is a social construct that differs for each individual. Such essential recognition of the heterogeneity of women around the world means that

relevant dimensions of diversity can be considered (Mertens, 2014) and inclusive spaces can be created (Bettcher, 2015).

Discussions indicate that the approach of finding appropriate methods for feminist research has given way to the thought that any method can be made feminist (Deem, 2002; Moss, 2007). DeVault (2018) describes several emerging lines of feminist qualitative inquiry research methods using visual (e.g., textbooks, advertisements, images) and online (e.g., blogs, social media, photo-sharing sites) techniques. In practice, a feminist researcher can use a variety of approaches and methods. Malecki et al. (2022) describe a feminist phenomenological approach employing an arts-based research technique called body mapping. Researchers used the life-sized outline of eight women to explore and visually represent how the experience of child abuse influenced the development of anorexia.

Critical work continues to address protecting Indigenous knowledge and the intersectionality of feminist research (e.g., the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and age; Olesen, 2018). Olesen (2018) summarizes the current state of feminist research under a number of transformative developments (e.g., globalization, transnational feminism, and standpoint research), critical trends (e.g., endarkened, decolonizing research and intersectionality), continuing issues (e.g., destabilizing insider–outsider, troubling traditional concepts), enduring concerns (e.g., bias, reflexivity, participants’ voices, ethics), influences on feminist work (e.g., the academy and publishing), and challenges of the future (e.g., the interplay of multiple factors in women’s lives, hidden oppressions). Recent discussions about emergent practices integrate international perspectives (e.g., Brisolara et al., 2014; Denzin et al., 2023) and new research technologies (e.g., DeVault, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Critical Theory

Critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). Critical theory provides new and valuable lenses to view our world and ourselves and gain new insights (Tyson, 2023). Researchers need to acknowledge their own power, privilege, and bias; engage in dialogues; and use theory to interpret or illuminate social action (Madison, 2019). Central themes that a critical researcher might explore include the scientific study of social institutions and their transformations through interpreting the meanings of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities (Fay, 1987; R. A. Morrow, 1994). With the aim of uncovering the cultural factors that impeded maintaining patients’ dignity in a hospital intensive care setting, Bidabadi et al. (2019) used a critical ethnographic approach to inform a culture shift in therapeutic relationships.

In research, critical theory can be defined by the configuration of methodological postures it embraces. The critical researcher might design, for example, an ethnographic study to include changes in how people think; encourage people to interact, form networks, become activists, and form action-oriented groups; and help individuals examine the conditions of their existence (Madison, 2019; J. Thomas, 1993). The end goal of the study might be social theorizing, which R. A. Morrow (1994) define as “the desire to comprehend and, in some cases, transform (through praxis) the underlying orders of social life—those social and systemic relations

that constitute society” (p. 211). The investigator accomplishes this, for example, through an intensive case study or across a small number of historically comparable cases of specific actors (biographies), mediations, or systems and through “ethnographic accounts (interpretive social psychology), componential taxonomies (cognitive anthropology), and formal models (mathematical sociology)” (p. 212). In critical action research in teacher education, for example, Kincheloe (1991/2012) recommends that the “critical teacher” exposes the assumptions of existing research orientations; critiques the knowledge base; and through these critiques, reveals ideological effects on teachers, schools, and the culture’s view of education. An example of a study using critical intersectionality was a review of literature seeking to understand the secondary school experiences of trans youth with the intent to address the patterns of educational disadvantage that reflect broader structures of social inequality (McBride, 2020).

The design of research within a critical theory approach, according to sociologist Agger (1991), falls into two broad categories: *methodological*, in that it affects the ways in which people write and read, and *substantive*, in the theories and topics of the investigator (e.g., theorizing about the role of the state and culture in advanced capitalism). An often-cited classic of critical theory is the ethnography from Willis (1977) of the “lads” who participated in behavior as opposition to authority, as informal groups “having a laff” (p. 29) as a form of resistance to their school. In a study of the manifestations of resistance and state regulation, R. A. Morrow (1994) highlight ways in which actors come to terms with and struggle against cultural forms that dominate them. Resistance is also the theme addressed in an ethnography of a subcultural group of youths (Haenfler, 2004).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is a set of theories committed to social justice that rely on “intersectionality (i.e., the nexus of race, gender, class, etc.), a critique of liberalism, the use of critical social science, a combination of structural and poststructural analysis, the denial of neutrality in scholarship, and the incorporation of storytelling, or ... ‘counternarratives,’ to speak back against dominant discourses” (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2018, p. 202). Others have described critical race theory as a “collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 2). Race and racism is deeply embedded within the framework of American society (Parker & Lynn, 2002) and has directly shaped the U.S. legal system and the ways people think about the law, racial categories, and privilege (C. Harris, 1993). Through the use of diverse research methods (e.g., observations of natural settings such as classrooms and reviews of personal and public documents), researchers seek missing voices to contribute to “dispelling notions of color-blindness and post-racial imaginings so that we can better understand and remedy the disparities that are prevalent in our society” (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2018, p. 209). Counternarratives are emerging as promising tool for stimulating transformative action for educational equity (R. Miller et al., 2020).

According to Chapman and Crawford (2023), critical race theory provides scholars with tools to critique and question with a goal to “move marginalized peoples by challenging stock stories and stereotypes and offering new, contextualized stories and perspectives” (p. 80), which

they argue is key to achieving racial justice. Parker and Lynn (2002) advance three aims of critical race theory. The first aim presents stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color. These may be qualitative case studies of descriptions and interviews. These cases may then be drawn together to build cases against racially biased officials or discriminatory practices. Since many stories advance White privilege through “majoritarian” master narratives, counter stories by people of color can help to shatter the complacency that may accompany such privilege and challenge the dominant discourses that serve to suppress people on the margins of society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The second aim recognizes that race is a social construct, meaning that *race* is not a fixed term but one that is fluid and continually shaped by political pressures and informed by individual lived experiences. The third aim addresses other areas of difference, such as gender, class, and any inequities experienced by individuals. As Parker and Lynn (2002) comment, “in the case of Black women, race does not exist outside of gender and gender does not exist outside of race” (p. 12).

In practice, the use of critical race theory methodology means that the researcher foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process; challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color; and offers transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in our societal and institutional structures. Researchers sometimes use critical race theory in concert with other frameworks—for example, disability studies (Annamma et al., 2020; Watts & Erelles, 2004) or feminist theories (Chepp, 2015; Mendoza Aviña et al., 2023).

Postcolonial Theories

A postcolonial lens assesses how knowledge production and theories of the past and the present have been shaped by ideas and power relations of imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, globalization, and racism. We honor the diverse perspectives and note the lack of agreement for terminology to describe Indigenous understandings as applied to theories, approaches, and paradigms. According to Chilisa and Phatshwane (2022), **postcolonial theories** provide a lens through which to “plan and conduct a study that is without prejudices and is respectful of all groups of people, including the marginalized in our communities” (p. 225). A postcolonial lens holds great potential for diverse roles in decolonizing research practice by focusing on, for example, the role of literature and language in the construction of knowledge and how we collect, analyze, and interpret data. A key characteristic of a postcolonial lens is to bring to its center the voices of those who have been muted by the dominance of Euro-Western methodologies.

In practice, some **postcolonial theory** promotes the use of data collection interactions that invoke Indigenous worldviews; for example, by informing the type of interview questions and the analysis of that data, postcolonial theory can mitigate power relationships where the researcher can become a colonizer (Chilisa & Phatshwane, 2022). In other studies, researchers intersect postcolonial theoretical frameworks with another lens. For example, Arur and DeJaeghere (2019) describe a study using postcolonial feminist perspectives to inform their study addressing gender oppression in life skills programming. The researchers describe how over time, they “had to unlearn some of the ways of thinking that inform [their] knowledge

production, and to consider what we did not know because of how [they] have framed the [interview] questions and ideas around gender relations, power and schooling” (p. 495).

Chilisa and Phatshwane (2022) describe the call by Indigenous scholars (e.g., Grande, 2000; G. H. Smith, 2000) for the inclusion of survivance in postcolonial theory. They describe the concept of survivance as going “beyond survival, endurance, and resistance to colonial domination, calling for the colonizers and the colonized to learn from each other” (p. 229). Chilisa and Mertens (2021) discuss nine principles for building relationships between the researchers and the communities and connecting with the environment: relationality, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, respectful representation, reflexivity, responsivity, rights and regulations, and decolonization.

Queer Theory

According to Alexander (2018), **queer theory** “is a collective of intellectual speculations and challenges to the social and political constructions of sexualized and gender identity” (p. 278). de Lauretis (1991) coined the phrase “queer theory” and outlined a complete rethinking of sexuality divorced from the binaries and standards defined by heterosexual power structures. Queer theory, also referred to as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) theory (Mertens, 2019), is characterized by a variety of methods and strategies relating to individual identity (Plummer, 2011a; K. Watson, 2005). As a body of literature continuing to evolve, it explores the myriad complexities of the construct, identity, and how identities reproduce and “perform” in social forums. Queer theory intends to remap the terrain of gender, identity, and cultural studies. Milani and Borba (2022) explain, “what characterizes queer theoretical approaches is a staunch commitment to unveiling and actively opposing regimes of sexual normality” (p. 195), questioning all aspects of normality—for example, its origins, contexts, and interests—and not exclusively in the realm of sexuality and gender.

Writers also use a postmodern or poststructural orientation to critique and deconstruct dominant theories related to identity (Plummer, 2011a, 2011b; Watson, 2005). Most queer theorists work to challenge and undercut identity as singular, fixed, or normal (Watson, 2005). Queer theorists have engaged in research and/or political activities and provide important insights for informing policies and practices. One such example described by Adams et al. (2014) generated vital health service information about how to appropriately engage with men who have sex with other men but who resist being labeled as gay. Plummer (2011a) provides a concise overview of the queer theory stance including a decentering of identities; an openness, fluidity, and nonfixedness of identities; and abandonment of deviance perspectives. Queer theorists can seek to understand particular populations such as queer people of color (Johnson & Henderson, 2005) and use methods that find expression in a rereading of cultural texts. Plummer (2011a) describes cultural texts as including a wide range of formats such as films and literature; ethnographies and case studies of sexual worlds that challenge assumptions; data sources that contain multiple texts; documentaries; and projects that focus on individuals.

Disability Theories

Disability inquiry addresses the meaning of inclusion in schools and encompasses administrators, teachers, students, and parents who have children with disabilities (Mertens, 2009, 2019). Mertens (2003) recounts how disability research has moved through stages of development, from the medical model of disability (sickness and the role of the medical community in threatening it) to an environmental response to individuals with a disability. Researchers using **disability theories** as an interpretive lens focus on disability as a dimension of human difference and not from a deficit perspective. As a human difference, the meaning of disability is derived from social construction (Mertens, 2003). According to Shildrick (2020), critical disability theories intend to “unsettle entrenched ways of thinking on both sides of the putative divide between disabled and non-disabled, and to offer an analysis of how and why certain definitions are constructed and maintained” (p. 37).

Viewing individuals with disabilities as different is reflected in the research process, such as the types of questions asked, the labels applied to these individuals, the benefits of data collection for the community, the appropriateness of communication methods, and the report of data respectful of power relationships. The lead researcher for an Australian study of people with a disability described having a lived experience of disability and as working in conjunction with industry and community service partners to provide the support needed for the involvement of participants with many different disabilities (Darcy et al., 2022). Mertens et al. (2011) have also linked critical disability theory with transformative frameworks because of its use as an intersection for many sources of discrimination. Further examples of disability theory with feminist theories, postmodern perspectives, queer theory, and critical race theory provide important areas for future development (Shildrick, 2020). Also, see Kroll et al. (2007) as a resource for guiding research informed by disability theories.

THE PRACTICE OF USING INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The practice of using interpretive frameworks in a qualitative study varies, and it depends on the framework being used and the particular researcher’s approach. Each of the descriptions of the interpretive frameworks highlighted unique researcher influences, goals, and practices. Qualitative researchers have found it helpful to distinguish among the interpretive frameworks. See an overall summary in Table 2.2. Once researchers can distinguish among the interpretive frameworks, then it is easier to see how they are applied in practice. At the most fundamental level, there are differences and commonalities based on the goals of the research. Seeking an understanding of the world is different from generating solutions to real-world problems. Potential similarities among the goals should also be noted. Feminist theories, critical theory and critical race theory, queer theories, and disability theories share a general intent for researchers to call for action and document struggles. Some common elements for practicing interpretive frameworks are as follows:

- Researchers focus on understanding specific issues or topics. The problems and the research questions explored aim to allow the researcher to understand specific issues or topics—the conditions that serve to disadvantage and exclude individuals or cultures, such as hierarchy, hegemony, racism, sexism, unequal power relations, identity, or inequities in our society.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Comparing Major Interpretive Frameworks

Interpretive Frameworks	Possible Researcher Goals	Potential Researcher Influences	Examples of Researcher Practices	Example Journal Articles
Postpositivism	To discover contributors to probability within situations of cause and effect	Prior quantitative research training	Reports systematic data collection and analysis procedures followed to ensure rigor	Churchill, S. L., Plano Clark, V. L., Prochaska-Cue, M. K., Creswell, J. W., & Onta-Grzebik, L. (2007). How rural low-income families have fun: A grounded theory study. <i>Journal of Leisure Research, 39</i> (2), 271–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2007.11950108
Social constructivism	To understand the world in which they live and work	Recognition of background as shaping interpretation	Interprets participants' constructions of meaning in their accounts	Brown, J., Sorrell, J. H., McClaren, J., & Creswell, J. W. (2006). Waiting for a liver transplant. <i>Qualitative Health Research, 16</i> (1), 119–136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732306284011
Transformative frameworks	To act for societal improvements	Knowledge of power and social relationships within society	Adopts an action agenda for addressing the injustices of marginalized groups	Mavrogordato, M., & White, R. S. (2020). Leveraging policy implementation for social justice: How school leaders shape educational opportunity when implementing policy for English learners. <i>Educational Administration Quarterly, 56</i> (1), 3–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18821364
Postmodern perspectives	To change ways of thinking	Understandings of the conditions of the world today	Situates research to highlight multiplicity of perspectives	Chipango, E. F. (2021). Constructing, understanding and interpreting energy poverty in Zimbabwe: A postmodern perspective. <i>Energy Research & Social Science, 75</i> . Article 102026. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102026

(Continued)

TABLE 2.2 ■ Comparing Major Interpretive Frameworks (Continued)

Interpretive Frameworks	Possible Researcher Goals	Potential Researcher Influences	Examples of Researcher Practices	Example Journal Articles
Pragmatism	To find solutions to real-world problems	Appreciation for diverse approaches to collecting and analyzing and the contexts in which research takes place	Uses the most appropriate methods for addressing the research question	Hammond, A., Priddis, H., Ormsby, S., & Dahlen, H. G. (2022). Improving women's experiences of perineal suturing: A pragmatic qualitative analysis of what is helpful and harmful. <i>Women and Birth, 35</i> (6), e598–e606. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wombi.2022.02.008
Feminist theories	To conduct research that is transformative for women	Perspectives of power relationships and individuals' social position and how they impact women	Poses questions that relate to the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness	Malecki, J. S., Rhodes, P., Ussher, J. M., & Boydell, K. (2022). A feminist phenomenological approach to the analysis of body maps: Childhood trauma and anorexia nervosa. <i>Health Care for Women International, 43</i> (1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2022.2096026
Critical theory	To address areas of inequities and empower humans	Acknowledgment of own power, privilege, and bias; engagement in dialogues; and use of theory to interpret social actions	Designs research in such a way that transforms the underlying orders of social life	Bidabadi, F. S., Yazdannik, A., & Zargham-Boroujeni, A. (2019). Patient's dignity in intensive care unit: A critical ethnography. <i>Nursing Ethics, 26</i> (3), 738–752. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733017720826
Critical race theory	To transform the relationship among race, racism, and power	Recognition of races as a social construct, and address other areas of difference	Designs research to tell counternarratives to speak back against dominant discourse	Annamma, S. A., Handy, T., Miller, A. L., & Jackson, E. (2020). Animating discipline disparities through debilitating practices: Girls of color and inequitable classroom interactions. <i>Teachers College Record, 122</i> (5), 1–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012200512

Interpretive Frameworks	Possible Researcher Goals	Potential Researcher Influences	Examples of Researcher Practices	Example Journal Articles
Postcolonial theories	To assess how knowledge production and theories of the past and the present have been shaped by ideas and power relations of imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, globalization, and racism	Center the voices of those who have been muted by the dominance of Euro-Western methodologies	Designs research without prejudices and is respectful of all groups of people, including the marginalized in our communities	Arur, A., & DeJaeghere, J. (2019). Decolonizing life skills education for girls in Brahmanical India: A Dalitbahujan perspective. <i>Gender and Education, 31</i> (4), 490–507. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1594707
Queer theory	To convey the voices and experiences of individuals who have been suppressed	Understandings of need for thinking about sexual categories as open, fluid, and nonfixed	Engages in inquiry with a focus on exploring the myriad complexities of individual identity	Adams, J., Braun, V., & McCreanor, T. (2014). "Aren't labels for pickle jars, not people?" Negotiating identity and community in talk about "being gay." <i>American Journal of Men's Health, 8</i> (6), 457–469. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988313518800
Disability theories	To address the meaning of inclusion	Recognition of disability as a dimension of human difference and not as a defect	Employs a disability interpretive lens for informing the research process	Darcy, S., Collins, J., & Stronach, M. (2022). Entrepreneurs with disability: Australian insights through a social ecology lens. <i>Small Enterprise Research, 30</i> (1), 24–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/13215906.2022.2092888

- Research procedures are sensitive to participants and context. The procedures of research, such as data collection, data analysis, representing the material to audiences, and standards of evaluation and ethics, emphasize an interpretive stance. During data collection, the researcher does not further marginalize the participants but respects the participants and the sites for research. Further, researchers provide reciprocity by giving back to those who participate in research, and they focus on the multiple individual stories and those who tell the stories. Researchers are also sensitive to power imbalances during all facets of the research process. They respect individual differences and avoid traditional aggregation of categories such as gender.
- Researchers are respectful co-constructors of knowledge. Ethical practices of the researchers recognize the importance of the subjectivity of their own lens, acknowledge the powerful position they have in the research, and admit that the participants or the co-constructors of the account between the researchers and the participants are the true owners of the information collected.
- Research is reported in diverse formats and calls for societal change. The research may be presented in traditional ways, such as journal articles, or in experimental approaches, such as theater or poetry. Using an interpretive lens may also lead to the call for action and transformation—the aims of social justice—in which the qualitative project ends with distinct steps of reform and an incitement to action.

TRY THIS NOW 2.2

EXPLORING YOUR USE OF INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The use of theory can vary greatly in qualitative research and be influenced by the goals a researcher is trying to accomplish. What might influence the ways you use interpretive frameworks in qualitative research?

LINKING PHILOSOPHY AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Although the philosophical assumptions are not always stated, the interpretive frameworks do convey different philosophical assumptions, and qualitative researchers need to be aware of this connection. A thoughtful chapter by Lincoln and colleagues (2018) makes this connection explicit. We have taken their overview of this connection and adapted it to fit the interpretive communities discussed in this chapter. As shown in Table 2.3, the philosophical assumptions of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology take different forms given the interpretive framework used by the inquirer.

The use of information from Table 2.3 in a qualitative study would be to discuss the interpretive framework used in a project by weaving together the framework, discussing its central tenets, and identifying how it informs the problem to a study, the research questions, the data collection and analysis, and the interpretation. A section of this discussion would also mention

Interpretive Frameworks	Ontological Beliefs (the nature of reality)	Epistemological Beliefs (how reality is known)	Axiological Beliefs (role of values)	Methodological Beliefs (approach to inquiry)
Postpositivism	A single reality exists beyond ourselves, “out there.” The researcher may not be able to understand it or get to it because of a lack of absolutes.	Reality can only be approximated, but it is constructed through research and statistics. Interaction with research subjects is kept to a minimum. Validity comes from peers, not participants.	The researcher’s biases need to be controlled and not expressed in a study.	Scientific method and writing is used. Object of research is to create new knowledge. Method is important. Deductive methods are important, such as testing of theories, specifying important variables, and making comparisons among groups.
Social constructivism	Multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others.	Reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences.	Individual values are honored and are negotiated among individuals.	More of a literary style of writing is used. Use of an inductive method of emergent ideas (through consensus) is obtained through methods such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing texts.
Transformative/postmodern/postcolonial	Participation between researcher and communities or individuals is being studied. Often a subjective-objective reality emerges.	There are co-created findings with multiple ways of knowing.	There is respect for Indigenous values; values need to be problematized and interrogated.	Methods consist of using collaborative processes of research, encouraging political participation, questioning of methods, and highlighting issues and concerns.

(Continued)

TABLE 2.3 ■ Interpretive Frameworks and Associated Philosophical Beliefs (Continued)

Interpretive Frameworks	Ontological Beliefs (the nature of reality)	Epistemological Beliefs (how reality is known)	Axiological Beliefs (role of values)	Methodological Beliefs (approach to inquiry)
Pragmatism	Reality is what is useful, is practical, and “works.”	Reality is known through using many tools of research that reflect both deductive (objective) evidence and inductive (subjective) evidence.	Values are discussed because of the way that knowledge reflects both the researchers’ and the participants’ views.	The research process involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis.
Critical, critical race, feminist, postcolonial, queer, disability theories	Reality is based on power and identity struggles. Privilege or oppression is based on race or ethnicity, class, gender, mental abilities, sexual orientation.	Reality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control. Reality can be changed through research.	Diversity of values is emphasized within the standpoint of various communities.	Start with assumptions of power and identity struggles, document them, and call for action and change.

Source: Adapted from Lincoln et al. (2018).

the philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology) associated with the interpretive framework. Thus, there would be two ways to discuss the interpretive framework: its nature and use in the study, and its philosophical assumptions.

As we proceed to examine the five qualitative approaches in this book, recognize that each one might use any of the interpretive frameworks. For example, if a grounded theory study were presented as a scientific paper using a postpositivist interpretive framework, the study would place major emphasis on objectivity, result in a theoretical model, report researcher’s bias, and provide a systematic rendering of data analysis. On the other hand, if the intent of the qualitative narrative study was to examine a marginalized group of learners with disabilities with the aim of documenting their struggles for identity about prostheses that they wear, the researcher might use a disability interpretive framework. This framework would highlight utmost respect for

their views and values and end the study with a call for a more inclusive society. We could see using any of the interpretive frameworks with any of the five approaches advanced in this book.

CHAPTER CHECK-IN

1. Can you see the differences among the associated philosophical beliefs among interpretive frameworks (postpositivism, social constructivism, transformative frameworks, postmodern perspectives, pragmatism, feminist theories, critical theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and disability theories)? Read qualitative journal articles that adopt different interpretive lenses (see Table 2.2 for examples) and identify how articles differ in their interpretive frameworks.
2. Can you identify unique elements within specific interpretive frameworks? Read one of the example qualitative journal articles listed in Table 2.2 and identify unique elements for the specific interpretive framework.
3. Can you discern the differences among interpretive frameworks when used in combinations? Examine qualitative journal articles that adopt a combination of different interpretive lenses, such as Chepp (2015) from feminist and critical race theory frameworks and Watts and Erevelles (2004) from disabilities and critical race theory frameworks. Identify examples of influence from each interpretive framework using Tables 2.2 and 2.3 in this chapter as a guide.

Chepp, V. (2015). Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence: The case of women's rap. *Feminist Theory*, 16(2), 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700115585705>

Watts, I. E., & Erevelles, N. (2004). These deadly times: Reconceptualizing school violence by using critical race theory and disability studies. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 41, 271–299. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002271>

SUMMARY

This chapter began with an overview of the research process so that philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks could be seen as positioned at the beginning of the process and informing the procedures that follow, including the selection and use of one of the five approaches in this book. Then the philosophical assumptions of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology were discussed, as were the key questions being asked for each assumption, its major characteristics, and the implication for the practice of writing a qualitative study. Furthermore, the popular interpretive frameworks (paradigm perspectives and theoretical orientations) used in qualitative research were advanced. How these interpretive frameworks are used in a qualitative study was suggested. Finally, a link was made between the philosophical assumptions and the interpretive frameworks, and a discussion followed about how to connect the two in a qualitative project.

CHAPTER KEY TERMS

Axiological assumptions	Philosophical assumptions
Critical race theory	Postmodernism
Critical theory	Postpositivism
Disability theories	Pragmatism
Epistemological assumptions	Queer theory
Evaluation	Research strategies
Feminist research approaches	Social constructivism
Interpretation	Social justice theories
Methods of data collection	Social science theories
Multifaceted experiences	Theories or theoretical orientations
Ontological assumptions	Transformative framework
Paradigms	

FURTHER READINGS

The following resources are offered as foundational references for this chapter. The list should not be considered exhaustive, and readers are encouraged to seek out additional readings in the end-of-book reference list.

Brisolara, S., Seigart, D., & SenGupta, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Feminist evaluation and research: Theory and practice*. Guilford Press.

Sharon Brisolara, Denise Seigart, and Saumitra SenGupta bring together illustrative examples exploring the processes involved in feminist research. The authors uniquely situate feminist research within disciplines and international contexts.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Norm Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln offer contemporary discussions about the role of guiding philosophy behind qualitative research. Specifically, we found the chapters on feminist research by Virginia Olesen and Marjorie Lyne DeVault; queer theory by Bryant Alexander; and critical race theory by Jamel Donnor and coauthor Gloria Ladson-Billings to be noteworthy.

Gergen, K. J. (2023). *An invitation to social construction: Co-creating the future* (4th ed.). Sage.

In this updated edition, Kenneth J. Gergen offers updated examples of social constructionist theory across diverse research contexts and disciplines.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1988). Do inquiry paradigms imply inquiry methodologies? In D. M. Fetterman (Ed.), *Qualitative approaches to evaluation in education* (pp. 89–115). Praeger.

Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, in offering their perspective of the relationship between paradigms and methodologies, contribute important work to these discussions.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2012). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber provides a grounding in feminist research through discussions of current perspectives on its influence on social change and transformation as well as the new technologies that are influencing methodological approaches within the field.

Lovern, L. L., & Locust, C. (2013). *Native American communities on health and disability: Borderland dialogues*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lavonna Lovern and Carol Locust provide a foundational resource for researchers interested in how to begin a genuine dialogue with Indigenous communities. The authors' experiences are particularly noted in the sections focused on "wellness" concepts that are respectful of disability and indigeneity.

Lynn, M., & Dixon, A. D. (Eds.). (2023). *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Marvin Lynn and Adrienne Dixon offer contemporary discussions about the role of critical race theory in educational research. Specifically, we found the chapters on critical race feminist praxis and scholar activism to be noteworthy.

Mertens, D. M. (2019). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed.). Sage.

Donna Mertens presents a brief history and then focuses on the philosophical underpinnings of four research paradigms: postpositivism, constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic. Of particular note is her useful description of the transformative paradigm including a rationale for its emergence and description of its philosophical and theoretical basis.

Mertens, D. M. (2021). Transformative research methods to increase social impact for vulnerable groups and cultural minorities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051563>

Donna Mertens provides an updated guide to conducting research using a transformative lens in a way that clearly connects theory to social impact.

Phillips, D. C., & Burbules, N. C. (2000). *Postpositivism and educational research*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Dennis Phillips and Nicholas Burbules offer an excellent description of postpositivism in practice that is a foundational read for researchers.

Slife, B. D., & Williams, R. N. (1995). *What's behind the research? Discovering hidden assumptions in the behavioral sciences*. Sage.

Brent Slife and Richard Williams explore the assumptions underpinning major theoretical approaches in the behavioral sciences. This important work has been widely cited across disciplines (e.g., psychology, education) as useful for encouraging critical thinking of theories.

Watson, N., Roulstone, A., & Thomas, C. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge handbook of disability studies* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

The editors adopt a multidisciplinary approach to discussions about disability. We found the critical disability studies chapter by Margrit Shildrick to be an essential read.

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