Chapter 1
Overcoming the Difficulties Associated With Using Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks in Heritage Studies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of conceptual and theoretical frameworks in social science research with a focus on heritage studies. Incorporating theory or developing a conceptual framework is a critical part of the research design process. It assists in explaining the issue under study and refining the research questions. Linking theory and empirical constructs is fundamental to both quantitative and qualitative research, although some studies suggest that this is something that a number of researchers in the latter research tradition tend to ignore. Theories provide a theoretical framework for conceptualising research. Without a theoretical or a conceptual framework, the analysis of the findings results in a mere narration. Many researchers encounter difficulties in distinguishing between and using a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework as research tools. There are recurring doubts about their utility in the research endeavour and how one might select a good theory. Consequently, there is limited engagement with theory.

INTRODUCTION

Conceptual or theoretical frameworks serve as the glue that holds the components of social research together, and in the absence of this glue, the research design falls apart. These conceptual tools give focus and direction to empirical research; the implication, therefore, is that theory is inseparable from research, and that conducting research without either a conceptual or theoretical framework is inconceivable. A conceptual or theoretical framework enhances the goals of research, and research conducted without either one is poor. As Suddaby (2015) observes: "Knowledge accumulation simply cannot occur without a conceptual framework" (p. 2). Furthermore:

Scuttling theoretical and conceptual frameworks is taking the risk that we accept answers that may leave out major parts of the whole, misinterpret the meaning of the findings, or miss incongruencies and contradictions. (Ivey, 2015, p. 153)

If used appropriately, conceptual and theoretical frameworks can enrich and enhance research (Cooper & Meadows, 2016), and they help researchers to reflect on their work and develop a "more critical sensitivity towards the activity of social research" (Cooper & Meadows, 2016, p. 20). Researchers are prompted by theory to consider the justification for their research, and their responsibilities and obligations in research. In other words, theory compels researchers to reflect on their role in knowledge production and its value to their field. Concepts and theories are the conceptual tools that provide direction and meaning to a research enterprise and help to identify its implications. Furthermore, the way in which data is collected and interpreted depends on the researcher's conceptual or theoretical perspective.

Many researchers, including heritage management professionals, find developing and using theoretical and conceptual frameworks difficult because the extant literature offers limited guidance (Grant & Onsanloo, 2014; Green, 2014; Ngulube, Mathipa, & Gumbo, 2015). Consequently, some researchers misuse theory. Identifying and applying theoretical or conceptual frameworks is not straightforward, since they are not found "readymade in the literature" waiting for researchers to apply them (Maxwell, 2012, p. xi). There are a number of misconceptions about theory that have contributed to its abuse and limited application. The limited application of theory or conceptual tools by researchers in heritage management may be partially attributed to the relative immaturity of heritage studies as a field as compared with disciplines such as education, medicine and physics. In this regard, May (2001) makes the following observation:

The idea of theory, or the ability to explain and understand the findings of research within a conceptual framework that makes 'sense' of the data, is the mark of a mature discipline whose aim is the systematic study of particular phenomenon. (p. 29)

As this quotation suggests, a discipline is considered to be mature if it can articulate and apply theory in the valuation and production of knowledge. Although Chapter 2 is devoted to the discussion of theory in archival science, Heritage Studies appears to have a weak theoretical base, and that tends to undermine its development as a discipline. Heritage management researchers should engage rigorously with theory, bearing in mind that theoretical development and practical improvement can be reciprocal. Research conducted in the absence of theory may be problematic for the advancement of heritage management as a discipline.

One does not cease to be practical when one engages with theory. Practice is fundamental to theorising, because it provides a platform for testing theories and generating questions for further research. Theoretically sound research has the potential to inform practice appropriately and establish sound practice guidelines. Theorising and conceptual framing may provide a deeper understanding and explanation of certain processes, actions, events and structures related to the management of heritage assets, including libraries, museums and archives.

The notions of a theoretical framework and conceptual framework have been explained differently by different scholars. The terminology applied to them tends to be loose, inconsistent and at times contradictory, and one is left wondering what the correct terminology in fact is. In some of the literature, theoretical frameworks are referred to as conceptual frameworks (Ocholla & Le Roux, 2011; Maxwell,

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