Chapter 17
Ways of Working in the Interpretive Tradition

Angela Thomas and Michael Corbett

> The literature regarding the process 'ordinary' researchers engage in as they struggle to make sense of qualitative data is sparse (Kendall 1999, p. 749).

Abstract The kinds of specialised questions that tend to be generated in educational contexts are intimately connected to professional practices, with the aim of understanding the complexities of social, discursive and textual practices within those contexts. This chapter presents an analysis of a range of difficult-to-categorise qualitative work that spans grounded theory, through post-structural analysis to structural linguistics, and which the authors in this section have used to address such complex and contextualised questions. What draws the work together is the notion of interpretation. The social, linguistic and psychological phenomena which form the heart of these questions raises challenges for researchers as they develop interpretive analyses that honours agency, multiplicity and difference. This chapter showcases and analyses the approaches of nine researchers as they undertake this kind of interpretive work. In the process, it also highlights the evolution of research methods, as new 'emerging' and continuously expanding forms of educational research driven by an ever-increasing range of educational problems, contexts, and interpretive tools to understand them.

Introduction

In the social sciences today perhaps the most pressing problem is that of finding ways to account for the resilience and power of structure while at the same time recognising and accounting for agency (Archer 2000; Bourdieu 1992; Giddens 1979). There have been a wide range of ways that the structure-agency nexus

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is theorised in contemporary educational research including structural theory, poststructural and postmodern theory, critical realism (Murphy 2013) as well as the way that contemporary qualitative research is haunted by poststructuralism, deconstruction (Lather 1991; Saint Pierre 2014) and other theoretical and methodological critiques of the interpretivist paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Giddens 1976).

Historically, this debate resonates with the rise of social research in the 20th century alluded to by Callingham and Hay in their chapter in this collection. Positivist and post-positivist forms of social research arose from the nineteenth century pursuit of a science of society, which would, as Auguste Comte imagined, position social analysis as the 'queen of the sciences'. In this foundational imaginary, the social sciences would build upon the comparatively simple inquiry in the physical and natural sciences to provide a calculus for social order. The positivist traditions in the social sciences derived largely from the Durkheimian sociological tradition combined the quantitative methods of the natural sciences with ethical and moral arguments that the social is both self-generating force that can be understood through rational inquiry and a necessary collective consciousness that could replace religion and tradition as a source of human solidarity.

Interpretive forms of social research arise from similar roots in the sense that this tradition reacted to grand structural functional imaginaries such as those of Durkheim and the analytic and theoretical traditions he inspired (c.f. Parsons 1950; Lazarsfeld 1961), arguing instead that qualitative analysis might support an understanding of social life that situates a conscious, interpreting agent at the centre of the process (Blumer 1986; Mills 2000; Wrong 1961). This tradition is traceable back to Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and epistemological and ontological positions in social philosophy, analysis and research that have struggled to come to terms with the problem of the perceiving subject marginalised in positivist traditions. In the United States, the important work of the Chicago School of sociology was influenced by anthropology, European hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions, and by the American pragmatism of Pierce, James, Mead and Dewey which has taken Anglophone educational scholarship in a direction which is more closely aligned with professional practice than in continental European academic contexts (Biesta 2015). More recently, the what has been called the linguistic, spatial and material turns in the social sciences have generated new 'emerging' and continuously expanding forms of educational research that we explore in the final section of this text.

In most forms of educational research conducted by higher degree students in Australian and North American education faculties today, we see the centrality of problems of practice rather than theoretically-driven, abstract conceptual, standard empirical or system analyses. We follow this pragmatic impulse here drawing on our experience as researchers and research supervisors to offer an interpretation of the ways in which RHD students face interpretive challenges that do not fall neatly within one or another established paradigm. Finding one's way to and between theory and method is generally a journey into what the actor network theorists describe as 'the mess' (Law 2004) where established theoretical categories are not

only unhelpful, they are often actually the hegemonic frameworks that blinker deep and nuanced analysis of specific educational problems as they appear on the ground in practice (Latour 2007). Each of the chapters in this section develops a particular set of responses not only to the substantive problems they take up, but also in the way that they problematise the transparency of data.

Educational research typically begins with a question, which informs (and even drives) the theoretical and methodological approach. The kinds of specialised questions that tend to be generated in educational contexts are intimately connected to professional practices, with the aim of understanding the complexities of social, discursive and textual practices within those contexts. Perspectives on knowledge-building in education are also centred on illuminating the issues, boundaries, and challenges in institutional practices in order to improve and transform education. Often this requires working at the borders, navigating ethical issues and recontextualising events from multiple perspectives. This leads HDR students on a search for new more flexible ways to understand and frame the complexities of practice. In other words, more unstructured and unique forms of interpretation and judgment are often at the heart of this process. This typically involves the construction and justification of methodologies that are nonstandard and that support and justify contextualised interpretation. In this search, established prescriptions can not only be unhelpful, they can actually prove problematic, or at least challenge the student and supervisory teams to think carefully about how this particular inquiry will stand up to scrutiny in established fields of inquiry.

This chapter presents an analysis of a range of difficult-to-categorise qualitative work that spans grounded theory, through poststructural analysis to structural linguistics. Each of the pieces, in different ways, illustrate the struggles RHD students encounter in the space in-between formulating structured analyses of social, linguistic and psychological phenomena in education, on the one hand, while on the other hand developing interpretive analysis which honours agency, multiplicity and difference. Methodologies that focus on interpretation also face the additional challenge of reflexivity and developing an intentional awareness and account of the interpretive process of writing and representing social phenomena. But this is much easier said than done, and the analytic habits and traditions that mark and reflect the positivist legacy of social research linger. The notion that researcher input is a form of bias is not easily replaced by one of conscious reflexivity, or accounting for inevitable researcher bias. It also needs to be said that qualitative research is still emerging as a legitimate form of social research and this emergence itself is haunted by persistent calls for an 'education science' (Kvale 2008) that is evidence-based according to the 'gold standard' of the double blind experiment (Lather 2004), or that represents a positive and pragmatic analysis of 'what works' (Biesta 2007, 2010) as represented by masses of quantitative meta-evidence (Glass 2016; Hattie 2008). These chapters also illustrate how, in the qualitative tradition (or dare we say paradigm), the ghost of positivism and the dream of transparent analytic procedures that are not reliant on either apriori theory or interpretation continues to stalk the academic corridors.

In the final section of this chapter, 'interpreting interpretation' we suggest that what these analyses have in common is the way that each of them represents an ongoing conversation with Glaser and Strauss' idea of grounded theory or the notion that data can generate theory through some form of more or less standardised analytic rigour. Animated as they are by a deep understanding of lived experience, and a deep immersion in some field of practice, these analyses all veer away from a distillation of a single truth about education to suggest a multiplicity of truths, which is, in our view, the important contribution of qualitative research over the last half century and an indicator of its future promise as a disruptor of the authoritarian drift in the field.

Diverse Interpretive Paths

Each of these chapters illustrates an interpretive path in which theory is employed at various junctures in the analysis, sometimes at the beginning, sometimes emerging in and through the process of the research itself and sometimes at the end of the process where theory is arrived at through a thoughtful encounter with data. The way that theory and method interact differently in these chapters illustrates how structure emerges through the exploration of a particular problem, within its equally particular context, and how the interpretive choices made by different authors give form to the analysis. What is apparent from this work is that it is difficult to categorise in any formulaic way, how theory and method work together and how these doctoral theses are structured. As much as doctoral students may wish for a template or a set of guideposts to orient their research, the research act itself inevitably presents problems and possibilities that then become part of the way the thesis ends up being structured. This is the particular problem of developing a methodology that sensibly addresses a problem of practice, which is consistent with what emerges as the knowledge claim or a theoretical 'take' on the problem itself. We offer the following table to illustrate the way that theory emerges in a way that is unlike the linear vision presented in most research methodology textbooks. In other words, theory enters actual doctoral research in different ways and at different times in the research act.

The role of literature in the nine chapters in this section is varied, including: theory as method, theory to drive method, theory throughout method, and theory as signposts. This is illustrated in Table 17.1. MacDonald and Hunter used an arts-based methodology as both theory and research. To interpret the ways that the dual roles of artist and teacher impacted on one another, the data consisted of an interwoven collage of narrative based on interviews, anecdotes, reflections, prose and imagery. Deleuzian theoretical concepts of 'becoming' and the 'rhizome' supported the narrative method. Here, theory is method and it orients MacDonald and Hunter in and through their research, ultimately structuring the thesis as both an analysis of becoming and as an act of becoming in itself.

Table 17.1 The role of literature in interpretive research

Researchers	Theory as method	Theory as driver of research	Theory during and after research
Beasy		✓	
Emery and Fielding-Wells			✓
Hugo			✓
Kitchener, Williams and Kilpatrick			✓
Koirala			✓
McDonald and Hunter	✓		
McMahon		✓	
Thomas		✓	
Zarmati			✓

Thomas, Beasy and McMahon all used theory to drive method. Thomas used theories of the teaching of linguistics to drive his research, and used linguistic analysis tools to analyse data. He also critically examined the role of testing in educational contexts moving toward a more critical framing of the problem of standardised testing in terms of its fairness to differently positioned youth. Beasy used social epistemology to frame her study, with sustainability theory and Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital and field used as a research lens to understand participants' social constructions of reality. In Beasy's work, Bourdieu's theories in conversation with hermeneutics, also informed the analytical framework. McMahon combined theories from sociology, sport ethnographic research, and the conceptual analysis of power to contextualise the study. These theories were used as an analytical lens to examine the data, and thus, in different ways, they contribute to the structure of the theses and to the arrangement of chapters and analysis

Perhaps most common across the chapters was the use of theory before, during and after the method. Koirala used a combination of social capital theory, second language learning and integration theory to initiate his study and develop his analytical framework. However, following the data collection, critical lenses such as feminist theory and critical race theory were employed to shed further light on the data. Emery and Fielding-Wells describe how their literature review was written in two parts: before the data collection, in order to contextualise the research, and after data collection to extend and transcend the work with respect to other scholarly evidence and ideas. Zarmati prepared her literature review over three distinct chapters to capture several interpretive lenses: school history content in the curricula, the pedagogy of teaching history, and museum education, but then she generated new theory to interpret her findings and to articulate and theorise how history is actually taught in Australian museums. Kitchener, Williams and Kilpatrick describe how the initial literature review on social justice 'lay fallow' during fieldwork, and new theory emerged from the data, through a grounded theory approach to social justice research. Hugo used a range of youth studies

'sensitising concepts' (such as bullying and mental health) as interpretive signposts in her research. Her conceptual framework evolved over the course of an autoethnography, as a result of sustained reflexivity and engagement with experience, the literature, and writing itself as a poetic act. In all cases, theory and method were seen as flexible and iterative in the research process emerging from the data but also from the very process of the personally transformative research act itself.

Methodological approaches across the chapters include arts-based approaches, autoethnography, ethnography, grounded theory and linguistic analysis. The range of methods is illustrated in Table 17.2, whilst the data sources used are illustrated in Table 17.3. Arts-based and ethnographic approaches centred on telling the participants' stories. MacDonald and Hunter employed a combined arts-based, narrative and autoethnographic methodologies, and a new method of a/r/tography to create a metanarrative of experiences of three participants to show relations between artist, teacher and researcher. Hugo used autoethnography to map her own changing positions to give voice to her lived experience as a grieving mother. She used poetry at pivotal moments in her autoethnography to express her grief, and these poems were then discursively and reflexively treated, in order to capture the lived reality of her pain. McMahon similarly sought to express the body pedagogies experienced by three elite swimmers by presenting her data in a 'theatrical' format in three acts. Koirala presented rich descriptions of his ethnographic study of the language learning of Bhutanese refugees through narrative. In each case, these researchers sought to capture the lived experience of participants through story. Table 17.2 visualises the range of methods employed across the chapters.

Grounded theory was used explicitly in several studies. Emery and Fielding-Wells discovered that the grounded theory method emerged and was shaped through the data collection phase of the study. Data sources included fieldwork (classroom observations) and interviews, and the writing of memos

Table 17.2 Method in interpretive research

Researchers	Arts-based methods	Auto-ethnography and ethnography	Grounded theory	Linguistic analysis	Hermeneutics
Beasy					✓
Emery and Fielding-Wells			✓		
Hugo	✓				
Kitchener, Williams and Kilpatrick			✓		
Koirala			✓		
McDonald and Hunter	✓	✓			
McMahon		✓			
Thomas				✓	
Zarmati			✓		

Table 17.3 Data sources in interpretive research

Researchers	Textual data sources (i.e. work samples)	Observations/ field work	Interviews	Narrative	Reflection
Beasy			✓		
Emery and Fielding-Wells		✓	✓		
Hugo				✓	✓
Kitchener, Williams and Kilpatrick			✓		
Koirala			✓	✓	
McDonald and Hunter		✓	✓	✓	
McMahon				✓	✓
Thomas	✓				
Zarmati		✓	✓		

(a grounded theory technique to inform theorisation) as Table 17.3 illustrates. Analysis was 'free-coding' data into categories, and required an iterative process between data and theory, creating analytical maps (Figs. 18.1, 18.2 and 18.3). Similarly, Kitchener, Williams and Kilpatrick used constructivist grounded theory to examine equity in vocational education and training contexts for learners experiencing disadvantage. They used interviews and the process of writing memos. Data were coded following every five interviews, before she returned to the field to collect new data and 'test' the categories emerging from the data categorisation. Both studies required multiple site visits and 'testing' of emerging theories and the 'messy' process of moving back and forth between theory and method.

Zarmati used substantial theoretical grounding to contextualise her study, but observed that the gap in the research was so significant that she found herself moving into grounded theory to identify and interpret what she observed in the educational context of the history museum in Australia. Her data collection included observations and interviews, and she also coded her data during the process of data collection, commenting that the iterative approach between theory and method was critical for her study. Beasy also collected data using interviews, but used a more typical approach of using the themes drawn from her literature review to frame the coding and categorisation of this data. However, she also aimed to integrate the multiple voices of her participants through a co-construction of knowledge, using their own language to create her interview questions, as opposed to relying solely on the language drawn from the literature. For both of these studies, coding and categorisation of data depended on interpreting and then testing their interpretations as they captured the experiences of participants.

Thomas's study stands out as quite different to the other studies in this section. He employed a highly-structured approach for his primary data analysis, which

involved a linguistic analysis of children's writing samples produced under Australia's national standardised testing program (NAPLAN) exam conditions. However, his analysis then led him into new and unexpected interpretive spaces and he came to question the NAPLAN testing process, and the disjunction between what was valued by NAPLAN examiners, the conditions and effects of the NAPLAN testing process on teachers and students, and the lack of authenticity of the artefacts produced by students under such conditions.

The interpretive paradigm has at its heart the idea of multidimensionalism and multiple perspectives from which a problem can be viewed and understood which is a way of responding to the promise of more positivistically-oriented forms of social research which tend to offer more one-dimensional approaches, relatively simple and largely technical ways of producing and validating knowledge claims, and a sense in which the work is structured for reproducibility and replication. What we find in these interpretive chapters is a group of researchers at the centre of a non-replicable process of learning and writing that reflect complex situations, relational processes, and brief, relatively unique moments in time.

Interpreting Interpretation

A central theme in the chapters in this section relate to what might be described as the 'theory after' school of thought. This is the idea that theory somehow emerges from an engagement with data, and from experience in the research act itself. This is opposed by the more deductively oriented notion of 'theory before' where hypotheses that are derived from apriori theory are in some way tested. Many contemporary interpretive methodologies in the social sciences can be traced to Glaser and Strauss's classic *Grounded Theory* (1967), which developed a set of analytic procedures that systematically derived theoretical propositions from a careful analysis of qualitative data. In this way, theory is 'grounded' in the data, emerging through the careful coding, memoing, and thematic categorisation processes. In some respects, each of the pieces in this chapter is wrestling with the ghost of grounded theory whether or not they mention it explicitly.

The critiques of grounded theory are well known. Suffice it to say here that the most significant of these, in our opinion, is the sense in which there is an internal contradiction in a theory that purports to attend to the nuance of social situations and their complexity and which at the same time strives to derive general theoretical principles from them just the same. This is the problem that Emery encountered in her analysis of the idea of cultural wellbeing and the search for 'shared meanings' of what this idea might be. She found herself increasingly dissatisfied with the 'smoothing over' of difference that grounded theory seemed to force her toward. This led her to recognise that data do not speak for themselves in transparent ways, and that she had latitude to think about what sort of interpretation of the data made the most sense. Ultimately she arrived at the conclusion that each situation was messy and unique. This led Emery to Clarke's (2005) situational analysis which

allowed her see that rather than finding shared meanings, it was imperative to identify the ways in which cultural location in fact shapes the way that wellbeing is understood.

Zarmati too began from a grounded theory perspective. This chapter represents a common practitioner's skepticism about the value of theory and perhaps a residue of the positivist dream for a transparent or neutral form of analysis. Her chapter is also one that focusses on a developing realisation that a kind pure or transparent interpretation is not possible when she realised early on that she had encountered a 'theoretical minefield' when she thought she was examining a simple and practical problem of practice. In a sense this is an account of a beginning researcher's theoretical awakening, or the recognition that there is no place outside theory from which to conduct a neutral investigation. Here the ghost of positivism rears its head again and yet, like Emery, Zarmarti was able to develop an interpretive approach that allowed her to gain an understanding of how people define reality and develop theory that is grounded in an inductive engagement with qualitative data.

Rather than searching for a single authoritative story, Kitchener begins with the assumptions that truths are multiple and that theory itself is situated and constructed. Her journey is one that leads from a grounded exploration of an educational equity problem, to a position that is explicitly theoretical and also explicitly political. What she seems to have discovered in the research act is how her interpretation that proceeded from a relatively open-ended analysis of data itself came to be framed in theoretical terms as she became immersed in her data. Like Zarmati, there is a theoretical awakening or as Kitchener puts is, 'I did not set out to undertake a social justice topic; the journey took me there'. Here, we find a journey from data to theory and a thesis that comes to be structured around that journey leading to more general conclusions.

Indeed, each of these chapters is a particular kind of journey that begins with a practical research problem or a 'stone in the shoe' (Neilsen 1994) derived from experience. Where the journey of RHD work leads is unpredictable and it can and often does lead to a reframing of the initial problem. This is what Thomas describes in his chapter that tells the story of a movement from a practical problem of practice (how to improve standardised test performance), through the pragmatics of developing a game-based mechanism for solving that problem, and finally to a complete paradigmatic reframing of the problem itself. Part of this shift is toward an explicitly political critique of the 'game' of testing itself and Thomas's research demonstrated to him that it is simply unfair. So, like Kitchener, he develops a social justice critique from his engagement in the pragmatics, complexities and the messiness of social research.

Beasy also arrives at her research topic because of a proverbial stone in her shoe, which is a teacher's realisation that things are not as they seem and that her curriculum contains problematic assumptions about the idea of sustainability. Thus, she moves theoretically to the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1990) to make sense of this disjuncture and theory becomes for her, an explicit lens for making sense of her data, and of course, her experience. Bourdieu's theoretical tools (i.e. capital, habitus, field) become interpretive instruments that allow Beasy to understand, like

Emery, how culture and social location of research participants shape a researcher's understandings. Social position here is not a variable, it is a lived geography where participants shape their understandings of past, present and future, which are critical to the way they understand, sustainability. As is the case for other chapter authors, theory and method are, in a sense, inseparable as an interpretive, invested and political stance arises from the research act.

The work of Bourdieu draws analytic attention to the wider significance of the ordinary and to the central idea of practice, which sits prominently in interpretive approaches to educational research. What is there to be interpreted if not experience or practice? Each of the pieces in this chapter is an account of engagement, emergence and resolution. This is perhaps most evident in the accounts of McMahon and Hugo where personal pain and struggle form the backdrop of the accounts. One of the most significant developments of the interpretive tradition is a retreat for the myth of value-freedom, neutrality and distance in social analysis that is the centerpiece of positivist-inspired educational research. McMahon's analysis, which draws on the emerging autoethnographic tradition, is a proactive account of how research can be used to take oppressive practices, in this case in high-level athletics, and desublimate them, rendering the research act an emancipatory and pragmatically political practice where the research participants' voices are central. Interestingly though, McMahon's approach, which she describes as a 'theoretical autopsy', employs theory after to make sense of her data. This is an approach that resonates with the general idea of grounded analysis, which remains a central point of confluence around which a considerable body of dissertation work seems to gather.

Conclusion

The crucial relationship between theory and data is what brings these chapters together as similar, yet unique interpretive journeys undertaken by HDR student researchers. It is well understood how most doctoral students struggle with theory and how to place it in their analysis. This leads to deeper and more challenging questions about how they link theory and method to construct a methodology that is convincing and powerful enough to answer research questions in a legitimate way. The process of structuring a doctoral thesis in these interpretive chapters is an interpretive act in itself and the key decisions that authors make are not easily prescribed in advance, but rather fleshed out in the process of inquiry which is an interpretation an intellectual field applied to a concrete situation or problem of practice, which links to the section on action research and to the critical tradition. Much interpretive research complexifies and critiques the simplicity and linearity of common educational practices like the mass data gathering and truth-formation exercise represented by a national standardised testing scheme illustrated in Thomas's chapter.

The interpretation of interpretive studies draws large themes out of located, nuanced studies that offer a challenge to authoritative macro analysis focusing on some form of practice. For MacDonald and Hunter, this practice involved complex identity work in which teachers straddle different social worlds, sometimes with competing and very different social norms and performative expectations. Using art as method is an important field of inquiry here and the Deleuzian deconstruction that this inquiry effects is a fascinating exploration of the process of becoming teacher and becoming artist that bridges very nicely to the final section of this book on emergent theory. This too illustrates how interpretive forms of social research are not easy to pin down structurally as they tend to be in standard research texts, which for many students become authoritative explanations of how research is 'supposed to be done'. As they work their way through the journey of dissertation research and writing, this normative framing is precisely what they find they need to get beyond and even abandon.

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