# 7

## Approaches to data analysis, interpretation and theory building for scholarly research

The real mystique of qualitative inquiry lies in the process of *using* data rather than in the process of *gathering* data. (Wolcott 1994, p. 1)

Most experienced qualitative researchers would agree with the sentiments expressed in this quote from Harry Wolcott. But what is not made clear in the quotation is that the processes of gathering and of using (i.e., analysing, interpreting and building new theory from) qualitative data are deeply intertwined. From the moment you start collecting qualitative data, you can – and you should – begin the process of analysing it. In essence, analysis involves looking for patterns in your data. Some may be patterns you see because of the questions you are trying to answer through collecting the data. Some may be informed by theoretical frameworks you are familiar with. And some may be patterns that are completely unanticipated but that emerge out of the data as you reflect on it.

Looking for patterns within and across individual elements of data *as you collect the data* is vital since it will influence how your research project unfolds. The patterns you see may, for example, suggest new questions to ask of informants, new bodies of literature to read, and new ways of using the data you are collecting. And sometimes, data analysis tells you that the research question you thought you were addressing either is not all that interesting, or cannot be answered using the data you are gathering. It may also suggest another research question that is both interesting (perhaps more so than your original question)

and answerable by your data. Thus, analysing data as you collect it is essential for shaping the research project.

Data analysis, moreover, is foundational to your interpretation and theory building. In fact, the lines between data analysis and interpretation/theory building are somewhat arbitrary. The linkage between them is iterative rather than sequential. But if the term 'analysis' is used to refer to finding patterns in the data, then the phrase 'interpretation and theory building' can be used to refer to coming up with an account of what the patterns mean. Compared to description, interpretation and theory building develop a more abstract, more general, or more complete explanation or account of a category of phenomena (the case or context you are studying thus comes to be considered a specific example of that more general category). **When we use the term theory, we follow Bourdieu's (1977) notion and refer to a system of ideas or statements explaining some phenomenon.** We use the phrase 'building new theory' to encompass identifying new concepts or constructs or processes that help us understand something about the phenomenon, identifying new variants in a phenomenon and the factors that help us understand and explain them, identifying exceptions that delineate when an existing theory is relevant, and/or challenging the adequacy of existing theory.

In the remainder of this chapter, we elaborate on techniques for data analysis, and for interpretation and theory building, and provide illustrations. In this chapter we assume that publication of an academic paper is your goal. In the next chapter, we consider analysis with the goal of deriving managerial implications. We also continue below with a series of exercises that are intended to aid in acquiring and practising analytic skills within an academic framework.

## Analysing data

Regardless of whether you have started collecting interview data, fieldnotes from participant observation, visual data, or archival data from sources such as blogs, websites, or annual reports, the fundamental step in your data analysis will involve coding. Coding refers to discerning small elements in your data that can retain meaning if lifted out of context (Ely et al. 1997, p. 161). **Codes are concepts and these concepts vary in their concreteness/ abstractness as well as their emic/etic nature. Another way of describing coding is 'reducing data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments' (Cresswell 2007, p. 148).** Regardless of whether the data you are coding is textual, visual, aural, or artefactual, the same considerations apply. For ease of discussion and because it is most common, we assume in

this chapter that your data are transcribed text transcripts. We will also look at coded elements of interviews taken out of the context of the entire interview as well as out of the entire set of interviews. Nevertheless, it is critical to immerse yourself in the entire dataset so that you are familiar with the context before you start to code. This will help you avoid the problem of coding, interpreting, or quoting people out of context.

For example, the following text is representative of that posted by bloggers who were studied by Eileen and Daiane Scaraboto (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). In this project, they looked at the online collective of 'plus-sized' consumers who are frustrated with the offerings available from clothing marketers. Bloggers routinely post statements like the following about the difficulties they face in finding suitable fashion options:

> When a favourite dress gets a major stain or tear, I basically feel a sense of panic. Last week, one of my 'go-to' skirts got caught in a car door and developed a tiny hole. My response entailed a surge of pure adrenalin. I rushed to the ladies room, did some elaborate rinsing, then as soon as I left work I went in search for just the right colour of thread at shops all over town. Then I laboured over each stitch required to repair the rip, hoping I could do that invisible stitching thing they taught us a hundred years ago in home economics. Now if I could count on being able to go to a local store and find a new skirt that suits me just as well, I'd have shrugged it off. But NOOOOO. I've learned from bitter experience that it won't work that way. The truth is, if I don't fix it, I'll spend months if not years looking for a replacement. I have no reason to believe I'll ever find one that makes me look good like this one did, and that I am happy to wear again and again.
>
> Those of you who have experienced the pangs of style scarcity will feel my pain. Of course we all know that things could be worse – we could lose our jobs or our homes, or we could lack the basic necessities of life. Fashion famine isn't on the same level. But when our hard-won wardrobes are in any way diminished, we truly do feel a sense of panic rising up. We're not like the women who wear size six or ten or twelve. We can't just stroll into the Banana Republic or Barneys and find some that fits and feels good. No, my friends, fat fashion is in short supply – we are talking resource scarcity here.

In examining a passage such as this one, several codes can be assigned. For example, the sentence 'No, my friends, fat fashion is in short supply – we are talking resource scarcity here' is assigned the code *fashion resource scarcity*. This seems both obvious and important to code as it speaks to the blogger's experience as someone who experiences a shortage of the plus-sized clothing she desperately needs. **It is also worth mentioning that this is an 'emic' code, meaning it draws directly on the language used by the people being studied.** It seems particularly interesting to us, as we rarely think of stylish or fashionable clothing as resource, much less as one that is in scarce supply.

A perhaps less obvious code is associated with the mentions of Banana Republic and Barneys. We code these with the label *mainstream brands*. This is worth noting because it indicates what the writer wants (i.e., to be able to shop at common bricks and mortar retailers), and hints at why she considers herself to be experiencing comparative scarcity (i.e., she lacks the convenient options open to women who can shop at such mainstream stores). **Note that this is an 'etic' code, meaning that we are using language and concepts (e.g., mainstream) that are not necessarily those of the people we study, but that seem appropriate to us within our scholarly field of interest**. A third code is associated with the portion of the passage that self-consciously acknowledges that the style scarcity is a less pressing concern than those facing people who lack a job or a home or basic necessities. We labelled this *legitimacy of desires* as it seems to suggest that the writer fears that her desire for more clothing options is somehow shallow, frivolous, or illegitimate given the scope of other societal issues. This, too, is an etic code.

These codes are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate what we mean by identifying meaningful units of data. Codes can be assigned to individual words, to sentences, to paragraphs or to chunks of text of varying lengths. And multiple codes can be applied to the same text.

Keep in mind that coding is iterative. The process typically involves generating an initial set of codes within a dataset (e.g., the transcripts from an initial set of interviews or fieldnotes). As new codes emerge, you have to go back to recode materials that you considered previously. After initial coding, the next step is to examine the set of codes to see which can be collapsed into slightly more abstract categories or expanded into finer codes. This process continues as new data is collected, new codes are identified, and existing codes furthered collapsed and refined into more abstract categories.

To give you a few more ideas about coding, which is so fundamental to the process and so daunting initially, we offer some 'tips' that might help you get started or that might help you find some interesting patterns that you overlooked on first reading.

1  Be alert to metaphors. Coding metaphors can help you figure out how people are making sense of their own reality (cf. Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). In the passage above, likening lack of fashion options to a 'famine' indicates that clothing choices are not experienced as frivolous fancies, but rather as critical necessities.
2  Look for indicators of strong emotion. They provide simple clues as to what is important to those who have produced whatever text you are analysing. In the passage we included above, strong emotions (panic, bitterness, frustration) are attached to the lack of readily accessible fashion options.
3  Listen (watch out) for phrases you have heard in other contexts that seem to be 'imported' into the context you are studying, like the phrase 'scarce resource'. This

may point to context-spanning discourses that structure the ways people think about the particular context you are studying.

4 Identify categories of actors who matter in the context you are studying. In the passage above, mainstream marketers (like Banana Republic, Barneys) are targeted for particular contempt. Thinking about this may lead you to identify other categories of actors, or to code the types of inter-dependencies that may exist or may be perceived as causing conflict between your actors in your context.

5 Notice the kinds of actions that are taken or contemplated. In the passage above, mending clothes is one kind of action that can be juxtaposed with others, in particular shopping. Being alert to actions that are commonly taken or contemplated can also sensitise you to actions that are rare or that are considered illegitimate.

6 Consider motives that lie behind the production of the text you are coding. Alvesson (2003, p. 14) notes that it would be naïve to regard any interviewee or informant in a research project simply as a 'competent and moral truth teller, acting in the service of science and producing the data needed to reveal his or her "interior" (i.e., experiences, feelings, values) …'. So whether you are coding interview data or some other kind of text, consider what kind of purposes might lie behind the creation of that text. In the passage above, the motives of lobbying for change in the fashion system and against weight-based discrimination in society at large could be considered.

7 Probe for contradictions. Contradictions may be found between seemingly incompatible elements of the text you are coding, or portions of the text may contradict assumptions you had made prior to starting the research. A puzzle related to the passage above concerns the fact that marketers seem to be missing an opportunity to serve a customer need; in 'normal' circumstances marketing theories would predict that some marketer will fill an unmet need so long as they can do so profitably. Coding puzzles like this can help you think out what other data you might need to collect to solve the puzzle, and might open up new research questions for consideration.

**EXERCISE 7.1**

1 Examine the passage above and see what other codes you might generate.
2 Get a colleague to engage in the same task, each of you working independently for a few minutes.
3 Compare the codes you have generated. See whether the same chunks of text led to different codes. Discuss between yourselves *why* you thought the code might be significant, and whether you can see why your partner came up with the codes he or she did.
4 See if you can come up with some higher order codes that allow you to collapse or expand the individual ones you have created into slightly more abstract categories.

If there is consensus about the basics of coding, there is less agreement about what can inspire or shape codes. For example, the often-cited (but less often closely read) 'classic' of qualitative research, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1999), is considered by some to advocate a tabula rasa approach to analysing data; i.e., starting only with the data itself. Many other textbooks on methods seem likewise to suggest that you attempt to come to the data without being 'prejudiced' by outside influences.

While we do not believe you should form strong assumptions or specific ideas about what codes or patterns you will find in your data prior to collecting it, **we do not advocate a tabula rasa approach!** Rather, we believe that your initial and ongoing coding can be influenced both by the data itself and by:

- your initial research purpose or research question;
- prior literature relevant to your research question; and
- the qualitative research tradition in which you are working.

Let us think about how each of these might influence your coding.

## Research questions and coding

In Chapter 2, we highlighted the singular importance of research questions in shaping qualitative research projects. Naturally, that means they have some part to play in influencing how you code. Consider a couple of examples related to the project mentioned above, that focuses on the online community of plus-sized fashion consumers. Assume that our research question is concerned with 'coping' – specifically (1) 'How do consumer cope with style scarcity?' and (2) 'What factors influence how consumers cope?' If these were our research questions, we would be looking to code data that identifies coping tactics or strategies, and at individual, group, or cultural level factors that might influence a consumer to use one coping tactic rather than another.

Looked at through the lens of our first research question, we add the code *coping strategies*: the passage above indicates two coping strategies used to deal with style scarcity, one involving mending clothes that cannot be replaced, the other involving venting frustrations, which can be seen to be the purpose, at one level, of the entire passage. Our second research question inspires us to create the code *social comparisons*. We assign this code to the portion of the text in which the writer indicates that she compares herself with 'women who wear size six or ten or twelve', and we flag it since we wonder whether making such comparisons might influence the choice of coping strategies.

Clearly, it is possible that we might have come up with these codes without having formulated research questions related to coping. But had we decided in advance that our research might focus in whole or in part on coping, then we would be sensitised to both different types of, and different influences on, coping. Thus we would deliberately seek out such phenomena in the data transcript. One of the best reasons for letting research questions influence the codes you consider is that it helps you to know if your questions can or cannot be addressed through the data you have collected. If not, it might mean you need other data, or it might mean you need to reframe your research question.

## Prior literature and coding

If you have heeded the advice we have offered in previous chapters, you will know we advocate looking at literature that relates to your research question before, during, and after data collection. And if you have done so, then it is both likely and appropriate that there will be concepts that you have identified from your reading that will sensitise you to how you might code portions of your data.

Sticking with the same example, let us assume that our research focus on consumer coping has meant that we have read papers in consumer research and psychology journals on the subject of coping and we are familiar with Goffman's (1963) work on stigma and managing identity. Having done so, we would know that the established literature on coping has created typologies of coping strategies or coping factors, and we might therefore be alerted to code for these. For instance, Duhacek (2005) identified eight coping factors (e.g., action, rational thinking, emotional support seeking, and denial) and we might create sub-codes under the general *coping strategies* code for portions of text that seem to indicate one or more of these coping factors is present in our data. For example, mending clothes as described in the passage above might be coded as a type of *action based coping*.

Looking to the prior literature for codes obviously opens you up to the potential pitfall of 'force-fitting' data. You must avoid assuming that because prior literature has identified (for example) eight types of coping that all or even some of them will be evident in your data. Further, there is the risk that seeing things through the filters of prior research will blind you to original codes and ultimately original insights. **However, the risks associated with not knowing what's in the prior literature far outweigh any benefit you might have from ignoring it**. You risk 'reinventing the wheel' (i.e., discovering what is already established). Further, you risk not seeing how your work can extend or even challenge assumptions that have been made in prior literature. And if you

cannot complement or show up the limitations of prior work, you will have a hard time convincing your audience that you are saying and doing something new. So our advice is that you deliberately cultivate a conversation with the prior literature through your coding: see how the insights others have generated might inform your own.

## Research traditions and coding

In Chapter 2, we described some of the different types of research traditions. If you have not read that chapter, you might want to scan the pages on research traditions. We bring them up again here because one of the ways in which they shape research projects is in guiding what you pay attention to … and coding is nothing if not paying close and systematic attention to your data.

Since we have described each research tradition already, here we will just take the opportunity to illustrate how some of them might influence the coding of the data on plus-sized consumers. First, if we were working in the phenom-enological tradition, codes related to the nature of plus-sized consumer lived experience would be natural. For example, the code *unreliable marketers* might be generated to reflect the writer's experience of mainstream marketers as unre-liable in meeting her perceived needs; the code *enforced self-reliance* might cor-respond to her experience of wanting to rely on her own skills and initiative in the face of an unreliable market.

If we were working in the hermeneutic tradition, we would be interested in widespread discourses or logics that are shaping the ways that consumers see the marketplace and how they react to it. For example, we might generate the code *consumer sovereignty.* Consumer sovereignty is a term for the culturally pervasive concept that, in a free market, consumers determine the goods that are pro-duced; this makes them 'sovereign' over what is produced in an economy (Henry 2010). We can apply this term to the entire passage, since this implicit cultural discourse appears to be influencing the underlying argument it is making: that consumers of plus-size fashion *lack* sovereignty. Tacitly inspired by the discourse, the writer believes that marketers should be offering them what they want and that fashion should be readily available.

If we were working in a postmodern tradition, we would focus coding on the metanarratives that are taken for granted, and how they might be challenged, inverted, or deconstructed. For example, throughout the post, the writer uses the term 'fat'. Scholars have suggested that there is a dominant narrative regarding fatness, namely that it 'is contextualised as pitiful and/or many of the following: lacking in moral fibre, diseased, potentially diseased, greedy and lazy, not just ugly but disgusting, pathetic, underclass, worthless, a repulsive joke, a problem

that needs to be treated and prevented' (Cooper 2008, p. 1). The postmodernist might consider how the passage reflects, reinforces, or challenges the dominant metanarrative associated with fat and fatness.

Turning to a critical tradition, we would want to develop codes that reveal how the focal group (women who wear plus-sized clothes) is marginalised, and which actors or practices in the system contribute to their marginalisation. The passage that refers to the lack of availability of plus-sized clothes at specific retailers that cater to women who wear smaller sizes could be coded *retailer discrimination*. You might also code for the consequences of discrimination. In the passage above, the emotional consequence of the lack of retail selection is described as *panic*, which could be another, more emic, code. In some of the computer software that can be used for data coding (see Chapter 8) we might also have a link to data about the origin of retailers' and bloggers' practices. Later this might help us to compare more easily practices associated with retailers versus bloggers.

A researcher operating within the semiotic tradition might step back from viewing the passage as an indication of the blogger's experiences, and regard the text as a piece of rhetoric crafted with words and phrases that symbolically convey a particular set of meanings, perhaps with persuasive intent. In examining the language of this passage carefully, a semiotician might attach particular codes to the terms with which the writer chooses to describe her fashion choices (Mick and Oswald 2006). She construes fashion as a *resource*; it is contrasted with other vital resources (food and shelter) thus positioning it as a necessity, albeit one that is less critical to survival. A semiotician might further code the rhetorical choice of the term *scarce*. As noted above, it is somewhat unusual to think of fashionable clothing as a scarce resource. In using these terms, and in grouping fashion with (other) necessities like food and shelter, the writer is laying the symbolic groundwork for positioning plus-sized fashion as a political cause, not just a personal frustration.

Finally, someone with a neopositivist approach to qualitative data analysis might look for codes conducive to identifying important constructs in the data, along with the causes and consequences of that construct (Silverman 2011). In the passage above, a focal construct that might be coded is *unmet needs*: the writer seems clearly to be expressing that she, at least, has needs for fashion that are not being met by the marketplace:

> Now if I could count on being able to go to a local store and find a new skirt that suits me just as well, I'd have shrugged it off. But NOOOOO. I've learned from bitter experience that it won't work that way. The truth is, if I don't fix it, I'll spend months if not years looking for a replacement. I have no reason to believe I'll ever find one that makes me look good like this one did, and that I am happy to wear again and again.

In examining the larger database that has been collected concerning plus-sized consumers, a researcher working in the neopositivist tradition could be seeking antecedents and consequences of unmet needs within a segment.

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**EXERCISE 7.2**

1 Drawing on the passage above, identify some codes that would correspond to self-perceptions of *unmet needs.*
2 Compare and contrast your codes with those of a colleague who has undertaken the same exercise.
3 In comparing your codes, consider what theories you have gleaned from other readings that led you to identify additional reasons why needs may be unmet, or that might suggest some individual level or market level outcomes of unmet needs. This might help you to identify other potential codes in the data – which in essence is coding that entails integrating prior literature, as described in the section on prior literature and coding.

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Although we have discussed the influences on coding as though they were discrete, in practice they never are. The text itself will always suggest some codes to you, as will your research questions, the prior literature, and the research tradition in which you are working. The trick is not to disentangle these influences, but rather to be open to them all as you generate initial codes, collapse some of those together, and create more abstract codes that integrate a set of lower level codes.

## Interpretation and theory building

As we indicated in the introduction to this chapter, data analysis is difficult to distinguish sharply from interpretation and theory building. The process of identifying lower order codes and aggregating them into higher order, more abstract, codes is clearly an interpretive one. However, as you move further along in this process, the emphasis shifts from identifying patterns in the data to attempting to find meaning in the patterns.

In this section we discuss several ways you can develop an interpretation of what the patterns in your data may mean and ultimately build theory. As a reminder, when we use the term theory we mean a system of ideas or statements that help us understand some aspect(s) of the phenomenon in which you are

interested. For purposes of publishing in scholarly journals, that is the goal on which you should be focused.

As you are reading what follows, please keep in mind that even though we present analysis, interpretation and theory building as a linear process, in practice you may expand codes, contract them, and revise them as interpretation and theory building progress. You may also tack back and forth between the data, the codes, the literature and your emerging theory. And you may also have *eureka* moments along the way when minor epiphanies send you back to revamp your coding and test an emerging interpretation (Thompson 1990).

## Looking for variation

Once you have developed and done some refining of your coding scheme in the analytic stage, you can start to look for variation in your data. When we talk about looking for variation, what we mean is seeking differences between one group and another in terms of the codes you associate with them. For example, when Russ and his colleagues Güliz Ger and Søren Askegaard were analysing data for their study of the phenomenon of consumer desire, they looked for variation in the codes that occurred in the data collected from informants in the three countries they studied: Denmark, Turkey and the USA. They did so in order to assess whether there might be differences in the experiences of desire 'across New World versus Old World, established versus transitional markets, Christians versus Muslims, and social welfare systems versus an individualistic market-based system' (Belk et al. 2003, p. 332). This led them to identify both commonalities and differences in terms of the dimensions of desire that were typical for informants in the distinct cultures.

*Where* you look for variation depends on your project. If you have collected interview data from a group of individuals, you might think about salient sociological or demographic characteristics that differ between them, such as social class, age, or gender, and see whether the codes that occur in data collected differ between those in one category versus another. If you are studying members of a consumption community, you might study differences between newcomers and those who have long been members. If you are conducting a multi-sited inquiry, you might look at whether the codes you associate with data collected from one locale differ from those you have associated with data collected from another. In general, what makes sense in terms of which groups to compare and contrast will be influenced by the variability in terms of those from whom you have collected data, as well by your research question, the prior literature, and your research tradition.

1  Identify a set of five papers based on qualitative data that have been published within the last five years in either *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing*.
2  Determine whether the authors' approach to data analysis included looking for variation.
3  If the authors did look for variation, identify the bases on which they looked for variation, and consider the rationale that led them to consider grouping the data as they did.
4  If the authors did not report looking for variation, consider whether there are some bases for variation that they could have considered based on the data set they assembled, their research question, the prior literature they cite, or the research tradition in which they appear to be grounded.

Before we leave the topic of looking for variation, we want to note a suggestion made by our colleagues Eric Arnould and Melanie Wallendorf. In writing about ethnography, they recommend that you look for variation in the codes that you discern in data obtained from interviews versus data from observation or from archival sources (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). We encourage you to follow their advice in any instance where you have multiple kinds of data. Detecting discrepancies between what people say and what people do, or between what they recall and what the archival record shows, can provide important clues that can contribute to your interpretation and theory building.

## Looking for relationships between codes: elements of phenomena, processes, and outcomes

The process of grouping lower order codes into higher order codes entails looking for relationships between codes. But you can push further by considering how higher order codes relate to one another in meaningful ways. One very systematic description of how to look for the kinds of relationships between codes has been offered by Strauss and Corbin (1998). They distinguish between open coding (such as that which we have illustrated in Chapter 8) and axial coding. When they use the term axial coding, they mean looking in the data for concepts or constructs that would be related to the central phenomenon or construct under investigation. While some might regard the advice Strauss and Corbin offer as being appropriate only if you are developing grounded theory, our view is that this is useful advice even if you are not 'doing' grounded theory.

We would encourage you to take from their ideas those that are useful to you in interpreting the patterns that exist between elements in your dataset.

(Do note however that if you are going to try to claim to be doing a grounded theory analysis, you should be aware of the disparate ways in which the original proponents of grounded theory, Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, independently developed their views on what it actually means to conduct an analysis that leads to grounded theory. As Jones and Noble (2007) note, Glaser is adamant that work that is the product of the grounded theory methodology *must* be created through what he calls 'open', 'selective' and 'theoretical' coding (see e.g., Glaser 2001). Strauss (e.g., Strauss and Corbin 1998) allows that grounded theory may be produced by using some mix of approaches to coding, and recommends not only open and axial coding, but also a 'coding paradigm' that looks for conditions, interactions, strategies, and consequences (Strauss 1987). For an excellent starting point for understanding what it now means to do grounded theory, see Jones and Noble (2007)).

Generally speaking there are three ways that codes you have identified can relate to one another. First, codes can be related to one another because they comprise distinct dimensions of the same construct, or distinct elements of the same phenomenon if you prefer such terminology. Second, they can be related to one another as steps, stages, phases or elements in a process. Third, they can be related to one another in an explanatory fashion: that is, they can be linked based on the premise that some codes can be interpreted as helping to understand why a focal phenomenon exists or has particular characteristics, while others are seen as being explained by, or being a consequence of or response to that focal phenomenon. Interpreting groups of codes as elements of a phenomenon, as processes, or as explanations for/outcomes of a phenomenon can constitute a new theoretical contribution if your insights are novel. To illustrate how this works, we will give examples of studies that built theory in each of these ways.

*Elements of phenomena.* We can draw once more on Russ, Güliz, and Søren's paper on consumer desire to provide an example of relating codes to one another as elements of a phenomenon. Recall that when they interpreted their data, they identified a set of elements that characterised the experience of desire. (Note that it was on these dimensions that they found that people from different cultures varied.) Specifically, the elements of desire that they found to vary across informants from different cultures were: the extent to which desire was experienced as embodied passion; the extent to which it entailed desire for otherness; the extent to which it entailed desire for sociality; the extent to which is was associated with a sense of danger and immorality; and the extent to which it was associated with distance and inaccessibility. In essence, this identification of the dimensions of the experience of desires constitutes a

clarification of the nature of desire as a phenomenon or construct: it helps us understand the complexity of the phenomenon and the variable ways in which it can manifest itself in human experience.

Eileen and her co-author Cele Otnes have referred to this kind of theory building as 'mapping' a construct, and they regard it as a type of theoretical contribution that is particularly valuable when constructs have 'analytical generalisability', in that they account for a large number and range of empirical observations (Fischer and Otnes 2006). Desire is exactly such a phenomenon: it is pervasive across times and cultures. Mapping a construct like desire can help make sense of disparate bodies of research, and it can help structure new research questions on why certain dimensions are more or less prominent in certain contexts.

*Processes.* One of the most important kinds of contributions that qualitative researchers can make is to develop process theory. Whereas variance theories provide explanations for phenomena in terms of relationships among antecedent and outcomes, process theories provide explanations in terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome. Temporal ordering is central to process theories, so they require developing an understanding of patterns in events. Anne Langley (1999) describes a number of different strategies for building theory from process data. We would particularly draw your attention to what she defines as a 'temporal bracketing' strategy (pp. 703–704).

This approach to building process theory entails identifying 'phases', not in the sense of a predictable sequential process but as a way of structuring the categorisation of events. Events that cluster within a phase have internal coherence; they are categorically different from events that are grouped together as part of a different phase. Many temporal processes can be analysed in this way, and doing so allows you to compare and contrast conditions that give rise to dynamics in different phases. Langley notes that temporal bracketing strategy is especially useful 'if there is some likelihood that feedback mechanisms, mutual shaping, or multidirectional causality will be incorporated into the theorisation'. And we would argue that in most instances of process theories published in market or consumer research, we would expect to find feedback mechanisms, mutual shaping and/or multi-directional causality.

Again, the paper by Russ and his colleagues Güliz and Søren provides an example of process theorising that features temporal bracketing. In their work, they developed a general account of a process through which desire emerges and evolves. Although they acknowledge that desire is experienced as an emotion, they also posit that there is process during which emotions change, especially when desires are realised. In the 'cycle of desire' (see Belk et al. 2003, p. 344), they argue, based on their data analysis, that the initial stage is an individual self-seductive imagining and an active cultivation of desire. Desire, they conclude,

is kept alive until the object is acquired or until it becomes clear that there is no hope that it will ever be acquired. Either the realisation of a desire, or the recognition that desire has been frustrated, can lead back to the beginning of the cycle, i.e., to imaging that which is desired. If you think about the analysis and interpretation that led to this process theory of desire, you can see that Russ et al. found recurring patterns in their data that they ultimately interpreted as being adjacent elements of a process, and as they developed their thinking, a cyclical process theory emerged.

It should be noted that not all data lend themselves to building process theory. Sometimes informants are able to reconstruct a process from memory, particularly if it is one they have gone through recently and or cycled through often (such as the cycle of desire). Ideally, particularly if you are theorising about processes that happen over an extended period of time and that involve a range of actors, it is best to have longitudinal data.

Our colleague Markus Giesler had such longitudinal data acquired through an engagement spanning seven years with music downloaders and music marketers. He conducted his research over the period of time during which downloading exploded in popularity and was ultimately challenged by various marketplace actors. Markus was able to use this data to analyse how markets in the cultural creative sphere evolve through iterative stages of structural instability (Giesler 2008). Markus identified common patterns over time, namely consumers' recurrent attempts to legitimise their preferred music consumption mode which in cyclical fashion provokes corporate reactions that attempt to de-legitimate downloading. Conducting a processual analysis on longitudinal data gave Markus a unique opportunity to develop theories about how markets evolve when consumers' collective actions threaten to destabilise them.

*Understanding conditions that give rise to a phenomenon or the consequences precipitated by a phenomenon.* Although some regard the notion of conditions that give rise to a phenomenon and consequences precipitated by that phenomenon as relevant only in neopositivist traditions of qualitative work, our observation is that many scholars who are working in other research traditions ultimately develop theories that speak either to conditions (often cultural or social) that give rise to some focal phenomenon of interest, or to outcomes or responses (often the strategies people adopt or reactions that people have) that are precipitated by that phenomenon. We believe that you do not have to eschew the search for conditions and consequences when you are developing theory from the interpretation of qualitative data. Indeed, we think that many of the best theories that have been developed by our peers in the marketing and consumer research communities have explained why things happen the way they do, or why things sometimes turn out one way and sometimes turn out another. These kinds of theories are essentially variance theories, in that they

help us understand the conditions under which a phenomenon will/will not occur or the consequences that are likely to come about when a phenomenon occurs versus when it does not.

We will provide an example of a research project that answers a 'why' question through the analysis of qualitative data by describing the study of online word-of-mouth marketing that Rob undertook, together with Kristine De Valck, Andrea Wojnicki and Sarah Wilner. Rob and his colleagues studied the ways that prominent bloggers in online communities communicated about a product when it was 'seeded', that is, given to them by a marketer attempting to generate positive word-of-mouth buzz for the new product (Kozinets et al. 2010). One of the questions that they attempted to answer was *why* bloggers adopt different communication strategies – in other words, they looked for precipitating conditions that would help to explain the variability they observed across bloggers in the communication strategies they adopted. In interpreting the data they collected, Rob and colleagues identified four types of narratives that bloggers create (or more accurately co-create along with members of their community): these were the strategies that they labelled evaluation, explanation, embracing and endorsement. And they found that there were four 'influences' that shaped which type of narrative a particular blogger produced. These included (1) the blogger's own 'character narrative' or enduring personal story; (2) the type of blog forum in which the blogger was embedded (e.g., whether it focused on life crises, relationships, technical issues, or parenting issues); (3) the communication norms within the blogger's forum that govern the expression, transmission, and reception of messages within it and (4) the promotional characteristics of the marketer's campaign, such as the type of product, the product's brand equity, and the campaign's objectives.

It is important to stress that when qualitative researchers develop such explanatory theories by looking at relationships between coded categories of data, they pretty consistently make it clear that they are not suggesting that human behaviour can ever be wholly predicted or fully shaped by a finite set of factors. In the case of Rob and his colleagues, this disavowal was expressed as follows: 'outcomes [forms of blog posts] are complex and underdetermined' (Kozinets et al. 2010, p. 83). Yet, notwithstanding that outcomes are never fully determined by the individual, social, cultural and community factors that are identified through qualitative data analysis, we can, if we choose, distil the relationships we identify into propositional statements. In their article, Rob, Kristine, Andrea, and Sarah included the following proposition:

> A positive communal attitude toward a WOMM [word of mouth marketing] message will be a function of the way that it is (1) consistent with the goals, context, and history of the communicator's character narrative and the communications

forum, or media; (2) acknowledges and successfully discharges commercial-communal tensions or offers a strong reason an individualistic orientation is suitable; and (3) fits with the community's norms and is relevant to its objectives. (Kozinets et al. 2010, p. 86)

It is extremely important to note here that including propositions in research is but one way of expressing its theoretical contribution. Indeed, some eschew this particular way of making a theoretical claim since it can be interpreted as signalling that the knowledge gleaned through qualitative research should be subjected to quantitative testing. Clearly, this is not the case.

In many papers, the expression of theoretical arguments takes the form of a series of sentences that simply lay out the logical connections that have been built through the study. Sometimes figures or diagrams are used as well to convey the logical flow of the theoretical claims being made. We have brought to your attention that fact that you may choose to use propositions, however, since some texts on interpretation and theory building in qualitative research might lead you to conclude this is somehow inappropriate. Our view is that it is neither inappropriate nor obligatory. We have raised it simply because considering logic of the kind expressed in a proposition such as the one Rob and his colleagues articulate may help sharpen your interpretive insight, and increase the theoretical clarity of your thinking. Keep in mind, though, that carelessly worded theoretical claims that make it seem as though you are being overly reductionist in your analysis can cause reviewers to reject your work.

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### EXERCISE 7.4

1 Go back to that same set of five papers from *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing* that you used to look for evidence of variation. This time, you will need to look very closely at their findings sections, any figures they have included, and at the discussion section where they summarise and identify implications of their work.
2 Identify the focal constructs or phenomena in their work – that which they seek to understand.
3 Now see whether they have 'mapped' the phenomenon by identifying elements of it, whether they've identified a process through which the phenomenon emerges or changes, and/or whether they have identified some conditions that help to explain the occurrence of the phenomenon, or common consequences of the phenomenon.
4 Try to write a sentence or two that captures the essence of the theory they have developed.

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This exercise is intended to help you build up an understanding of how others have developed theory from identifying relationships between coded categories in their data and to give you insight on how you might do so as well. We suspect once you have gone through this exercise, you will find that the next section will help you more fully understand what you observe, since many contemporary scholars are not really just building theory anew from data. They are also using prior theory to modify and build on existing theory, and this requires some explanation.

## Drawing on pre-existing theoretical perspectives

Increasingly (though not without exception), qualitative scholars are turning to pre-existing theory to help them develop their own unique conceptual insights into the things they study. We realise this may be a bit confusing, especially since the vast majority of prior texts on qualitative research do not mention using existing theory to build new theory. Indeed, some have asserted that prior theory has little role in qualitative research (e.g., Anfara and Mertz 2006). But a contemporary trend in scholarly research in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour (and allied fields such as strategy and management) is to embrace some prior theory in order to build new theory. Alvesson and Karreman (2011) are among the most explicit advocates of using pre-existing theory in the theory building process. They argue explicitly for 'theory development through recognising the fusion of theory and empirical material in the research construction process' (p. 3). They challenge the idea that researchers should build theory from data alone and advocate viewing data as a resource for extending and/or challenging existing theories. Given that a growing number of scholars see it is both viable and valuable to use one or more pre-existing theoretical perspectives to develop novel theory, we want to provide some insights into what this means and how it is done.

When we use the term 'pre-existing theoretical perspective' we do not simply mean 'the prior literature' (which may be a rather disjoint set of empirical findings related to your focal phenomenon). Rather, we refer to a set of concepts or a more fully developed theory that has been advanced by earlier scholars to explain a range of phenomena. Often, pre-existing theoretical perspectives can provide a lens through which your focal phenomenon can be viewed, and a set of enabling concepts that may help you answer your research questions. We will illustrate this by talking about just two pre-existing theoretical perspectives that have been used by a range of scholars to address a range of questions.

The first theoretical perspective is the semiotic square. Algirdas Greimas, a structuralist semiotician, introduced the semiotic square as a means of analysing paired concepts in a system of thought or language. In particular, Greimas proposed that concepts might relate to one another not just as binary opposites,

but in a range of other ways (for a fuller description of the semiotic square, look at Greimas 1987, pp. xiv, 49). The semiotic square has been used by a number of consumer researchers to help them develop theoretical accounts of relevant phenomena. For example, Rob used a semiotic square to help him address questions about how cultural and social conditions form into ideologies and how these ideologies influence consumers' thoughts, narratives, and actions regarding technology (Kozinets 2008b). He found that using the semiotic square in the context of his study allowed him to see relationships between seemingly disparate ideological elements, and to look at how paradoxical ideological elements interact to inform how consumers think about and use technology.

Others in the field have used the semiotic square for quite different purposes. For example, Paul Henry (2010) adapted the semiotic square to allow him to investigate cultural discourses that encourage or deter consumers from asserting their sovereignty in a market. Doug Holt and Craig Thompson (2004) used a semiotic square to analyse how mythologies of masculinity shape patterns of consumer behaviour and thought among contemporary North American men. And in his study of music downloaders, our colleague Markus Giesler used a semiotic square in order to understand how historical tensions between marketers and consumers arose and were resolved (Giesler 2008). The key point to be stressed here is that the same pre-existing theoretical perspective – the semiotic square – provided a useful means for building theory related to widely varying focal phenomena.

Another pre-existing theoretical perspective that has proven useful for many consumer researchers comes from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's body of scholarship is vast, and he provided a wide range of 'thinking tools' – that is, conceptual terms which frame his approach to understanding society as a whole, and specific practices and fields of practice within larger societies (for one account of Bourdieu's body of work, see Grenfell 2004). We will focus here on one of his concepts, that of 'habitus', a set of taken-for-granted tastes, skills, styles and habits acquired through early socialisation and subsequent education. The notion of habitus is one of the conceptual tools developed by Bourdieu that has been particularly useful to scholars developing consumption and market related theories.

Douglas Allen (2002) drew on Bourdieu's concept of habitus in developing his theory of how consumers come to make and feel comfortable with major life choices such as selecting a college. His goal was to make sense of choices that cannot well be explained by the rational choice or constructive choice frameworks that are best able to account for decisions made after extensive investment in deliberate and impartial consideration of choice alternatives. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Douglas developed his alternative theory of choice that he labelled the 'Fits-Like-a-Glove' or FLAG framework. It theorises choice

as socio-historically shaped practical experience; in other words, as something deeply influenced by the taken-for-granted habitus of the decision-maker. His particular context of investigation was student choice for postsecondary education, but he argues that the FLAG framework is applicable in many contexts.

Others have used Bourdieu's concept of habitus quite differently. One recent paper particularly worthy of note is by Tuba Üstüner and Douglas Holt (2010), who studied how status consumption operates among the middle classes in less industrialised countries. Üstüner and Holt did not simply use the concept of habitus to understand their data, but developed a theoretical contribution by showing that their data enabled them to revise Bourdieu's concept to make it more appropriate for application in a non-Western context. Taken together, these papers show how new theory can be developed either by applying a pre-existing theory and using it to answer a novel research question, or by challenging such theory by applying it in a new and different context.

There are many, many other pre-existing theories that have been used by individual researchers in our field. And often, researchers will use not one but two or more prior theories to inform their analysis and interpretation. For example, Ashlee Humphreys (2010) used concepts from both institutional theory and new social movement theory in order to understand the market creation process that gave rise to the casino gambling industry. The key point we want to make is that you should be aware both of the foundational theories that are used, and of the ways that they help to inform new theory building. To that end, we advise you undertake the final exercise in this chapter.

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### EXERCISE 7.5

1  Review that same set of five papers from *Journal of Consumer Research* or *Journal of Marketing* that you used for the previous two exercises (or pick some new ones).
2  Identify any pre-existing theories that these papers used to develop their novel theoretical contribution.
3  Decide whether they directly applied the pre-existing theory or whether they revised or challenged that theory in examining it through the light of their data. Also consider whether the theories the authors used came from within consumer and market research or from related outside fields.

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We conclude this chapter on data analysis, interpretation, and theory building by noting something that is often unspoken, but that needs to be acknowledged. What counts as novel theory, and what counts as a valid way of developing a novel theory, is very much socially constructed. We have done our best here

to give you some insights into the current state of the art in marketing and consumer research. But if we were writing this paper purely for scholars in, say, operations management, we would be emphasising different things. Approaches to theory building and what counts as an original theoretical contribution are not standard across time or across disciplines. They are very much socially constructed within fields of practice, and they do evolve over time. Call it fashion trends in academic domains if you like. Just as members of different cultures may dress differently, members of academic communities may theorise differently. And just as cultures are continually changing, so are academic disciplines. So if you feel the advice you have been given here is different from what you have read in other domains, there is a reason for that! Our advice here is meant to facilitate the kinds of contributions that will help you publish in consumer or marketing research journals, and will be less relevant if you are targeting journals outside the fields of marketing, consumer research, or management.