

Chapter 12

Theoretical Approaches and Methodologies in Qualitative Research

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding realist and relativist epistemological approaches
 - ▶ Comparing phenomenology and social constructivism
 - ▶ Conducting an interpretative phenomenological analysis
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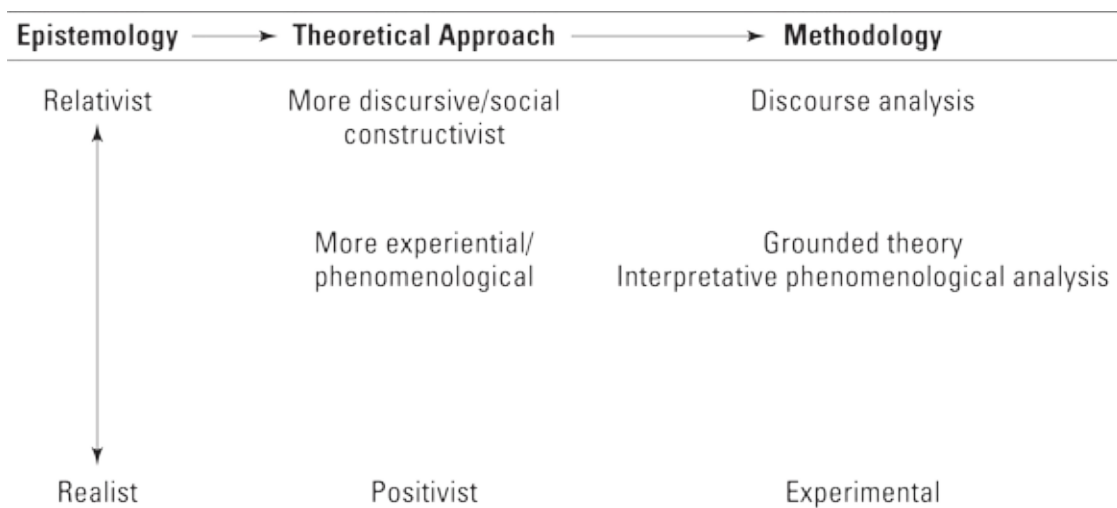
In [Chapter 10](#), we look at guidelines for conducting qualitative research. We also consider guidelines for analysing qualitative data in [Chapter 11](#). These guidelines apply to all types of qualitative research, but you need to have even more information to hand if you choose to follow a specific qualitative methodology when conducting your research.

In this chapter, we help you understand the different theoretical approaches and common methodologies that underlie some qualitative research. We also examine the differences between experiential and discursive theoretical approaches and focus on the methodologies of both interpretative phenomenological analysis and grounded theory. You may find that many of these terms are unfamiliar right now, so we provide plenty of detail throughout this chapter to help introduce these.

Experiential Versus Discursive Approaches

A *methodology* is a set of procedures that governs how you conduct research. In qualitative research, a methodology represents the way you conduct your research and analyse your data and is driven by a specific theoretical approach.

In qualitative research, you guide the way you conduct your research by following a methodology. The methodology that you choose to follow is driven by your theoretical approach, which is driven by your epistemological stance. We summarise this in [Figure 12-1](#). You may argue that [Figure 12-1](#) offers a simplistic way to think about how you choose a particular methodology, but it's still useful to think about things in this way because it illustrates how you choose a methodology – not in isolation, but as result of other considerations too.



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Figure 12-1: Choosing a qualitative methodology.

Epistemology refers to beliefs about what knowledge is and how you obtain it. You find this particularly important in research settings, because research is about obtaining knowledge. Your *epistemological stance* sits somewhere along the continuum between relativism and realism. You find out more about relativism and realism in the next section, '[Relativist and realist epistemologies](#)'.

After you have considered your epistemological stance, you need to think about an appropriate theoretical approach. A *theoretical approach* is a way of thinking about how you conduct your research. It's a more specific form of an epistemology (although not everyone makes a distinction between an epistemology and a theoretical approach). A theoretical approach expresses your belief about how the research data you obtain is influenced by your data-collection process.

In qualitative research, you have two main theoretical approaches:

- ✓ **The phenomenological approach:** This is the belief that you can understand the experiences of others via research that focuses on others' perceptions and experiences. (See the later section '[The experiential approach: Focusing on phenomenology](#)' for more information.)
- ✓ **The social constructivist approach:** This is the belief that reality is constructed through interactions with others and, therefore, research must focus on these interactions. (See the later section '[The discursive approach: Focusing on social constructivism](#)' for more information.)

After you've decided on your epistemological stance and your theoretical approach, you consider which qualitative methodology is appropriate for your study. [Figure 12-1](#) lists a few qualitative methodologies, but you'll find many more available that we can't cover in this book. We take you through grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological

analysis later in this chapter, as these are the two most common qualitative methodologies used in psychology.



Your epistemological stance and theoretical approach are likely to be driven by your own experiences of and aptitude for different types of research. These may not be obvious to you, but they are worth considering, as it is important to undertake research that fits with how you think about the world. So, think about how your epistemological stance and theoretical approach relate to your choice of methodology. Thinking about this helps you to avoid choosing a methodology that is inconsistent with your beliefs. For example, if you have a phenomenological theoretical approach, you may find it difficult to get your head around a methodology such as discourse analysis. The result is that you may end up with a research report that is inconsistent; that is, the decisions you make during the research process are not consistent with the methodology. You won't achieve assessment success with this sort of research report.



Some researchers consider themselves to be pragmatists. They claim to follow a pragmatic approach, rather than any of the approaches outlined in [Figure 12-1](#). A *pragmatic approach* is where you understand the value of different approaches to conducting research and you choose the one that is most suited to your research question. You're not tied to a particular epistemology. Rather, you understand the relativist and realist approaches to research and you use different methodologies as you feel you need to. To take a pragmatic approach, you require some experience of conducting research and a good general understanding of research methods.

The following sections look at relativist and realist epistemologies, and consider the differences between the theoretical approaches of phenomenology and social constructivism.

Relativist and realist epistemologies

Relativism and realism represent two opposite ends of a spectrum of epistemological beliefs. In many ways, they are opposing beliefs.

Relativism is the belief that no-one can hold or present an absolute truth – in other words, that no single version of reality exists, and so different people may have different perceptions of the world. As a result, research observations may differ depending on the context of the observation. Any observations are from the perspective of the observer, not a representation of what everyone observes. For everyone to observe the same thing, you'd require everyone to have the same view of the world. Relativism suggests that this isn't the case.

Realism, on the other hand, suggests that a single, measurable reality exists. In other words,

you can construct ways of observing the world so everyone makes the same observations. With realism, different people make the same observations, and this is crucial to scientific discovery. After all, if you don't consistently find similar observations of the same phenomenon by different people, how can you advance your understanding of the world?

You can see how these two perspectives come from different places. In some research disciplines, you'd be crazy to consider both, as the work of these disciplines only lends itself to one perspective or the other. For example, in laboratory-based sciences such as chemistry, chemists show little interest in different people's perspectives, focusing on information that can be accurately recorded, measured and replicated. Imagine you take a drug for high blood pressure. You want to make sure that the drug has been shown to reduce blood pressure time and time again, and that chemists in general agreed that the drug did exactly what it was supposed to. However, you'd be concerned if you were told to take the drug because, in the opinion of *one* chemist, it appeared to work (but other chemists didn't interpret the information in the same way!). Research disciplines such as chemistry are based on realism as opposed to relativism.

Psychology is a broad discipline and you find a place for both the relativist and realist viewpoints (and everything on the spectrum in between). Before you conduct your research, consider where you place yourself on the spectrum between relativism and realism.



When dealing with questions about how people experience the world, a relativist approach makes sense. In this case, people's views about the world help you to understand their experiences. By deciding to conduct qualitative research, you've already decided that you want to take a more relativist and less realist epistemological approach to addressing your research question.

The experiential approach: Focusing on phenomenology

Taking an *experiential approach* to research means that you concern yourself with the research participant's experiences of the world. The experiential approach to qualitative research is primarily, but not exclusively, driven by a phenomenological tradition.

A *phenomenological theoretical approach* flows from an epistemological stance that is more relativist than realist (although not at the extreme of relativism, like social constructivism – see the next section for more on this).

Phenomenological theoretical approaches to research aim to develop an understanding of a person's thoughts, feelings and perceptions. You seek to understand an experience from the perspective of your research participants. The phenomenological approach suggests that you can develop this understanding by making sense of your research participants' communications about their experiences. In other words, you aim to make sense of your participants' interpretations. Therefore, the phenomenological approach assumes a

perceived reality but also assumes that perceptions of reality differ between individuals, so you end up with multiple perceptions.

By taking a phenomenological approach, you aim to make sense of the perceived reality of your participants and how this reality is influenced by their assumptions about the world. To do this, you attempt, as much as possible, to prevent your own assumptions about the world from prejudicing your research. You also allow findings to emerge that are grounded in the data. To facilitate this, the phenomenological approach adopts a systematic, step-by-step treatment of the data to ensure that nothing is changed or distorted from its original meaning. [Chapter 11](#) takes you through these steps. Also, see the later section ‘[Exploring Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis](#)’ for an example.

Different methodologies can be considered to follow an experiential approach. Interpretative phenomenological analysis and grounded theory are two of the more commonly used methodologies. (You also get different types of grounded theory, and some are more experiential than others!) We look at grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis later in this chapter.

It’s possible to conduct a qualitative research project using a general phenomenological framework, rather than following a more specific methodology: this allows you to be more flexible in the way you conduct your qualitative research. However, it also means you need to work out ways of doing things for yourself, rather than following the guidelines of a specific methodology. Guidelines pre-agreed by others provide security, which is why most students of psychology prefer to follow a specific methodology when they conduct qualitative research for the first time.



Although you see obvious benefits to working within a specific methodology, keep in mind this less-obvious drawback. By labelling your research project with a specific methodology, you place constraints on how your research can be conducted, and if you step outside these boundaries, your research may not live up to its methodological label. You may be left with a project that’s considered poor practice rather than innovative.



If you choose to follow a prescribed methodology, ensure you adhere closely to its principles.

The discursive approach: Focusing on social constructivism

Discursive approaches to qualitative research are synonymous with a social constructivist theoretical approach. *Social constructivism* assumes that, in terms of collecting and interpreting data, you can’t separate the researcher from the participant. In other words, when you gather data from a participant, you aren’t collecting data which represents that

participant's experiences; instead, you play a role in constructing the data, as the data is a product of the interaction between you and the participant.

Social constructivism argues that there's no single reality that you can study, and that instead 'reality' is what individuals construct through their interaction with the world. You see a subtle but important difference here between social constructivism and phenomenology:

- ✓ In phenomenology, the implicit notion is that a reality does exist, although individuals perceive reality in different ways. Phenomenology focuses on these perceptions.
- ✓ In social constructivism, the assumption is that reality is specific to the individual and, therefore, you find multiple realities. The focus is on how individuals and groups socially construct these realities.

The social constructivist approach suggests that the world you experience at present is a social construction. Different social constructions are developed at different points in time and by different cultures, so how you understand the world, and what the world means to you, is part of a dynamic process.



By conducting research to explore someone's experience, you influence the social construction of this experience. The information research participants provide you about their experience is, therefore, affected by the data-collection process and the interaction between you and the participants. Social constructivists argue that you can't collect data about a person's experience, because the act of collecting data has an impact on how a person constructs this experience.

This all sounds very complex! Consider the following example to help you untangle this. Imagine you've just been to see a movie with your friends. When you leave the cinema, one of your friends says to you: 'That movie was rubbish, what did you think of it?' Now, what if you thought the movie was okay? You may respond by telling your friend about all the bits that you thought were rubbish, so you can agree with her. You may also respond by disagreeing with your friend, emphasising all the good bits of the film to prove that it wasn't rubbish at all. Whichever response you choose, it's likely to be affected by the interaction that has just taken place between you, such as by the way your friend asked the question, how much you like her, what you think she is trying to say, whether you think she knows what she is talking about and so on. All of these things have an impact on your answer. Is your answer representative of how you really felt about the film, or is it a product of the interaction? Social constructivists argue that it's the latter.



Social constructivists make the point that you shouldn't study qualitative data as if it is representative of the person's perception of a phenomenon. Rather, you should

interpret the communications of research participants to make sense of how they construct their perceptions.



A number of methodologies use the social constructivism theoretical approach – for example, discourse analysis. However, social constructivism is difficult to get your head around and further discussion of this type of research is beyond the scope of this book.

Exploring Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (or IPA) is a fairly new qualitative methodology. Researchers primarily use it in health psychology. Psychology students tend to prefer IPA over other qualitative methodologies because it was constructed by and for psychologists, so it's relevant to the types of questions you ask in psychological research. IPA also seems to have a clearer set of guidelines to follow compared to other qualitative approaches. As a result, IPA can seem like an attractive option for first-time researchers. It also helps that you can find a large and ever-increasing body of published psychological research that uses IPA, giving you plenty of examples to help you understand how this methodology works in practice.

IPA has two key features: the idiographic approach and the double hermeneutic. Any study that doesn't include these features can't be considered a true IPA study. In the following sections, we explore IPA in detail, looking at the idiographic approach and the double hermeneutic, and giving consideration to the outcomes of your IPA study.

Understanding the idiographic approach

IPA studies take an idiographic approach. An *idiographic approach* means that the research focuses on individuals. It is the opposite of a nomothetic approach.



A *nomothetic approach* means that the research focuses on understanding groups. In general terms, quantitative research tends to be nomothetic and some types of qualitative research tend to be idiographic.

Because IPA takes an idiographic approach, it aims to provide a detailed examination of individuals. This doesn't mean that IPA studies are always conducted with a single participant (although conducting an IPA study with a single participant makes sense). Taking an idiographic approach isn't about the number of people in the sample – it's about ensuring that the experiences of every individual are represented in any research reports (as opposed

to grouping the individuals together and presenting the average experience of the group). If you conduct an IPA study with several participants, you need to communicate a sense of the individual experiences of participants as well as the themes that you find when looking across all the individual data.



Given the time limitations on conducting a research study, consider carefully how many participants you need to include in your IPA study. If you include too many participants, you may find yourself swamped with data, making it difficult, if not impossible, to conduct an analysis that is true to the idiographic approach. Your analysis may then become a shallow summary of the participants' responses, or the sense of the individual may be lost in your data.



IPA studies usually include no more than about six participants. However, this depends on how much data you obtain from each participant. The number of participants in your study must be guided by the quantity and quality of data you obtain, and you won't know this in advance of collecting the data.

Contemplating the double hermeneutic

IPA is a phenomenological approach (the clue is in the name!) because it focuses on the account of a person's experiences and perceptions and seeks to understand how a person makes sense of these experiences. However, IPA also takes the position that you can't obtain a true understanding of a person's experience, as this understanding is influenced by the researcher's assumptions about the world and the wider social context. Therefore, you need a double interpretation to help you understand the research data.



When you conduct an IPA study, the first interpretation is the participants' interpretation of their experiences (which they communicate to you). The second interpretation is your interpretation of the participants' interpretations. This double interpretation is known as a *double hermeneutic*.



The double hermeneutic in IPA is influenced by social constructivism. Although IPA is phenomenological, it also acknowledges the role of social constructivism in helping you to make sense of the world.

If you conduct an IPA study properly, you must interpret the information provided by the participant. It's not enough to provide a description of the research participant's experience. A descriptive analysis is a good starting point for your IPA analysis, but you need to try to

understand the meaning behind the participant's description and the participant's attempts to make sense of that person's experience. So, you are trying to make sense of participants making sense of the world – the double hermeneutic again.



To help you engage in this deeper level of interpretation, you should draw on psychological theory. In other words, use your knowledge of psychology to help you make sense of both what people are thinking and the meaning behind what they are saying. No wonder psychology students like to use IPA!

To do this, you use a process similar to the process that many psychologists use in clinical practice. Psychologists gather information about a client's thoughts, feelings and behaviours and try to make sense of this information using their psychological knowledge. They then develop a *formulation*, which is a hypothesis about what the client is experiencing. The psychologist base this hypothesis on her interpretation of the client's experience. The hypothesis may be right or wrong, from the perspective of the client, but the psychologist bases it on what the client reports and the principles of psychology.

The interpretation process in IPA is very similar. In this case, the researcher gathers information about the participant's experiences and tries to make sense of this using psychological knowledge. The researcher then interprets this information and presents it as a set of themes.

Because IPA recognises that a research study's findings are a product of the researcher's interpretations and requires that the researcher speculates on the meaning behind the participant's interpretations (the double hermeneutic), the findings from your IPA study need to demonstrate a clear path from your raw data to your higher order interpretations. The reader can then trace your interpretations back to individual reports. Your approach to data analysis in an IPA study needs to be systematic and explicit.



Don't underestimate the amount of time you require to conduct your data analysis in an IPA study. You need to immerse yourself in the data to get a sense of the perspective of your research participant and to interpret what this means within the wider context of your study. Allow time to reflect on your interpretations of the data and how you arrived at these interpretations, and then to revisit your interpretations armed with these reflections. Refer to [Chapter 11](#) for more on taking a systematic approach to data analysis and reflecting on your data.



When you undertake a good quality IPA study, you may struggle with your analysis. You may revisit your analysis many times to change your interpretation of the data,

because you want to ensure that the individual voices of your research participants are being represented appropriately. You may also find it difficult to reduce your research report in light of any time limits or word limits imposed on it. You may feel that removing or reducing information distorts the picture and that your report doesn't now fully represent the information provided by your participants. However, you can feel reassured because these struggles are a positive indication that your data analysis has developed a sense of the research participants' experiences. You face dilemmas in your analysis because you want to communicate the stories of the individuals in your research. This is commendable and fits with the IPA methodology, so it's not something to be discouraged. You just need to ensure that you leave enough time towards the end of the research process to convert your information into meaningful summaries that retain the essence of the individual and the important elements of your interpretations.



The write-up of your IPA study is part of your personal journey through the research process, and it takes time.

Figuring out the end result

What does your analysis look like when you follow an IPA methodology? The end result can look very similar to the outcomes of a study where you've used thematic analysis. (Refer to [Chapter 11](#) for the results of a sample thematic analysis.) The processes may be different, but the outcomes can look similar if your thematic analysis takes a phenomenological approach (refer to the section '[The experiential approach: Focusing on phenomenology](#)', earlier in this chapter, for more on the phenomenological approach). One of the differences between the outcomes of thematic analysis and IPA is that IPA organises its themes into superordinate themes.

Superordinate themes group themes together into a more overarching theme. A superordinate theme represents the meaning of several themes. For example, in the sample transcript in [Chapter 11](#), several codes were identified in the data and these were translated into three themes:

- ✓ **Powerlessness:** Some codes highlight a lack of complaints by staff because of the fear of reprisal by management, as well as feelings of wanting to quit.
- ✓ **Ineffective management, effective self:** Some codes point to a lack of support from management and management's inability to organise employee leave. However, the participant is trusted and supported by others in the workplace.
- ✓ **Inflexibility:** Some codes highlight the lack of flexibility around leave due to workload, which results in stress.

With IPA, you may instead represent this small amount of data using a single superordinate

theme. Perhaps you label this theme ‘Frustrated tolerance’. This superordinate theme draws together all the data and themes in your transcript. It indicates the frustration felt by the participant because of the situation in her workplace, but also highlights her ongoing tolerance of the situation: the participant is frustrated enough to want to quit, but hasn’t yet done so.

A good IPA study identifies superordinate themes, explaining their meaning with reference to the data. In this way, superordinate themes act more like subheadings when you organise the presentation of your results: it’s these superordinate themes that you actually discuss in detail. The superordinate themes also help you think about possible psychological models that may help to explain the participants’ experiences. It is beyond the scope of this book to explain how you go about this in detail; refer to a book on qualitative analysis for further information.

Understanding Grounded Theory

In a grounded theory study, you aim to develop a theory that has been generated by (or is grounded in) the data. The process by which you derive a grounded theory is now known as *grounded theory* – the methodology has been labelled by its outcome!



Originally, a grounded theory methodology took a phenomenological approach (refer to the section ‘[The experiential approach: Focusing on phenomenology](#)’ earlier in this chapter for more on phenomenological approaches). However, over the years grounded theory has deviated from this approach, resulting in disagreements among researchers about what can accurately be described as grounded theory and the extent to which it is situated in a phenomenological theoretical approach (as opposed to a social constructivist theoretical approach). Even the two people who first developed this methodology (Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss) have disagreed about the approach that a grounded theory methodology should take!

As you’re aiming to develop a theory that is grounded in the data, the onus is on you to attempt to prevent your assumptions and theoretical knowledge from influencing the generation of your theory. You may interpret this as meaning that you must avoid reading any of the published literature in the area and that you need to avoid formulating specific research questions. However, this approach isn’t very practical: if you take this approach you’re unlikely to be able to direct your research project appropriately and complete it in time. It’s fine to develop a research question for a grounded theory study where the question is informed by your knowledge of the literature. What you can’t do is allow this knowledge to influence the generation of your theory – the theory needs to be generated by the data.



To avoid potential problems of inappropriate influence arising from your background knowledge of the literature, you must reflect on an ongoing basis about how your theory is developing and the extent to which it's grounded in the data. This becomes particularly important during the later phases of your study, because the theory you're developing may move away from the data and instead become informed by your knowledge. This happens because in the later phases of analysis, you are using your psychological knowledge to interpret the data and there is a danger that your interpretations might lose connection with the data and be driven by your existing knowledge. This is known as *theoretical sensitivity*. *Theoretical sensitivity* refers to your ability to understand the data and develop a theory that is grounded and meaningful.

In a grounded theory approach, you develop your theory through a process of data collection and data analysis until you reach *theoretical saturation*. *Theoretical saturation* is the point at which you have developed a theory that is grounded in the data, and this theory is not being modified (but instead is being further confirmed) by the addition of more data.

Data collection and data analysis proceed concurrently and influence each other. You analyse data as you collect it and establish how it adds to the development of your theory. You call this a *constant comparative method*. Remember to do this on an ongoing basis, because the development of your theory identifies gaps in the theory and helps you to work out what type of participants you need to continue to recruit to your study to help you address these gaps. In this way, your data analysis guides the way you select participants for your study. This is known as *theoretical sampling* (we explore theoretical sampling in [Chapter 10](#)). As a result, it can be difficult to tell how many participants you need for your study until you reach theoretical saturation. Typically, grounded theory studies have around 30 participants.



You don't conduct a grounded theory study in a linear way. Your data collection, data analysis and sampling processes follow a repeating cycle and this can sometimes make you feel that you're no closer to developing your theory than when you started! It's like travelling towards a point in the distance. If you fix your sights on the destination, you may feel you're making little progress; it's only when you look back at your starting point that you realise how far you've travelled. Therefore, although you need to keep your sights on your end goal – the development of your theory – you also need to let the data guide you to the more immediate questions that need to be resolved on the way to developing your theory.

Grounded theory studies tends to follow three phases: open sampling and open coding; relational sampling and focused coding; and discriminate sampling and selective coding.

Note that each phase refers to sampling and coding. This emphasises both the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling process as mentioned earlier in this section, and these are key features of grounded theory.

The following sections look at each of these phases in turn, and consider the outcomes of a grounded theory study.

Open sampling and open coding

Open sampling is the process of selecting the first few people to participate in your sample, and *open coding* is when you code the data with no pre-conceived themes in mind. You complete this process during the initial data-collection and analysis phase. You read the data from the first purposively selected participants to get an impression of how your data contributes to the development of your theory. You then code your data (using codes that may vary later in the analytical process).



You don't use these codes to group large chunks of data because this may lead you to engage in a level of analysis that is inappropriate for this stage of the study, which may result in premature analytical closure (refer to [Chapter 11](#) for more on this).



The codes that you use at this stage are meant to help you to develop your ideas. Although the codes need to stay close to the data, you need to make this initial interpretation of your data because otherwise the codes only repeat your data.

Relational sampling and focused coding

Relational sampling is selecting participants for the sample because they are likely to be able to help you add information to some aspect of your developing theory. *Focused coding* is identifying the most pertinent codes in your data and developing them into initial themes. In this phase, you select the most pertinent open codes and examine them further, sorting and comparing them. By doing this, you create initial themes for your theory that merge large chunks of data in a meaningful way.

During this phase, you select participants purposively to address elements of your developing theory. In other words, where you identify that aspects of your developing theory requires elaboration, you choose participants that you believe may be able to contribute something useful to this particular aspect of the theory. This enables you to elaborate on your themes and to identify the nature and limitations of the relationships between them. You may find yourself questioning your initial themes as a result, or you may instead break these down, or amalgamate them.



In this phase, you develop the concepts that become part of your theory.



Relational sampling is sometimes called *variational sampling*, and focused coding is sometimes called *axial coding*.

Discriminate sampling and selective coding

Selective coding means you focus on certain codes and initial themes for the purpose of generating a core theme. *Discriminate sampling* means you conduct purposive sampling to confirm the theory that you've developed and to demonstrate theoretical saturation. You identify the core theme of your theory and relate it to other themes. Your core theme is the single, superordinate theme that is central to the theory you generate. In other words, everything else hangs around this central theme.

The outcome of a grounded theory study

Your final theory, in a grounded theory study, needs to be plausible and to provide a recognisable description of the issue under investigation. You find this if:

- ✓ Your theory is truly grounded in the data.
- ✓ Your data is comprehensive enough to include adequate variation, thereby allowing it to be applicable in a range of contexts.
- ✓ The limits of your theory are clear.
- ✓ Your interpretation of the data is comprehensive.
- ✓ Your theory can be used in a meaningful way by those working in the area.



As discussed in the earlier section, '[Understanding Grounded Theory](#)', grounded theory is not a linear process (though we've demonstrated this to you in stages in the preceding sections). The key elements of the grounded theory approach that need to be evident in your outcomes are:

- ✓ Theoretical sampling until you reach theoretical saturation.
- ✓ A constant comparative method – you collect data and compare it with existing data on an ongoing basis.



Grounded theory requires you to handle a great deal of information. It's not just

about identifying themes in the data, but also about how these relate to each other and coincide to form your core theme. Therefore, you need a strategy for managing your data. Diagrams are useful and commonly used in grounded theory studies, and you may also want to consider using a qualitative data analysis computer package to organise your information as you develop your outcomes.



It's difficult to provide a useful example of grounded theory in action without setting out a wealth of information first. If you want to know more about how a grounded theory study turns out, take a look at published research that uses this methodology.