2 CONCEPTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- **2.1** Define concept and its role in theory
- **2.2** Identify the functions of a concept and its uses in various disciplines
- **2.3** Explain a concept's role in a theoretical statement
- **2.4** Apply qualitative data analysis methods to generate concepts and their interrelationships

PROPERTY 1

A theory, most often, expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts.

Theory: Another Definition

"A theory is simply a system of ideas or *concepts* intended to explain something" (Pope & Mays, 2020, p. 21, emphasis added).

DEFINING A CONCEPT

A concept is somewhat comparable to a category's function. It is a label for an assemblage of patterned comparability. It brings together things that "look alike" and "feel alike" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 347) to form "a system of ideas" as noted in Pope and Mays's (2020, p. 21) definition.

A concept is a word or short phrase representing something that literally cannot be perceived or sensed; thus, a concept suggests an idea or **abstraction** rather than a tangible object.

For example, I can touch a school building, but I cannot touch the broader concept of *education*. Concepts also refer to a collection of comparable observable actions—**processes**—and their broader meanings. I can observe a nurse using medical devices to measure and record a patient's weight, heart rate, oxygen level, temperature, and blood pressure, but the collective process of these separate actions constitutes the concept of, in the nurse's words, "taking vitals." Concepts unify and embody related realities—that is, patterns—much like a symbol and its condensed meanings. Words that are broad category labels for a collection of related words are also known as **hypernyms**. For example, *education* is both a concept and a hypernym for *school, classroom, teacher, students, learning, testing*, and so on. But *concept* is perhaps the most well-known term in the literature.

"A concept is independent of a specific time or place" (Reynolds, 2007, p. 12). Analysts conceptualize to transcend the local and particular of what is studied to find broader patterns of meaning and possible applicability and transferability to other populations or more general settings and contexts, though some methodologists advise, "It is the concept that generalizes, not the specific content or context" (Simons, 2020, p. 695).

Chirkov (2016) cleverly posits, "Concepts for a theory are as firewood for a campfire" (p. 157), while J. Thomas (1993) identifies a concept as a metaphorical "icon" of the social terrain (p. 20). Concepts ignite the imagination and become essential properties for theory development. We conceptualize to discover possible latent meanings and deeper significance embedded in the data we generate, and to create new ideas through an original concept's unique word combinations such as psychology's *loss aversion*, sociology's *total institution*, social media's *selfie dysmorphia*, and child development's *emotional ambivalence*.

Just as there are subcodes and subcategories, there can also be **subconcepts**—the unpacked constituent elements of a broader concept. For example, the concept *support* can include emotional support, tangible support, informational support, and companionship support. *Risk-taking* includes the propensities of social risk-taking, physical risk-taking, financial risk-taking, and ethical risk-taking (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2020, p. 328). As another example, there are four kinds of *dirty work*: physical, social, moral, and emotional (Rivera, 2015). Subconcepts can sometimes function as the properties and/or dimensions of their parent concept for grounded theory analysis (discussed further in Chapter 4).

Barbour (2007, p. 126) recommends that we pay close attention to the concepts used by participants in interviews and focus groups, for they can become important facets of data analysis as **codes**, **categories**, or **themes**, and thus a theory. H. J. Rubin and Rubin (2012) also advise attunement to a participant's uses of symbols, slogans, metaphors, similes, and repeated stories for conceptual adaptation: "Concepts that emerge out of the ordinary speech of your interviewees often convey goals, values, perceptions, or attitudes or represent strategies that frame [conceptual] action" such as *courage* and *independence* (p. 194). Once these concepts are labeled and defined to represent broader phenomena and experiences, they can be integrated and interrelated into theoretical statements that suggest higher-level abstraction and possibly generalization. Just as the proverb *qua* theory goes, "Good fences make good neighbors," good concepts make good theories.

CONCEPT EXAMPLES

One example of an assemblage of patterned comparability that brings together things that "look alike" and "feel alike" is this list of different field note observations in an elementary school visual arts classroom:

- Rack labels by the entry door are labeled "Detention Forms" and "Attendance Files."
- On the shelved counter beneath are plastic tubs with teachers' names on them to keep students' class work together.
- Carol (the teacher) raises her hand to get the students quiet, and they raise their hands and stop talking. One student responds with a clap, but Carol says that response is for another class.

These three comparable notes, plus others, are observable moments that combine to create the researcher-constructed but well-established educational concept, *classroom management*. The following actions/processes were also observed in the classroom:

- Taking attendance
- Lecturing
- Facilitating a group discussion
- Disciplining a student
- Explaining a homework assignment
- Writing lesson plans
- Grading papers

Patterned actions combine to create a concept, but its wording depends on the researcher's vocabulary, not to mention their creativity and the study's contexts. The broader concept could be as simple and direct as *educating*, but it could also extend into phrases such as the metaphorical *learning the ropes* (for a first-year teacher), *workplace routines* (for a veteran teacher), or *preparing the future generation* (for an optimistic, student-centered teacher). Notice that two of these concepts include **gerunds**—"-ing" words. Gerunds in conceptual phrases suggest more active processes, which provide a stronger sense of "aliveness" in theoretical statements. Qualitative methodologist Victoria Clarke offered in one of her webinars, "Sometimes your data will tell you how they want to be analyzed." As an extension, sometimes your data analysis will tell you how your concepts want to be worded.

A concept frequently applied to and by novice educators learning how to manage the required, sometimes frenetic multitasking in a classroom is *survival*. But some may perceive that concept as demeaning for an educator. Other concept labels such as *resilience, grit*, or *emotional intelligence* could be considered as possible alternatives. Words for concepts should be

carefully selected. Precision in quantitative research rests with statistical accuracy, but precision in qualitative inquiry rests with our word choices. Writer Mark Twain is attributed with this paraphrased advice: The difference between the right word and the *nearly* right word is the same amount of difference as between lightning and a lightning bug.

Concepts in the Disciplines

The disciplines collectively have adopted and developed thousands of concepts (e.g., Bothamley, 1993; N. Brown et al., 2017; Engelke, 2018; Giddens & Sutton, 2021), several of which apply to multiple fields (e.g., identity, society, gender), not just within the social sciences. A mere sampling of concepts from selected areas of study includes the following:

- *Anthropology:* culture, ethos, habitus, religion, artifact, pollution ritual, rite of passage
- *Psychology:* deviance, personal significance, social desirability, trait impulsivity
- *Sociology:* class, industrialization, social mobility, public sphere, glocalization
- *Political Science:* democracy, ideological power, state systems, national identity
- *Business:* credit, risk, privatization, balance of trade, joint venture, global marketing
- *Health Care:* adapting, coping, cure, healthism, disability, telemedicine, chaos narrative
- *Human Development:* becoming, infant determinism, possible selves, shadow trajectories
- *Education:* microlearning, hidden curriculum, critical pedagogy, multiple intelligences

Additionally, there are concepts that are niche or relevant to contemporary social issues:

- *Experiential States:* flow, aesthetic arrest, collective effervescence, the feels, eudaimonia
- *Post-truth:* organizing doubt, manufactured crisis, fake news, alternative facts
- *Social Media:* infoveillance, memescape, the cloud, sextech, digital intimacy, FOMO

In addition to original compound word concepts (e.g., motherscholar), some researchers, social critics, and members of the general public have invented their own clever conceptual labels for social phenomena (and critique) when they observe unique connections:

- *Original Adaptations:* tween, edutainment, testocracy, Disneyization, McUniversity

Holton and Walsh (2017, p. 25) label the use of existing concepts in theoretical statements as *incremental theorizing* and the development of new concepts as *rupture theorizing*.

The possible names for concepts are virtually limitless depending on the creativity and vocabulary prowess of the researcher. Prior (2008) advises, "The most imaginative forms of analysis rely on concepts that emerge from the sociological imagination rather than from simple

data mining exercises" (p. 491). But be wary of novelty just for its own sake. In your own theory development, there is nothing wrong with incorporating a long-standing, established set of concepts from your discipline if those are indeed the most accurate choices. In fact, they can often grasp magnitude and generalizability through their elegance. A sampling of theories using general conceptual language includes these:

- "Power is derived from the privileged access to social resources." (Joye & Maeseele, 2023, p. 22)
- "The production of services replaced the production of goods as the main economic activity in post-industrial societies." (Murphy, 2021, p. 92)
- "Social change happens one person at a time." (Ellis & Adams, 2020, p. 370)

Concept or Not?

Sometimes, like theory, a concept is in the eye of the beholder. Here is just a brief note about "generic" terms. It was stated at the beginning of this chapter that a concept represents something that literally cannot be perceived or sensed. So, are words such as *the individual, friends, customers, children*, and the like considered concepts? They *are* perceptible and observable, after all.

For a theory's purpose, words such as these are considered conceptual because the terms refer to people in the collective or generic sense and not as a specific individual or group of named human beings. Idiographic (the case) and some experiential (the personal-practical) theories may refer to particular individuals, specific organizations, or targeted small groups. Other experiential and mostly all nomothetic theories, however, address more general groups and populations.

Other types of nouns *qua* concepts that some consider "concept or not?" are settings (e.g., schools, Europe, women's shelters); time (e.g., 2024, sundown, afterward); actions (e.g., romance, playing, consuming); emotions, feelings, and mood states (e.g., anger, happiness, mourning); and other elusive terms such as these. You can certainly adopt well-established concepts from a discipline to ensure that your theory reaches an appropriate level of abstraction. But it is your qualitative analyses—through coding, categorizing, themeing, asserting, and so on (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022)—that best inform you of the potential concepts you can adopt and/or conceive.

Concept vs. Construct

Some social scientists label phenomena such as *stress, lifestyle, happiness, home*, and so on as concepts because of their constituent elements or their individually interpreted, subjective nature. To other social scientists, however, a **construct** (vs. concept) is a phenomenon whose constituent elements cannot be directly observed but are supposedly empirically measured nevertheless—for example, *intelligence, attitude*, and *creativity*. To others, a construct is a more abstract form of a concept. And still to others, a construct (sometimes labeled a *factor, domain*, or *theoretical*

construct) is a combination of related concepts or categories. As Hammersley (2023) wisely observes, "Synonyms do not avoid the problem but simply cover it up" (p. 34).

These variations and contradictions are not intended to confuse you. They are mentioned for researchers to be aware that some disciplines and fields may prefer a selected repertoire of terms over others. And sometimes *concept* and *construct* may be used interchangeably in the scholarly literature. As with all term choices and concept labels, select yours consciously and carefully for a written report. One of comedian Robin Williams's early recordings was *Reality . . . What a Concept*. But perhaps it should have been titled *Reality . . . What a Construct*.

CONCEPTS IN THEORIES

When two or more concepts are brought together for a theory, it is because the researcher has observed through data analysis some type of connection or **interrelationship** between them (discussed later in this and the next chapter). One of Hall's (2019) theories in his study of friendship development claimed, "Expectations rise as relationships become closer" (p. 1279). "Expectations" and "relationships" are the two concepts included in this theory, and their connection is not just correlational; it is sequential: As a friendship becomes more personal and intimate over time, expectations rise regarding aspects such as making more time to spend together, being there in times of need, maintaining confidentiality of private and secret disclosures, and so on. Chapter 3 will discuss more in depth how concepts in a theory work together through propositional logic.

Emotional Labor and Surface Acting

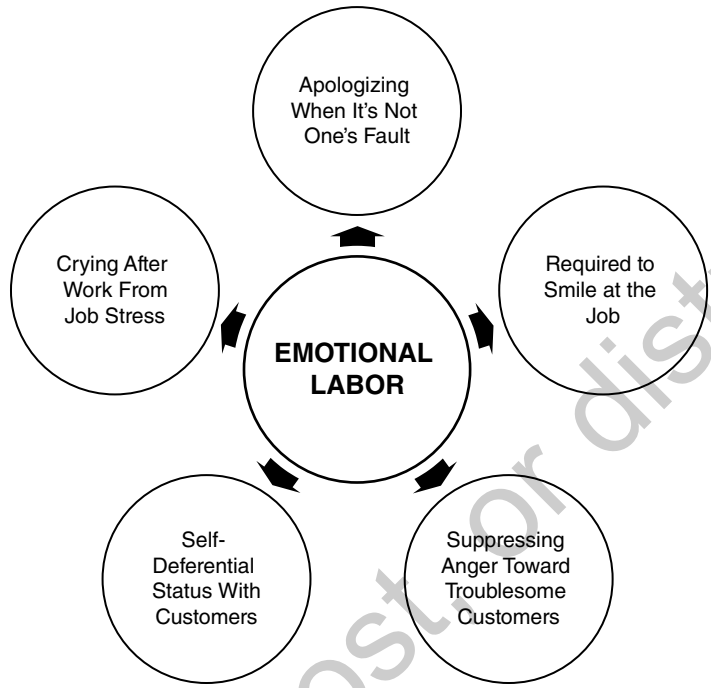
One of the most well-known concepts in social science is Arlie Russell Hochschild's (2003) "*emotional labor* . . . the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*" (p. 7, emphasis in original). Thousands of studies have employed her concept and theories about people in service professions who must display and maintain acceptable emotional performances, emotional suppression, and emotional resilience as part of their interactions with customers and clients. Figure 2.1 illustrates through a concept map just five of the possible constituent processes of emotional labor.

Another concept related to emotional labor is *surface acting*, the deliberate amplifying, faking, or suppressing of felt emotions by workers to appear positive when interacting with customers, clients, students, patients, and others in various social settings. Grandey and colleagues (2019) studied emotional labor and the drinking habits of people in the United States who work with the public and theorized,

> Employees with more emotional job demands—that is, difficult or distressing events at work—will need to engage in more surface acting to maintain appropriate emotions in the wake of emotionally demanding interactions and may also consume more alcohol to cope with the job stress. (p. 484)[1]

[1] From A. A. Grandey, M. R. Frone, R. C. Melloy, & G. M. Sayre, "When Are Fakers Also Drinkers? A Self-Control View of Emotional Labor and Alcohol Consumption Among U.S. Service Workers," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 24*(4), 482–497, published by American Psychological Association, 2019, reprinted with permission.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Sample Constituent Processes of the Emotional Labor Concept



Note: From p. 212 of *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* (2nd ed.), by J. Saldaña and M. Omasta, 2022. Copyright 2023 by SAGE Publishing. Reproduced with permission.

The research team correlated that employees who surface act with their customers are more likely to be heavy drinkers of up to four to five drinks at a time after work—a maladaptive response to stress. "Overall, a self-control impairment explanation seems to fit: The more employees exert control over their expressions for customers, the more likely they drink to intoxication" (Grandey et al., 2019, p. 491). The co-researchers conclude with a theory of prediction and caution: "Our findings suggest a cost to the 'service with a smile' requirement: Unless service encounter employees have strong self-control tendencies or they are permitted to be self-governed at work, 'fakers' tend to also be 'drinkers'" (Grandey et al., 2019, p. 493).

The multiple concepts in this study—*surface acting, autonomy, self-control, impulsivity, intervention*, and so on—demonstrate a strong unity and interrelationship with each other, qualities essential for integrated theory development. When conducting your own study, collect from a literature review and from your own reflection a list of relevant and related concepts about the topic. Concept map them as in Figure 2.1 or employ other modeling tools such as mind maps, tree diagrams, fishbone diagrams, and so on to plot their connections (also see Figure 2.2 later in this chapter).

Sensitizing Concepts

Blumer (1969), in his treatise on symbolic interactionism, calls concepts "anchor points" for our theories (p. 26). He encourages researchers to develop a stock of "**conceptual capital**"—a

broad knowledge base of concepts from multiple disciplines to better inform our own theoretical constructions (Blumer, 1969, p. 142). Blumer also differentiates between definitive concepts and general "**sensitizing concepts**" (e.g., culture, institutions, personality). "Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (Blumer, 1969, p. 148).

Sensitizing concepts can be either a good or a bad thing for a researcher, depending on the concept and how it is incorporated into the theory. Sweeping conceptual terms such as *children* or *childhood* (without specifications of age ranges, developmental stages, cultures, or other relevant variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, and family structure) can be used in certain theoretical statements with some success and little disagreement from their readers:

- "Children are used to telling stories about their lives; it is a natural and common way in which they convey their experiences." (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017, p. 183)
- "Violence to children, whether structural or direct, produces violence in the next generation." (Handwerker, 2015, p. 82)
- "In many nonindustrial societies, gender is typically a powerful mediator of what children are expected to learn." (Lancy et al., 2010, p. 5)

If we are overly precise in our conceptual term use, we lose the abstracting and symbolizing power of a concept's function by diluting it with conditional limitations. How we employ sensitizing concepts in our theoretical statements with parameters and conceptual variation (discussed in Chapter 4) fine-tunes them into more definitive concepts to sharpen their focus, sometimes achieved by nothing more complex than descriptive detail and extended sentence length:

- "Because childhood is to a large extent socially constructed, children in different social settings experience different kinds of childhoods." (Euwema et al., 2000, p. 197)
- "While middle-class mothers and fathers repeatedly produce scripts of parental responsibility for their children's success and well-being, the working-class family's narrative environment promotes stories of children coming of age by getting through life on their own." (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 136)
- "I argue that adolescence should not be thought of as a stage of development, but rather as a period in which one can select from behaviors characteristic of both children and adults from the 'toolkits' to which boys and girls have access in creating appropriate adolescent activities." (G. A. Fine, 2001, p. 4)

Theoretical Pluralism

Though many theories derive from discipline- and topic-specific research studies, theories that integrate concepts from more than one disciplinary area embody what is labeled **theoretical**

pluralism or, in current marketing parlance, "theory *plus*." Studies in education, for example, might integrate previous research in pedagogy, human development, and public policy. A health care study could incorporate the literature and concepts from nursing, psychology, and occupational therapy. In life course research, multidisciplinary concepts are essential, for "a theory of age must include a theory of gender" and race/ethnicity (M. W. Riley, 1998, p. 31). A constituent element (e.g., a category, concept, phenomenon) that applies across several theories is termed **transtheoretical** (Payne, 2020, p. 210).

Not all theories need to embody an interdisciplinary character, but we make theories more applicable—not to mention more generalizable and/or transferable—when we design our ideas for broader audiences and constituent interests. Plus, our research projects benefit from multiple lenses, filters, and angles of knowledge bases when synthesized for theoretical pluralism. Just a few examples of theories whose concepts reach beyond intradisciplinary parameters include these:

- "Our language shapes our identities, our social relationships, and our social and political world." (Berger, 2016, p. 4)
- "The world is simultaneously material and social, as the things that surround us are an inseparable part of how our relationships to other people are mediated, and the environment, society and culture we live in." (Woodward, 2020, p. 1)
- "To survive physically and psychologically, combatants had to be able to put aside their prewar civilian selves, adjust to the 'realities of war,' and then, when they returned home, readjust once again by constantly shifting their images of 'self' and the 'meanings of war.'" (Corbin, 2021, p. 41)

Concept Definitions

Make certain your data analysis has generated summative meanings that are not just categorical but conceptual. For example, perhaps a participant's habit of "a glass of wine every night after work" and a large number of alcoholic drinks over the weekend could be categorized simply as *alcoholism* or *excessive drinking*, both acceptable concepts. But if the researcher interprets subtextual, latent meanings from these actions, perhaps the category and concept labels might be transformed into *escaping reality* or *killing the pain*. Again, be wary of novelty just for its own sake. Reimagining and renaming your concepts are effective brainstorming tasks in finding just the right words, not the nearly right words.

We sometimes accept concepts at face value without critically examining their nuances and possible variability. For example, literally hundreds of definitions exist for the concept/construct of *culture* in ethnographies and *attitude* in psychology's texts and tests. *Gender* becomes more and more contested as a holistic concept with social positionalities and standpoints such as *intersectionality* and *queerness*. *Identity* and *personality* are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature when they are two distinctively different concepts.

The point is to *define your concepts* or, at the very least, establish the parameters or boundaries of them, especially if they are new or novel. The definitions needn't be part of the theoretical statement itself but can be included in the preliminary front matter of a report or in the theory's

accompanying explicating narrative if needed. Concept definition is first and primarily for the researcher's understanding to better ensure a more solid theoretical foundation and a more focused data analysis. A few sentences can be documented in the researcher's journal or analytic memos that illustrate the concept or be taken from the literature as a working definition.

The elements and operations of *power*, for example, "are far too multiple and complex" for a concise characterization (Nealon & Giroux, 2012, p. 262). One can adopt classic sociological perspectives on the concept for a study, such as the following:

> By *power* is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests. (Weber, 1962/1990, p. 117, emphasis in original)

But sometimes a palette of examples of power represented in the data, or supplemental theories about power found during the literature review, can flesh out the researcher's working understandings for the study and analysis:

- "Our experience of everyday life is marked by domination and power." (Schratz & Walker, 1995, p. 61)
- "Power is produced within the struggle over it." (Miller & Fox, 2004, p. 43)
- "Power isn't a possession; it's a relationship." (Kimmel, 2008, p. 59)

Just as theory and power are elusive terms to define, so are all-encompassing and multiply complex concepts such as *racism, violence,* and *patriarchy*. Ahmed (2017) wisely counsels that our attempts to compose precise definitions and meanings of such ideas are indeed challenging: "By trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present, we generate what I call 'sweaty concepts'" (p. 12).

The goal of defining your terms or establishing the parameters or boundaries of them is not to systematically operationalize the concepts as in quantitative experimental research, but to provide a conceptual compass of sorts to guide your inquiry during data generation, data analysis, theory development, and write-up. Defining concepts in your presentation also brings your readers onto the same page as you. Never assume that everyone in your audience already knows what you mean by broad concepts such as *leadership, performance*, or even *theory*.

Popper (1959/1992) takes issue with concepts that cannot be "ostensive" (demonstrable) or empirically defined (pp. 53–54). Conversely, selected contemporary approaches to inquiry openly reject the essentialism of precise, standardized definitions in favor of the multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives possible about the world—an appreciation of "definitional heterogeneity" (B. Smith & McGannon, 2024, p. 535). While I acknowledge these viewpoints, I find it frustrating when a researcher is unwilling or unable to commit to a perspective for the sake of investigative clarity. If one of our analytic goals is to achieve understanding, then the *meanings* of our concepts need to be meaningfully articulated—not necessarily for empirically measured precision, but for audience sensemaking and informed conversations through "ontological reference points" (B. Smith & McGannon, 2024, p. 535).

Theory: Another Definition

"A theory is a set of interrelated *concepts*, definitions, and propositions that describe, explain, or predict how and/or why a phenomenon occurs. . . . Theories explain *relationships* between factors or variables. . . . Theoretical statements aim to convey a framework of principles" (Salmons, 2019, pp. 24, 22, emphasis added).

ANALYZING QUALITATIVE DATA FOR CONCEPTS

I emphasized two key words in Salmons's (2019) definition, *concepts* and *relationships*, because these are some of the first steps in developing a theory. How you arrive at concepts in your data analysis depends on which method(s) you employ—coding, categorizing, themeing, assertion development, and so on. Grodal and colleagues (2021) assert in their superior methods article that "qualitative analysis is fundamentally a categorization process" and thus "more likely to yield theoretical insights" (pp. 605, 607). If you know beforehand that a theory or theories will be a necessary outcome of your research study, select a data-analytic method(s) that will help you construct concepts for building plausible relationships between them. Once the concepts, as core properties of theory development, have been formulated through data analysis, the next series of steps is to integrate them into the other properties of a theory with an accompanying explicating narrative.

But first things first. Learn what currently exists in the disciplines.

The Literature Review

The **literature review** is an important task not just during the initial research design stage but throughout the inquiry process, even up to the final written report. Certainly, look for theories that others have developed to inform you of your discipline's knowledge base, and pay particular attention to the concepts embedded within them and their proposed interrelationships. These can provide you with ideas for your own study and references for your project's **conceptual framework** (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). You may find an intriguing theory to field test, which could lead to the established theory's confirmation, modification, revision, or refinement. Concepts also become one way of categorizing and unifying the results from several topic-related qualitative studies for **metasummary** and **metasynthesis** analyses for experiential and nomothetic theory development (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The literature review better guarantees that you're not reinventing the conceptual and theoretical wheels, and it provides valuable material for hypothesis testing and constructing new ideas.

Concept Coding

One method for developing concepts from your data is **concept coding** (Saldaña, 2021, pp. 152–157). Concept codes assign meso or macro levels of meaning to data or to data-analytic

work in progress (e.g., a series of comparable codes or categories). This method has been colloquially labeled "smart coding," as concepts grasp and embody larger meanings and ideas. Concept coding can be applied to virtually any data form (interview transcripts, field notes, documents, video, etc.).

Concepts can be phrased as nouns or processes in gerund ("-ing") form, such as these for a health care study of COVID-19 patients: *surrealistic recovery* or *healing in limbo*. Noun-based concepts become richer when the researcher explores how evocative adjectives and adverbs support the idea. Gerund-based concepts are highly recommended for studies in grounded theory since the construction of processual action is one of the methodology's analytic goals. And, just as there are subcodes and subcategories, a concept can also consist of component *subconcepts* (e.g., the concept of *urban education* can include subconcepts such as street pedagogy, hidden curriculum, and inequity).

Field notes and initial analytic writings may already contain conceptual ideas: "It is misleading to dichotomize data and theory as two separate and distinct entities, as data are never quite pure but, rather, are imbued with, and structured by, concepts in the first place" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 198). Glaser (1978, p. 91) recommends that when researchers compose **analytic memos** about their data, they should focus on writing with and about concepts, not about specific people. A memo example from a health care study reads as follows:

> February 24, 2023
>
> *Observations:* The ultrasound on the elder patient's leg went smoothly, except for one moment when the technician pressed too hard into his sensitive lower thigh area and he let out a yelp. The technician kept apologizing over and over after that for any discomfort she was causing, but the patient just chuckled and said, "No problem. I've been poked and prodded so many times from so many tests that this one is a walk in the park."
>
> *Conceptualizations:* The major concepts I see from this unit of action are *diagnostics, pain, apologizing*, and *reassuring*. I was also taken by the patient's metaphor, "a walk in the park" (I learned later he had recently had bloodwork, an EKG, EEG, MRI, a test for neuropathy, wore a Holter monitor for 3 days, etc.). The elderly take diagnostic and health care tests like these with such frequency that it becomes *routine body maintenance* or a *clinical excursion* from retirement. Some elders take a leisurely walk in the park; others take a painful journey through a clinic.

Interrelating the Concepts

After concepts have been labeled from analysis, the next step is to interrogate how pairs or more of them *plausibly* interrelate. *Plausibly* is emphasized because forcing the jointure of two or more concepts in unsupported ways distorts the potential theory that could be developed. Examine the passages of data and their related concept codes for associations and correlations, suggesting a compatible relationship. Also look for possible propositional combinations of concepts (discussed in Chapter 3) to infer concurrence or causality.

As a semi-fictional example, imagine an arts education study that surveyed teachers' and students' experiences along with selected interviews. One of the most apparent concepts frequently mentioned by participants was striving for *quality* in their artwork. When the researchers analyzed the values system of the artists, one conceptual word used most often by teachers and students themselves was feeling *passionate* about their respective art forms. The analytic team also interpreted that the artists' products were highly *personal* to them, so personal that participants were *persistent* in achieving strong artistic rigor or *quality*. Given these concepts, the researchers wove them together into a theoretical statement about these young artists and their educators:

> "The drive for [artistic] quality is personal, passionate, and persistent." (Seidel et al., n.d., p. iii)

This straightforward example demonstrates how four one-word concepts can be plausibly interrelated into a theoretical statement. But a substantial number of theories include multiple and multiply worded concepts woven into complex arrays such as these three about social media, which also exhibit theoretical pluralism:

- "Our most trivial everyday experiences are mediated, augmented, and conditioned by algorithms." (Bucher, 2016, p. 84).
- "From every type of supposed mass broadcast medium, there have arisen grassroots, bottom-up popular manifestations of the technology that have repurposed it for purposes of fandom, leisure, communication, and sociality." (Kozinets, 2020, p. 68)
- "The electronic media and the new information technologies turn everyday life into a theatrical spectacle where the dramas that surround the decisive performances of existential crises are enacted." (Denzin, 2002, p. 835)

Semantic Relationships

Spradley (1979, p. 111) outlines possible **semantic relationships** to systematically organize and document the types of meanings and actions that can be classified into more general domains *qua* cultural categories. These relationships are constructed from interview transcript and field note data to analyze and learn how people perceive and do things in their world. The nine methods profiled by Spradley can also serve as heuristics for exploring two concepts' possible interrelationship, using an X–Y nomenclature and structure—for example, for the "Concept X is a kind of Concept Y" structure, we can posit that "Karen Barad (X) is a kind of feminist theorist (Y)" (though we would rewrite that awkward sentence into something more fluid for the report). Lofland (1995/2002) also adopts the X–Y nomenclature for his list of "generic proposition" structures that overlap with some of Spradley's yet offer unique additions for concept linkage.

The examples that follow are not the only types of interrelationship structures available, but they serve as suggested models for your own theoretical statement development. Each one is followed by an example theory:

1. *Strict Inclusion/Type: Concept X is a kind of Concept Y.* "The personal is evidence of the social but not separate from it." (Eichsteller & Davis, 2022, p. 13)
2. *Spatial/Structural: Concept X is a place in Concept Y; Concept X is a part of Concept Y.* "One may be tempted to think of 'thought control' as an extreme and rare phenomenon, but in fact it is the bread and butter of social life." (Rueschemeyer, 2009, p. 56)
3. *Magnitude: Concept X is of Concept Y size, strength, or intensity.* "Research change is intensifying so quickly that big data today may simply be data tomorrow." (K. A. Mills, 2019, p. 60)
4. *Frequency: Concept X occurs with Concept Y frequency (over Z periods of time).* "People pass regularly from one state of mind to another many times in a day, often without realizing it, and particularly in response to difficult relational experiences." (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008, p. 497)
5. *Cause–Effect/Consequence: Concept X is a result of Concept Y; Concept X is a cause of Concept Y.* "The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated our reliance on technology as we incorporated it into our lives, both inside and outside of work." (Birks & Mills, 2023, p. 216)
6. *Rationale: Concept X is a reason for doing Concept Y.* "Social media is driven by the need to produce profits." (Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022, p. 7)
7. *Location for Action: Concept X is a place for doing Concept Y.* "From remote, to rural, to urban settings, people are in a lifelong reproductive and reflexive dialogue, a dialectic, with their surrounds." (Madden, 2023, p. 42)
8. *Function: Concept X is used for Concept Y.* "A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii)
9. *Means–End/Agency: Concept X is a way to do Concept Y.* "The whole American judicial process rests not on measures of certainty but on *degrees of doubt*." (Gerard, 2017, p. 7, emphasis in original)
10. *Sequence/Process: Concept X is a step (stage) in Concept Y.* "Community development is an effective strategy for the promotion of mental health in a disadvantaged community." (Bazeley, 2021, p. 475)
11. *Attribution: Concept X is an attribute (characteristic) of Concept Y.* "Rituals are found in every human culture because they help solve some of those [ancestral] problems and satisfy some of our basic human needs." (Xygalatas, 2022, p. 85)

The next chapter will illustrate additional structures for composing propositional statements, which can also serve as concept connectors for theories like the semantic relationships.

Concept Mapping

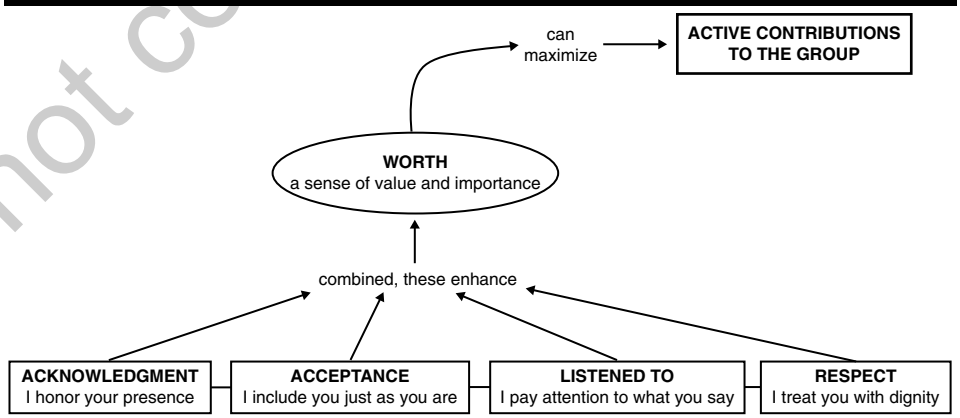
Stringer and Ortiz Aragón (2021, pp. 184–187) recommend concept mapping as a method for visually illustrating not only the concepts' interrelationships but also their processual connections, directions, and flows. Diagramming can precede, follow, or work concurrently with most of the relationship-building activities previously described. The map can consist exclusively of concept labels or include brief annotations of the concepts to explain their place and function in the visual model.

One of Stringer and Ortiz Aragón's (2021) theories for enhancing constituent participation in action research projects reads, "When people feel acknowledged, accepted, heard, and treated with respect, their feelings of worth are enhanced, and the possibility that they will contribute actively to the work of the group is maximized" (p. 36). Figure 2.2 is my hypothetical mapping of their theory to illustrate how the statement's concepts might interrelate and processually flow. Notice how the concepts are bolded for emphasis and briefly described. Models such as these are not only ways to document the theory but ways to develop one by exploring their spatial interrelationships through multiple drafts. Pencil-and-paper sketches, or various arrangements of index cards or sticky notes with concept labels on them, serve as initial diagramming methods before formalizing the concept map with software.

For additional methods of visually modeling a theory, see Chapter 9.

To learn more about concepts, an excellent reference from sociology is Giddens and Sutton (2021), with more advanced content in sociology and political science in Rueschemeyer (2009). Several major publishers such as SAGE, Routledge, and Palgrave Macmillan have a *Key Concepts* reference series for multiple disciplines in their catalogues. These books include core information about major concepts, theories, and theorists.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ A Theoretical Model for Action Research Participation



Note: Based on Stringer & Ortiz Aragón (2021, p. 36).

CLOSURE AND TRANSITION

The first property of a theory, most often, expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts. A concept is an abstraction, a label for an assemblage of patterned comparability. Ethnographers Coffey and Atkinson (1996) reinforce that concept and theory development are not exclusively systematic processes but embedded and heuristically creative enterprises:

> It should certainly not be assumed that theory can be "built" by the aggregation and ordering of codes or the retrieval of coded segments. One must always be prepared to engage in creative intellectual work, to speculate about the data in order to have ideas, to try out a number of different ideas, to link one's ideas with those of others, and so to move *conceptually* from one's own research setting to a more *general*, even *abstract*, level of analytic thought. (pp. 142–143, emphasis added; reproduced with permission)

The second property of a theory, propositions, is discussed in the next chapter.

KEY TERMS INTRODUCED IN THIS CHAPTER

abstraction
analytic memos
categories
codes
concept coding
conceptual capital
conceptual framework
construct
gerunds
hypernym
interrelationship
literature review
metasummary
metasynthesis
processes
semantic relationships
sensitizing concepts
subconcepts
themes
theoretical pluralism
transtheoretical

RECOMMENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Individually or in small-group discussion, identify the concepts embedded in these theoretical statements and how they are interrelated or linked:
   - **a.** "All research is a political act." (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 35)
   - **b.** "Our life course is framed by the historical development of the society we live in." (Sears & Cairns, 2015, p. 169)
   - **c.** "Subjective experiences of sociality, perceptions of identity and meaning, and norms of behavior change as technologies change." (Kozinets, 2020, p. 113)

d. "Culturally diverse patients are less likely to access healthcare in general due to various barriers, including language, socioeconomic status, perception, understanding, distrust, confusion or fear." (Davidson & Howlett, 2023, p. 88)

e. "The acting and experiencing human being is not an ahistorical, disembodied and universal intellect, but rather a historical, embodied, affective creature that lives in a sociomaterial world of flux and uncertainty." (Brinkmann, 2019, p. 136)

f. "There are few human instincts more basic than territoriality." (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 29)

g. "Siblings living in the same home are often different in many psychological qualities." (Kaga et al., 1998, p. 78)

h. "Ritual is an act in which metaphors are used to capture meaning." (Foltz & Griffin, 1996, p. 326)

i. "We are born with brains, but our minds are made, and the shape they take is influenced by the culture in which that development occurs." (Eisner, 1998, p. 78)

j. "Human nature being what it is, everything that we consider important arouses our inner feelings or emotions, which are expressed with opinions and sentiments." (Liu, 2015, p. 4)

2. Transform these observable objects and actions into concepts; the first two offer examples:

a. Church Building → Religion, Spiritual Oasis

b. Facebook → Social Media, _____

c. House → _____, _____

d. Book → _____, _____

e. Mobile Phone → _____, _____

f. Tattoo → _____, _____

g. Pet (Cat, Dog, etc.) → _____, _____

h. Voting → _____, _____

i. Cleaning a House → _____, _____

j. Exercising → _____, _____

3. If you are currently working on your own qualitative study, make a list of the major concepts you can construct from your data and from your reflection on their meanings. Explore how selected concepts might interrelate or link for possible theory development. Select one of the key concepts and create a concept map, similar to Figure 2.1's format, labeling a minimum of five of the concept's constituent elements and/or processes.