

Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Frameworks

Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research. Sometimes these 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 in us during our educational training through reading journal articles and books, through advice dispensed by our advisors, and through the scholarly communities we engage at our conferences and scholarly meetings. The difficulty lies first in becoming aware of these assumptions and beliefs and second in deciding whether we will actively incorporate them into our qualitative studies. Often, at a less abstract level, these philosophical assumptions inform our choice of theories that guide our research. Theories are more apparent in our qualitative studies than philosophical assumptions and theories are made explicit for us in our scholarly training and in report 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 theoretical and interpretive frameworks that enact these beliefs. A close tie does exist between the philosophy that one brings to the research act and how one proceeds to use a framework to shroud his or her inquiry. This chapter details the various philosophies common to qualitative research and where both philosophy and theory fit into the large schema of the research process. Types of philosophical assumptions, and how they are often used or made explicit in qualitative studies, are advanced. Further, various interpretive frameworks are suggested that link back to philosophical assumptions. Commentary is made on how these frameworks play out in the actual practice of research.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Where do philosophy and theoretical frameworks 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 types of interpretive frameworks are 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?

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

An understanding of the philosophical assumptions behind qualitative research begins with assessing where it fits within the overall process of research, noting its importance as an element of research, and considering how to actively write it into a study.

A Framework for Understanding Assumptions

Philosophy means the use of abstract ideas and beliefs that inform our research. We know that philosophical assumptions are typically the first ideas in developing a study, but how they relate to the overall process of research remains a mystery. It is here that the overview of the process of research compiled by Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 12), as shown in [Table 2.1](#), helps us to place philosophy and theory into perspective in the research process.

The research process begins in Phase 1 with the researchers considering what they bring to the inquiry, such as their personal history, views of

Table 2.1 The Research Process

Phase 1: The Researcher as a Multicultural Subject

History and research tradition
 Conceptions of self and the other
 The ethics and politics of research

Phase 2: Theoretical Paradigms and Perspectives

Positivism, postpositivism
 Interpretivism, constructivism, hermeneutics
 Feminism(s)
 Racialized discourses
 Critical theory and Marxist models
 Cultural studies models
 Queer theory Postcolonialism

Phase 3: Research Strategies

Design

Case study
Ethnography, participant observation, performance ethnography
Phenomenology, ethnomethodology
Grounded theory
Life history, *testimonio*
Historical method
Action and applied research
Clinical research

Phase 4: Methods of Collection and Analysis

Interviewing
Observing
Artifacts, documents, and records
Visual methods
Autoethnography
Data management methods
Computer-assisted analysis
Textual analysis
Focus groups
Applied ethnography

Phase 5: The Art, Practice, and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation

Criteria for judging adequacy
Practices and politics of interpretation
Writing as interpretation
Policy analysis
Evaluation traditions
Applied research

Source: Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12. Used with permission, SAGE Publications.

themselves and others, and ethical and political issues. Inquirers often overlook this phase, so it is helpful to have it highlighted and positioned first in the levels of the research process. In Phase 2 the researcher brings to the inquiry certain theories, *paradigms*, and perspectives, a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). It is here in Phase 2 that we find the philosophical and theoretical frameworks addressed in this chapter. 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 [Table 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 on 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 [Table 2.1](#) is the importance of having an understanding of philosophy and theoretical orientations that informs a qualitative study.

Why Philosophy Is Important

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 when presenting the study to an audience. Huff (2009) is helpful in articulating the importance of philosophy in research.

- It shapes how we formulate our problem and research questions to study and 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.

- 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 such research components as specific research problems to study, how to go about studying these problems, and how to add to knowledge through the study. This raises the question as to whether key assumptions can change and/or whether multiple philosophical assumptions can be used in a given study. My stance is that assumptions can change over time and over a career, and they often do, especially after a scholar leaves the enclave of his or her discipline and begins to work in more of a trans- or multidisciplinary way. Whether multiple assumptions can be taken in a given study is open to debate, and again, it may be related to research experiences of the investigator, his or her openness to exploring using differing assumptions, and the acceptability of ideas taken in the larger scientific community of which he or she is a part.

- 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 (or the journal editor) diverge, the author's work may not receive a fair hearing, and conclusions may be drawn that it does not make a contribution 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 presenting a proposal to a funding agency. On the reverse side, understanding the differences used by a reviewer may enable an author-researcher to resolve points of difference before they become a focal point for critique.

Four Philosophical Assumptions

What are the philosophical assumptions made by researchers when they undertake a qualitative study? These assumptions have been articulated throughout the last 20 years in the various *SAGE Handbooks of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011) and as the “axiomatic” issues advanced by Guba and Lincoln (1988) as the guiding philosophy behind qualitative research. These beliefs have been called paradigms (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010); philosophical assumptions, epistemologies, and ontologies (Crotty, 1998); broadly conceived research methodologies (Neuman, 2000); and alternative knowledge claims (Creswell, 2009). They are beliefs about ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values in research), and methodology (the process of research). In this discussion I will first discuss each of these philosophical assumptions, detail how they 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 2.2](#)).

The **ontological** issue relates to 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 multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives. For example, when writers compile a phenomenology, they report how individuals participating in the study view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994).

With the **epistemological** assumption, conducting a qualitative study means that researchers try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied. 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 the “field,” where the participants live and work—these are important contexts for understanding what the participants are saying. The longer researchers stay in the “field” or get to know the participants, the more they “know what they know” from firsthand information. For example, a good ethnography requires prolonged stay at the research site (Wolcott, 2008a). In short, the researcher tries to minimize the “distance” or “objective separateness” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94) between himself or herself and those being researched.

All researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study. This is the **axiological** assumption that characterizes qualitative research. How does the researcher implement this assumption in practice? 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 the field. We say that they “position themselves” in a study. 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

and presentation of the author as much as the subject of the study (Denzin, 1989a).

Table 2.2 Philosophical Assumptions With Implications for Practice

<i>Assumption</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Implications for Practice (Examples)</i>
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is multiple as seen through many views	Researcher reports different perspectives as themes develop in the findings
Epistemological	What counts as knowledge? How are knowledge claims justified? What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?	Subjective evidence from participants; researcher attempts to lessen distance between himself or herself and that being researched	Researcher relies on quotes as evidence from the participant; collaborates, spends time in field with participants, and becomes an "insider"
Axiological	What is the role of values?	Researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and that biases are present	Researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretations of participants
Methodological	What is the process of research? What is the language of research?	Researcher uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design	Researcher works with particulars (details) before generalizations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field

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. 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.

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 form 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.

INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

In [Table 2.1](#), the philosophical assumptions are embedded within interpretive frameworks that qualitative researchers use when they conduct a study. Thus, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) consider the philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology) as key premises that are folded into interpretive frameworks used in qualitative research. What are these interpretive frameworks? On the one hand, they 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* or advocacy/participatory theories seeking to bring about change or address social justice issues in our societies. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state, “We want a social science committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights” (p. 11).

In [Table 2.1](#) we saw one categorization of interpretive frameworks consisted of positivism,

postpositivism; interpretivism, constructivism, hermeneutics; feminism(s); racialized discourses; critical theory and Marxist models; cultural studies models; queer theory; and postcolonialism. The frameworks seem to be ever expanding, and the list in [Table 2.1](#) does not account for several that are popularly used in qualitative research, such as the transformative perspective, postmodernism, and disability approaches. Another approach that has been extensively discussed elsewhere is the realist perspective that 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). Consequently, any discussion (including this one) can only be a partial description of possibilities, but a review of several major interpretive frameworks can provide a sense of options. The participants in these interpretive projects often represent underrepresented or marginalized groups, whether those differences take the form of gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, or geography (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005) 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. I 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). A good overview of postpositivist approaches is available in Phillips and Burbules (2000).

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). My approach to qualitative research has been identified as belonging to postpositivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), as have the approaches of others (e.g., Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I do tend to use this belief system, although I would not characterize all of my research as framed within a postpositivist qualitative orientation (e.g., see the constructivist approach in McVea, Harter, McEntarffer, & Creswell, 1999, and the social justice perspective

in Miller, Creswell, & Olander, 1998). This postpositivist interpretive framework is exemplified in the systematic procedures of grounded theory found in Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), the analytic data analysis steps in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), and the data analysis strategies of case comparisons of Yin (2009).

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism (which is often described as interpretivism; see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mertens, 2010) is another 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 narrow 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 recent writers who have summarized this position are Crotty (1998), Lincoln and Guba (2000), and Schwandt (2007).

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 in order 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. Thus the researchers make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background. 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.

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 (2006), in which she grounds her theoretical orientation in the views or perspectives of individuals.

Transformative Frameworks

Researchers might use an alternative framework, 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, and thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society (Mertens, 2003). These individuals include marginalized groups such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender persons, queers, and societies that need a more hopeful, positive psychology and resilience (Mertens, 2009).

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. The issues facing these 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. Describing it as participatory action research, Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) embrace features of this transformative framework:

- Participatory action is recursive or dialectical and is focused on bringing about change in practices. Thus, in participatory action research studies, inquirers advance an action agenda for change.
- It is focused on helping individuals free themselves from constraints found in the media, in language, in work procedures, and in the relationships of power in educational settings. Participatory studies often begin with an important issue or stance about the problems in society, such as the need for empowerment.
- It is emancipatory in that it helps unshackle people from the constraints of irrational and unjust structures that limit self-development and self-determination. The aim of this approach is to create a political debate and discussion so that change will occur.
- It is practical and collaborative because it is inquiry completed “with” others rather than “on” or “to” others. In this spirit, participatory authors engage the participants as active collaborators in their inquiries.

Other researchers who embrace this worldview are Fay (1987) and Heron and Reason (1997). In practice, this 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. In this way, the “voice” of the participants becomes heard throughout the research process. 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 (2011) and in the change-oriented forms of narrative research (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004).

Postmodern Perspectives

Thomas (1993) calls postmodernists “armchair radicals” (p. 23) who focus their critiques on changing ways of thinking rather than on calling for action based on these changes. *Postmodernism* might be considered a family of theories and perspectives that have something in common (Slife & Williams, 1995). 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. Also included is the need to “deconstruct” texts in terms of language, their reading and their writing, and the examining and bringing to the surface of concealed hierarchies as well as dominations, oppositions, inconsistencies, and contradictions (Bloland, 1995; Clarke, 2005; Stringer, 1993). Denzin’s (1989a) approach to “interpretive” biography, Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach to narrative research, and Clarke’s (2005) perspective on grounded theory draw on postmodernism in that researchers study turning points, or problematic situations in which people find themselves during transition periods (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992). Regarding a “postmodern-influenced ethnography,” 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.

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). There is a concern with applications—“what works”—and solutions to problems (Patton, 1990). Thus, instead of a focus on methods, the important aspect of research is the problem being studied and the questions asked about this problem (see Rossman & Wilson, 1985). Cherryholmes (1992) and Murphy (1990) provide direction for the basic ideas:

- 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).
- Recent writers embracing this worldview include Rorty (1990), Murphy (1990), Patton (1990), Cherryholmes (1992), and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003).

In practice, the individual using this worldview 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. 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, Jackson, & Usher, 2006; Yin, 2009).

Feminist Theories

Feminism draws on different theoretical and pragmatic orientations, different international contexts, and different dynamic developments (Olesen, 2011). *Feminist research approaches* center on and make problematic women’s diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations. 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), and work by or about specific groups of women, such as standpoint theories about lesbians, women with disabilities, and women of color (Olesen, 2011). The theme of domination prevails in the feminist literature as well, but the subject matter is often gender domination within a patriarchal society. Feminist research also 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 so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative. Recent critical trends address protecting indigenous knowledge and the intersectionality of feminist research (e.g.,

the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, able-bodied-ness, and age) (Olesen, 2011).

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. 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, Stewart (1994), translates feminist critiques and methodology into procedural guides. She suggests that researchers need to look for what has been left out in social science writing, and to study women’s lives and issues such as identities, sex roles, domestic violence, abortion activism, comparable worth, affirmative action, and the way in which women struggle with their social devaluation and powerlessness within their families. Also, researchers need to consciously and systematically include their own roles or positions and assess how they impact their understandings of a woman’s life. In addition, Stewart views women as having agency, the ability to make choices and resist oppression, and she suggests that researchers need to inquire into how a woman understands her gender, acknowledging that gender is a social construct that differs for each individual. Stewart highlights the importance of studying power relationships and individuals’ social position and how they impact women. Finally, she sees each woman as different and recommends that scholars avoid the search for a unified or coherent self or voice.

Recent 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). Olesen (2011) summarizes the current state of feminist research under a number of transformative developments (e.g., globalization, transnational feminism), critical trends (e.g., endarkened, decolonizing research and intersectionality), and continuing issues (e.g., bias, troubling traditional concepts), enduring concerns (e.g., 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).

Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). Researchers need to acknowledge their own power, engage in dialogues, and use theory to interpret or illuminate social action (Madison, 2005). 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; Morrow & Brown, 1994).

In research, critical theory can be defined by the particular 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, 2005; Thomas, 1993). The end goal of the study might be social theorizing, which Morrow and Brown (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) 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. 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. As a study of the manifestations of resistance and state regulation, it highlights ways in which actors come to terms with and struggle against cultural forms that dominate them (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Resistance is also the theme addressed in the ethnography of a subcultural group of youths highlighted as an example of ethnography in this book (see Haenfler, 2004, in [Appendix E](#)).

Critical race theory (CRT) focuses theoretical attention on race and how racism is deeply embedded within the framework of American society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Racism has directly shaped the U.S. legal system and the ways people think about the law, racial categories, and privilege (Harris, 1993). According to Parker and Lynn (2002), CRT has three main goals. Its first goal is to present 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, counterstories 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). As a second goal, CRT argues for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct (Parker & Lynn, 2002). In this view, *race* is not a fixed term, but one that is fluid and continually shaped by political pressures and informed by individual lived experiences. Finally, the third goal of CRT 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 research, the use of CRT 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.

Queer Theory

Queer theory is characterized by a variety of methods and strategies relating to individual identity (Plummer, 2011a; 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. Writers also use a postmodern or poststructural orientation to critique and deconstruct dominant theories related to identity (Plummer, 2011a, 2011b; Watson, 2005). They focus on how it is culturally and historically constituted, is linked to discourse, and overlaps gender and sexuality. The term itself—*queer theory*, rather than *gay*, *lesbian*, or *homosexual theory*—allows for keeping open to question the elements of race, class, age, and anything else (Turner, 2000), and it is a term that has changed in meaning over the years and differs across cultures and languages (Plummer, 2011b). Most queer theorists work to challenge and undercut identity as singular, fixed, or normal (Watson, 2005). They also seek to challenge categorization processes and their deconstructions, rather than focus on specific populations. The historical binary distinctions are inadequate to describe sexual identity. Plummer (2011a) provides a concise overview of the queer theory stance:

- Both the heterosexual/homosexual binary and the sex/gender split are challenged.
- There is a decentering of identity.
- All sexual categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, heterosexual) are open, fluid, and nonfixed.
- Mainstream homosexuality is critiqued.
- Power is embodied discursively.
- All normalizing strategies are shunned.
- Academic work may become ironic, and often comic and paradoxical.
- Versions of homosexual subject positions are inscribed everywhere.
- Deviance is abandoned, and interest lies in insider and outsider perspectives and transgressions.
- Common objects of study are films, videos, novels, poetry, and visual images.
- The most frequent interests include the social worlds of the so-called radical sexual fringe (e.g., drag kings and queens, sexual playfulness) (p. 201).

Although queer theory is less a methodology and more a focus of inquiry, queer methods often find expression in a rereading of cultural texts (e.g., films, literature); ethnographies and

case studies of sexual worlds that challenge assumptions; data sources that contain multiple texts; documentaries that include performances; and projects that focus on individuals (Plummer, 2011a). Queer theorists have engaged in research and/or political activities such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Queer Nation around HIV/AIDS awareness, as well as artistic and cultural representations of art and theater aimed at disrupting or rendering unnatural and strange practices that are taken for granted. These representations convey the voices and experiences of individuals who have been suppressed (Gamson, 2000). Useful readings about queer theory are found in the journal article overview provided by Watson (2005) and the chapter by Plummer (2011a, 2011b), and in key books, such as the book by Tierney (1997).

Disability Theories

Disability inquiry addresses the meaning of inclusion in schools and encompasses administrators, teachers, and parents who have children with disabilities (Mertens, 2009, 2010). 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. Now, researchers using a *disability interpretive lens* focus on disability as a dimension of human difference and not as a defect. As a human difference, its meaning is derived from social construction (i.e., society's response to individuals), and it is simply one dimension of human difference (Mertens, 2003). Viewing individuals with disabilities as different is reflected in the research process, such as in the types of questions asked, the labels applied to these individuals, considerations of how the data collection will benefit the community, the appropriateness of communication methods, and how the data are reported in a way that is respectful of power relationships.

THE PRACTICE OF USING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The practice of using social justice interpretive frameworks in a qualitative study varies, and it depends on the framework being used and the particular researcher's approach. However, some common elements can be identified:

- The problems and the research questions explored aim to allow the researcher an understanding of 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.

- 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 or paying back those who participate in research, and they focus on the multiple-perspective stories of individuals and who tells the stories. Researchers are also sensitive to power imbalances during all facets of the research process. They respect individual differences rather than employing the traditional aggregation of categories such as men and women, or Hispanics or African Americans.
- 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-construction of the account between the researchers and the participants are the true owners of the information collected.
- 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.

LINKING PHILOSOPHY AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

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 et al. (2011) makes this connection explicit. I 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 this table in a qualitative study would be to discuss the interpretive framework used in a project by weaving together the framework used by discussing its central tenets, 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 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 ahead and 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, with a major emphasis on objectivity, with a focus on the theoretical model that results, without reporting biases of the researcher, and with a

systematic rendering of data analysis, a postpositivist interpretive framework would be used. On the other hand, if the intent of the qualitative narrative study was to examine a marginalized group of disabled learners with attention to their struggles for identity about prostheses that they wear, and with utmost respect for their views and values, and in the end of the study to call for changes in how the disabled group is perceived, then a strong disability interpretive framework would be in use. I could see using any of the interpretive frameworks with any of the five approaches advanced in this book.

Table 2.3 Interpretive Frameworks and Associated Philosophical Beliefs

<i>Interpretive Frameworks</i>	<i>Ontological Beliefs (the nature of reality)</i>	<i>Epistemological Beliefs (how reality is known)</i>	<i>Axiological Beliefs (role of values)</i>	<i>Methodological Beliefs (approach to inquiry)</i>
Positivism	A single reality exists beyond ourselves, "out there." Researcher may not be able to understand it or get to it because of 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.	Researcher's biases need to be controlled and not expressed in a study.	Use of scientific method and writing. Object of research is to create new knowledge. Method is important. Deductive methods are important, such as testing of theories, specifying important variables, 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 used. Use of an inductive method of emergent ideas (through consensus) obtained through methods such as interviewing, observing, and analysis of texts.
Transformative/ Postmodern	Participation between researcher and communities/ individuals being studied. Often a subjective-objective reality emerges.	Co-created findings with multiple ways of knowing.	Respect for indigenous values; values need to be problematized and interrogated.	Use of collaborative processes of research; political participation encouraged; questioning of methods; highlighting issues and concerns.

<i>Interpretive Frameworks</i>	<i>Ontological Beliefs (the nature of reality)</i>	<i>Epistemological Beliefs (how reality is known)</i>	<i>Axiological Beliefs (role of values)</i>	<i>Methodological Beliefs (approach to inquiry)</i>
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, Race, Feminist, Queer, Disabilities	Reality is based on power and identity struggles. Privilege or oppression based on race or ethnicity, class, gender, mental abilities, sexual preference.	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. (2011).

SUMMARY

This chapter began by starting 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 question being asked for each assumption, its major characteristics, and the implication for the practice of writing a qualitative study. Furthermore, the interpretive frameworks used in qualitative research were advanced. They include postpositivism, social constructivism, transformative, post-modern perspectives, pragmatism, feminist theories, critical theory, queer theory, and disability theory. 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.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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EXERCISES

1. Examine a qualitative journal article, such as the qualitative study by:

Brown, J., Sorrell, J. H., McClaren, J., & Creswell, J. W. (2006). Waiting for a liver transplant. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(1), 119–136.

There are four major philosophical assumptions used in qualitative research: ontology (what is reality?), epistemology (how is reality known?), axiology (how are values of the research expressed?), and methodology (how is the research conducted?). Look closely at the Brown et al. (2006) article and identify specific ways in which these four philosophical assumptions are evident in the study. Give specific examples using [Table 2.1](#) in this chapter as a guide.

2. It is helpful to read qualitative articles that adopt a different interpretive lens. Examine the following articles that work from different interpretivist frameworks:

A postpostivist framework:

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. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 39(2), 271–294.

A social constructivist framework:

Brown, J., Sorrell, J. H., McClaren, J., & Creswell, J. W. (2006). Waiting for a liver transplant. *Qualitative Health Research, 16*(1), 119–136.

A feminist framework:

Therberge, N. (1997). “It’s part of the game”: Physicality and the production of gender in women’s hockey. *Gender & Society, 11*(1), 69–87.

Identify how these three articles differ in their interpretive frameworks.

3. Examine the Therberge (1997) feminist qualitative research article. Identify where the following elements of a feminist interpretive framework are found in the study: the feminist issue(s), the directional question, the advocacy orientation of the aim of the study, the methods of data collection, and the call for action.