

1 **ABSTRACT**

2 This paper examines the place of theory in qualitative medical research. While theory's place
3 in research planning and data analysis has been well-established, the contribution of theory
4 during qualitative data collection tends to be overlooked. Yet, data collection is not an asocial
5 or apolitical process and requires reflection and analysis in and of itself. Therefore, drawing
6 on an exemplar case study research project which focused on patients' use of medicines, the
7 paper argues that engaging with theory to think reflexively, throughout a project but
8 particularly during the process of data collection can ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of
9 qualitative data. In this case study, we draw on sociologist Erving Goffman's theoretical
10 framework of the dramaturgical metaphor to address the multiplicity of roles that healthcare
11 practitioners undertaking qualitative research have to occupy and navigate. Rather than
12 painting researchers out of their research through a naïve search for 'objectivity', reflexivity
13 that is scaffolded by theory, offers a way through which researchers' biases and subjectivities
14 can be made explicit and their data analysis transparent. In making this argument, we
15 encourage medical researchers to engage with, and be attuned to, theoretical perspectives
16 outwith their own discipline.

17

18 **KEYWORDS**

19 Data Collection, Identity, Reflexivity, Rigour, Theory,

20

1 **INTRODUCTION**

2 Given that many contemporary global health challenges call for diverse and
3 interdisciplinary research approaches, healthcare practitioners and health scientists are
4 increasingly stepping outside of traditional disciplinary boundaries to engage with qualitative
5 methods. This methodological mobility can present philosophical, epistemological and
6 ethical challenges¹ as well more practical considerations centred on the occupation of two
7 roles (healthcare practitioner and qualitative researcher) simultaneously. In some ways these
8 roles are similar as both involve in-depth and often personal conversations, rely on a degree
9 of trust and rapport, and are underpinned by conventions of confidentiality. In other ways,
10 though, these roles come into conflict with each other particularly around the expectation of
11 interventions, whereby healthcare practitioners are expected to offer advice during
12 interactions while qualitative researchers are not.¹ Moreover, while qualitative researchers try
13 to rescind power as much as possible and position participants as the experts during research
14 interactions,² shaking off the deeply-established power associated with being a medical
15 professional is not straightforward.

16 Given this complexity, this article explores how theory and processes of reflexivity
17 can support healthcare practitioners to navigate issues of role-swapping during project design,
18 data collection and data analysis, to make sense of their own place within, and effects upon,
19 qualitative research. Such theoretically-informed reflexivity ensures the rigour of qualitative
20 data in the medical and health sciences field (where data quality is often linked to high
21 participant numbers, generalisability, and objectivity,³) by explicating the theoretical
22 perspectives of the researchers, improving transparency of the research findings.

23 While theory is always an integral part of qualitative research design and data
24 analysis,⁴ its value during data collection and to inform processes of reflexivity can often be
25 overlooked in health and medical research. For example, Meyer and Ward provide useful
26 guidance on integrating theory into qualitative healthcare research but do so by focusing

1 solely on the research design and analysis stages.⁵ However, data collection is not a
2 mechanical, apolitical process but, rather, involves researchers actively engaging with and
3 becoming a part of the social world they are researching⁶. This can bring researchers'
4 characteristics, attitudes and personal beliefs into sharp focus - all of which can ultimately
5 affect the quality of data collected. This can be a particularly acute challenge for healthcare
6 practitioners undertaking qualitative research as they navigate and occupy multiple social
7 roles at the same time. In this article we build on Meyer and Ward's perspective to
8 demonstrate that theory is also valuable for qualitative researchers as a lens through which to
9 make sense of challenges during data collection.

10 To do this we use an illustrative exemplar case study of qualitative research into
11 patients' experiences of medicines adherence to demonstrate the use of theory 'in action' in
12 research. This exemplar research sought to explore patients' understandings of medicines and
13 the effects of these understandings on medicines use. Existing research on medicines
14 adherence has highlighted that approximately 50% of patients do not take prescribed
15 medication as directed by their practitioners.⁷ Poor adherence to medications can result in
16 poorer health outcomes, economic loss, increased health systems costs and increased
17 morbidity and mortality.⁸ Current theoretical models of medication adherence
18 disproportionately emphasise the identification of barriers and facilitators to adherence,
19 targeting specific observable factors such as age⁹, sex¹⁰, ethnicity¹¹, and cognitive
20 impairment¹² yet fail to address the complex social worlds where decisions about medication
21 use are actually made.

22 Using smaller sample sizes to obtain rich data, qualitative approaches foreground
23 lived experiences of medicines use.^{13,14} Within this paradigm, medicines non-adherence is not
24 a simplistic case of variables, barriers and facilitators but is acknowledged as stemming from
25 multiple social, cultural, familial and economic factors. Though these factors may appear

1 irrational to healthcare practitioners,¹⁵ qualitative research has repeatedly demonstrated
2 rational decision-making processes underlying intentional non-adherence.¹⁶

3 To understand the social dimensions of medicines use decisions, we collected rich
4 qualitative data from chronically ill patients about their experiences of medicines use and
5 their reflections on adherence interventions. To gather this data, APR, a registered UK
6 pharmacist, conducted interviews and focus groups with 57 adults (≥ 18 years old) who had
7 been prescribed medicines for long-term conditions (diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary
8 disorder, cancer, gout and cardiovascular disease) in the last six months. These disease
9 groups were chosen to provide a range of experiences of illnesses with different symptomatic
10 profiles.

11 The findings of the study were two-fold. Firstly, insights into patients' lived
12 experiences of medicines adherence identified that the experience of adherence was shared
13 across disease groups. Participants' decisions about medicines use were informed by the
14 triangulation of diverse information from both formal and informal sources including doctors,
15 pharmacists, nurses, friends and family, and the internet. Moreover, use behaviours were
16 linked to existing beliefs about, or inclinations towards, medicines use in general; participants
17 who were suspicious of medicines or concerned about their ubiquity avoided medicines use.

18 The second key finding which is most pertinent to this article was methodological and
19 relates to the transformational process required for healthcare professionals, trained within
20 the natural sciences, to engage in, understand and apply interpretivist theories and approaches
21 which centralise individual experiences and do not seek to produce generalizable findings to
22 research.¹ While we anticipated some negotiation of these competing approaches, this proved
23 to be far more extensive than we initially imagined and permeated each stage of the research
24 project.

25

1 Occupying the (often competing) positions of qualitative researcher *and* pharmacist
2 during this research presented multiple challenges and dilemmas which were navigated using
3 theoretically-informed reflexivity. To make sense of this role ambiguity we drew on theory,
4 specifically Goffman’s Dramaturgy, to help us plan and carry out the research. Throughout
5 this article we continually refer to this case study project as a way to exemplify the central
6 role of theory in qualitative health research. In particular, we elucidate the challenges and
7 dilemmas of occupying multiple roles during data collection and explain how using theory
8 helped us to address these challenges. First, we define what we mean by ‘theory’ and outline
9 the ways that theory is most prominently entangled in qualitative medical and health sciences
10 research –namely through design, data collection and data analysis. In this, we argue that
11 theory’s contribution to the data collection phase of research is substantial and should not be
12 overlooked by qualitative medical researchers as it provides an invaluable way to address the
13 identity of the researcher and complexities when occupying multiple roles.

14 **THEORY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

15 Though ‘theory’ is seemingly ubiquitous across qualitative research, Morrison and
16 van der Werf argue that it ‘defies simple definition’.¹⁷ More alarmingly, Hervé Corvellec
17 suggests that attempting to definitively answer the question *what is theory?* is ‘simply
18 dangerous’ because it risks engendering dogmatic academic control and legitimising only one
19 way of engaging with theory.¹⁸ Instead, he argues that theory is understood and used
20 differently across academic disciplines and encourages researchers to celebrate this diversity
21 and eclecticism. Joas and Knöbl go a step further and highlight that even within disciplines,
22 particularly the social sciences, the nature of theory, its objectives, mission, and core
23 concepts have not been determined.¹⁹

24 Notwithstanding such ambiguities, Corvellec suggests that using and generating good
25 theory which helps to understand and explain the world is a ‘collective quest’ in academic

1 research.¹⁸ Indeed, classical thinkers Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx commented similarly that
2 ‘practice without theory is blind’. More recently, social psychologist Kurt Lewin commented
3 ‘there’s nothing so practical as good theory’²⁰ while educational theorist Martinus
4 Jan Langeveld suggested ‘practice without theory is for fools and rogues’.¹⁷

5 Despite these challenges in pinning down an exact definition, theory is accepted as a
6 way to help shape research and make sense of its findings. For Meyer and Ward, theory is
7 ‘concerned with the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of empirical phenomena’.⁵⁽⁵²⁶⁾ They go on to suggest
8 that theory is ‘a logical-deductive system consisting of a set of interrelated concepts from
9 which testable propositions can be derived deductively’.⁵⁽²²⁶⁾ We echo this understanding of
10 theory in this article, positioning it as shorthand for a set of ideas and principles that explain
11 and make sense of an observed phenomenon and are, to varying extents, applicable across
12 space and time. In our case study project of medicines adherence, existing theory has sought
13 to explain why large numbers of patients do not take medicines as directed by practitioners.
14 Theories of non-adherence have made sense of this phenomenon through, for example,
15 understanding patients’ balancing of the perceived necessity of using a medicine with
16 concerns about adverse effects (The Necessity-Concern Framework)²¹; through
17 understanding patients’ lay constructions of risk and efficacy (Lay Pharmacology)¹³; and
18 through the patients’ physical and cognitive abilities and beliefs (Capability, Opportunity,
19 Motivation, Beliefs (COM-B) model).²²

20 Although an important element through any research project, theory predominantly
21 enters qualitative medical and health sciences research at two crucial points – planning and
22 analysis. During planning, many researchers identify important theories through critical
23 readings of existing literature to understand how others have explained a particular
24 phenomenon previously and locate the research within a broader conceptual landscape. It
25 should be noted that not all qualitative researchers engage with literature at this planning

1 stage of research. Grounded theorists who seek to generate findings and insights entirely from
2 data would actively avoid reading pre-existing theory at this stage of research and similarly,
3 phenomenological researchers who wish to ‘bracket off’ previous experiences and knowledge
4 may not see theory engagement during planning as a particular priority. For others, this
5 critical reading allows qualitative researchers to arrive at their specific research question and
6 identify what their research will add to existing theory. This might not only encompass
7 asking novel research questions but also answering research questions in novel ways by, for
8 example, conducting research in an under-studied population or using novel methods to
9 generate new forms of data. In other words, through this critical reading, abstract concepts
10 and theories become ‘researchable’ through the application of specific methods.⁵ In our case
11 study project, critically examining existing theories at the planning stage supported the
12 development of our core research question and methodological approach. A deep analysis of
13 extant literature highlighted to us an absence of qualitative research focused on medicines as
14 ‘social objects’¹⁴ where decisions about medication use are made within everyday spaces,
15 relationships and interactions.

16 Theory also takes centre stage during qualitative data analysis. For medical
17 practitioners traditionally taught through quantitative approaches, qualitative data analysis is
18 often considered ‘complex and mysterious’ and receives relatively limited attention in the
19 literature.²³ Generally, qualitative research does not seek to quantify data and so analysis is
20 not driven by identifying numerical patterns such as how many times a particular word is
21 mentioned in an interview.²⁴ Instead, the majority of qualitative analysis is driven by the
22 identification of salient analytical categories through the process of ‘coding’ which Charmaz
23 describes as the ‘critical link’ between data and the eventual theorizing to emerge from it.²⁵
24 Although some qualitative methods such as discursive analysis or descriptive
25 phenomenological approaches do not involve coding, our focus here is on those which do,

1 namely thematic analysis which we used in our case study project. Simply put, codes are
2 shorthand devices to label and describe qualitative data which are then used to identify
3 patterns and categories²⁶. Codes, at this point, are purely descriptive interpretations of what is
4 going on in the data. Figure 1 gives an example of this kind of descriptive coding using an
5 extract from an interview with a diabetic patient from our case study project.

6

7 [FIGURE 1 HERE]

8

9 It is through theory during data analysis that researchers are able to move from this
10 purely descriptive coding to understand *what is going on here?* Broadly speaking, qualitative
11 researchers use theory in one of three ways during data analysis - to conduct a *deductive*,
12 *inductive* or *abductive* analysis of their data. These approaches to data analysis differ in the
13 relationship between theory and data, as demonstrated in Figure 2 where the use of these
14 different approaches in our case study research is highlighted in the dashed boxes.

15

16 [FIGURE 2 HERE]

17

18 A deductive analytical approach takes existing theory as its starting point and interrogates
19 data for areas where it confirms or contrasts with existing theoretical ideas. In this approach,
20 coding is undertaken in line with the constructs of the particular theory which is driving data
21 analysis. In the case of medicines adherence, the Necessity-Concerns Framework²¹ might
22 provide a lens through which the data is deductively organised and explored. In such an
23 approach, data would be explored for mentions of the central tenets of this framework – the
24 perceived necessity of using a medicine and patients’ concerns about adverse effects. To aid
25 this deductive analysis, a particular theory may have also been used in research design where

1 interview questions are specifically constructed around the key features of a theoretical
2 framework (for example, participants might be specifically asked about their perception of a
3 medicine's necessity and their concerns where research is driven by the Necessity-Concerns
4 Framework as a deductive lens). In this case, theoretical constructs are readily apparent in the
5 data. In this sense, researchers already know some of what they are looking for when they
6 begin to interact with data.²⁶ Such an approach can use multiple theories to drive data
7 analysis where, for instance, the Necessities-Concerns Framework might be combined with
8 another theoretical approach to non-adherence. Moreover, a deductive analytical approach
9 might identify a theory's shortcomings, nuances and areas for expansion or 'prove' its value.

10 In contrast to this, an inductive analytical approach seeks to generate new theoretical
11 insights from the data alone. Here, theory might inform the project planning and data
12 collection, however, should be 'put to one side' during the analysis. Or in the case of a
13 'grounded theory'²⁷ approach, researchers will have deliberately avoided any engagement
14 with theory during project planning to prevent tainting findings with pre-existing
15 conceptions. In taking these approaches of avoiding theory during planning or putting to
16 theory to one side at the analysis stage, analysis is grounded in data from which findings
17 'emerge'²⁸ rather than being driven *a priori* by existing theory about a particular
18 phenomenon. During inductive analysis when using a thematic approach or another coding-
19 based method, researchers gain deep familiarity with data by reading and re-reading, before
20 moving on to assign codes to the data. Through a process of constant case comparison, in
21 which each code is compared with the rest of the data (rather than compared to pre-existing
22 theoretical constructs), analytical categories or groupings, called 'themes' are generated.
23 Once the most pertinent or salient themes have been identified, these are then used to form
24 the basis of a new theoretical idea.

1 In practice, few qualitative researchers, including in our case study project, actually
2 undertake a wholly deductive or wholly inductive analysis of their data. The problem with
3 deductive analysis is that focusing solely on the tenets of existing theory leaves little room for
4 nuance. Indeed, frustration with deductive analysis' constant reproduction of existing theories
5 underpinned the development of inductive approaches in the 1960s as researchers grew weary
6 of data being 'forced into the straight-jacket of pre-existing concepts'.²⁹ The problem with
7 inductive analysis, though, is that it is extremely challenging to 'bracket off' previous theory,
8 from both reading and general experiences in order to be entirely data-driven. Timmermans
9 and Tavory point to an inherent contradiction in the key tenets of pure induction - while
10 researchers should generate new theory without being beholden to pre-existing work, they
11 still require some broad knowledge of existing theory in order to design studies and collect
12 data to generate new theory.²⁹ Moreover, others have highlighted the practical challenges of
13 wholly inductive analysis for novice researchers³⁰ and those bound by standardization
14 required by ethics committees and Institution Review Boards.³¹

15 Most qualitative researchers, then, undertake *abductive* analysis, which is both
16 informed by researchers' existing theoretical positions but also allows space for new
17 theoretical reasoning³². In undertaking abductive analysis, researchers must be 'neither
18 theoretical atheists [as in inductive analysis] nor avowed monotheists [as in deductive
19 analysis], but informed agnostics'.²⁹ The tenets of abductive analysis are drawn from
20 philosopher Charles S. Peirce's works on the logic and practice of natural sciences in which
21 he argues that 'discovery' (through induction) and 'justification' (through deduction) are
22 inseparable.³³ This inseparability became evident during our case study research project
23 where our deep knowledge of the theoretical landscape gleaned through research design and
24 planning necessarily informed our reflections on the meanings of our data. For example,

1 participants talking about ‘needing’ to take medicines, put us in mind of the Necessity-
2 Concerns Framework yet we were not driven by ‘proving’ or ‘testing’ this framework.

3 Abduction, then, particularly centralises surprising research findings which call for
4 new explanations. In our case study research, our participants extensively described devices
5 to support medication compliance (known as multi-compartment compliance aids or dosette
6 boxes) as symbolic of cognitive decline, old age and ill-health which was a finding we had
7 not anticipated and which was not well-reflected in the extant theoretical literature on
8 medicines adherence. Such findings can be alarming and there is undoubtedly a temptation to
9 treat such data as an anomaly or indicative of a methodological issue.⁵ However, these kinds
10 of unexpected and non-conformist data can be the most interesting and theoretically-
11 insightful. Our unexpected finding that compliance aids are symbolic of ill-health required an
12 openness to participants’ perspectives that allowed participant narratives to ‘give life and
13 meaning’ to these inanimate devices. However, this findings also required familiarity with
14 literature and practice that i) understood social symbolism and symbolic interaction as forms
15 of reality and ii) was cognisant of professional practices and evidence that linked compliance
16 devices with health deterioration and cognitive decline.

17 Abductive analysis, then, treats existing theoretical ideas as ‘sensitizing’ notions³⁴
18 which inform research design, planning and analysis but do not predetermine the frameworks
19 within which data should be analysed. As such, researchers are encouraged to enter analysis
20 having a broad knowledge of existing theory but keep this knowledge somewhat at arms-
21 length. Timmermans and Tavory emphasised the recursive nature of abductive analysis and
22 suggested that collaboration and sharing research ideas is crucial for the production and
23 testing of new theory.²⁹ While there is temptation to form collaborations with and present
24 work to like-minded researchers from our own fields, stepping out of disciplinary silos can
25 introduce researchers to new theoretical landscapes. Interdisciplinarity can enhance the

1 quality and breadth of abductive analysis as well as introduce different theory that challenges
2 well-engrained disciplinary practices. Indeed, Stark reminds us that innovation emerges most
3 readily when multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives, values and theoretical ideas are
4 brought to the table.³⁵ In this vein, our research brought together theoretical frameworks from
5 APR's background of pharmacy and KJ's discipline of sociology to produce a melting pot of
6 diverse theoretical perspectives which we were able to deconstruct, adapt and adopt in
7 innovative ways to analyse our data.

8 **THEORY'S ABSENCE FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: DATA COLLECTION**

9 Although theoretical perspectives are often well described within qualitative health
10 and medical research design and data analysis to rationalise inductive, deductive and
11 abductive approaches, there is limited work describing theory in data collection in this field
12 of research. In their detailed step-by-step guide to qualitative healthcare research, Meyer and
13 Ward mention theory's relevance to data collection only in its informing 'saturation point'
14 (where no new data is emerging) and to recommend analysis occurs alongside data
15 collection.⁵ That is not to say, however, that the role of theory or the complexities of research
16 identity in data collection have not been considered. In social sciences, scholars have
17 devoted, and continue to devote, considerable attention to debating these issues. Traditional
18 grounded theory approaches are highly focused on 'pure induction' where new theoretical
19 insights 'emerge' from data alone and the role of the researcher is downplayed.³⁶ In this
20 approach, the reality of a particular research field is understood as a single objective truth
21 independent of the researcher which can be 'discovered' if the researcher sets aside their
22 personal biases to centralise the data alone. This traditional approach has been critiqued as
23 naïve and Charmaz's more recent developments in grounded theory approaches acknowledge
24 that pure induction is near impossible as researchers 'are part of the world we study, the data
25 we collect and the analyses we produce'.³⁷⁽¹⁷⁾ As such, her constructivist grounded theory

1 approach views research as a collective exercise involving researchers and participants and
2 their respective interpretations of the world, and where the collectivity of the research process
3 means researchers should explore multiple understandings of, and positions in, the social
4 world including the researchers' own. Despite these lengthy and extensive theoretically-
5 driven debates within social sciences, health qualitative research does not routinely engage
6 with these discussions when it comes to the data collection process. Hence, data collection
7 can often be presented as an objective, mechanical process of, for example, conducting
8 interviews or undertaking observations. In this sense, researchers can fall into the trap of
9 describing very well what they actually *did* during data collection but not reflecting on the
10 impacts and implications of this from a theoretical perspective. This limits the transparency
11 of the data collection and obscures the theoretical perspective through which data collection
12 took place.

13 However, data collection (much like other aspects of qualitative research) is never an
14 objective, apolitical process. Instead, it brings researchers' characteristics, attitudes, biases
15 and beliefs into sharp focus. As Malterud comments 'a researcher's background and position
16 will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged
17 most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing
18 and communication of conclusions'.³⁸ In other words, researchers always occupy particular
19 positions in society (as women, as middle-class, as people of colour etc.) and these positions
20 taint our approaches to research, bringing the theoretical 'baggage' of our position to our
21 research. Research is, then, influenced in often invisible ways by researchers at every stage,
22 and should never claim to be objective. Chasing objectivity in qualitative medical and health
23 sciences research (indeed any research) is naïve and, instead, researchers should strive to be
24 as reflective as possible, being constantly mindful of implicit subjectivities engendered
25 through social positions.

1 Data collection is no exception to subjectivity. While qualitative researchers seek to
2 minimise their influence on research encounters, participants and their responses when
3 collecting data (through, for example, not asking leading questions in interviews, asking
4 standardized questions using topic guides), researchers' characteristics and positions can
5 themselves be influential and affect the quality of data collected. For example, feminist
6 scholars argue that shared gender encourages women to speak freely with female
7 researchers³⁹ while others note the importance of shared racial experiences in research
8 encounters.⁴⁰ In other words, physical characteristics of researchers can have significant
9 impacts on what research participants are willing to share. This creates an insider/outsider
10 phenomenon where 'insider' researchers are often the best placed to collect data from
11 participants with whom they share some kind of connection. Contextualising data collection
12 using theory as a lens, such as unpacking insider/outsider relationships can improve the
13 transparency of this process and understanding for other researchers.

14 Issues with the quality of data collection can arise when researchers undertake work
15 with participants to whom they are 'outsiders' without considering the impact of this on the
16 data collected or research outcomes. Researchers cannot, of course, alter their characteristics
17 or social position. In some cases, problems presented by undertaking research as an 'outsider'
18 can be predicted. For example, Sollis and Moser note that in highly gender-segregated
19 societies, male researchers are unable to collect the same quality data as women⁴¹.

20 In other research, issues arising from a researcher's position may not be as obvious
21 where, for example, the research is not on a particularly sensitive subject and does not have
22 obvious political implications. However, researcher positionality is still a crucial factor in
23 data collection and requires theoretically-driven exploration in the presentation of research. In
24 the next section, we highlight an example of ambiguous researcher positionality in our case
25 study project, where a pharmacist explored patients' lived experiences of using medication.

1 We highlight the insider/outsider dilemma that arose during the project and the ways we used
2 social theory and the practice of reflexivity to navigate this.

3 **REFLECTING ON AND PRESENTING THE SELF: REFLEXIVITY IN MEDICAL** 4 **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

5 **THE DILEMMA**

6 Data collection in the case study project was undertaken by APR, a UK registered
7 pharmacist. Since the research was focused on medicines use in everyday life, we sought to
8 collect honest data about participants' adherent and non-adherent behaviours. Given the
9 research focus on the dynamism and complexity of everyday life and medicines' place within
10 it, data pertaining to non-adherence was actually the most interesting and relevant. However,
11 obtaining this data about non-adherence presented something of a dilemma in terms of APR's
12 position as a pharmacist, specifically how he should represent himself to participants during
13 data collection and if he should disclose his position as a pharmacist or not?

14 From one theoretical position (or on the one hand), disclosing his pharmacist status
15 would have located him as part of the medical establishment, potentially reframing the
16 interview encounter as something akin to a paternalistic clinical consultation; after all, a
17 qualitative interview about medicines use is not wholly dissimilar to a medicines review with
18 a general practitioner, physician or community pharmacist. In such an interaction, there is a
19 risk that participants will modify their behaviour or stories to appear as 'good' patients. As
20 Palmeieri and Stern point out, patients regularly tell 'untruths' in clinical settings in order to
21 tell practitioners what they want to hear and to access services.⁴² Given that a research
22 interview with a pharmacist bears striking resemblance to a medicines review consultation,
23 such untruths might be expected during data collection for this project.

24 The solution, then, seemed simple - APR should not disclose his position as a
25 pharmacist in the interests of building rapport with participants and gathering the most

1 relevant data. However, not disclosing this presented other issues from a theoretical
2 perspective. Firstly, medical practitioners carry a high status which can be beneficial for
3 recruiting participants for research. Not disclosing his pharmacist identity would have
4 removed this expert position, reducing his status and potentially reducing the success of
5 participant recruitment. Secondly, not disclosing APR's pharmacist status would have
6 removed his right to counsel patients if a safety issue, such as risky non-adherent behaviours,
7 became apparent during a research interview. As such, the dilemma around whether to
8 disclose is not just a methodological question but also an ethical quagmire given that non-
9 disclosure effectively removes the ability to reduce harm to participants if necessary.¹ Finally,
10 suppressing APR's role as a pharmacist would have been something of a deception. While
11 there is no obligation on qualitative researchers to disclose personal details, there is an
12 expectation that participants will be informed of *relevant* information. There is, of course, a
13 debate to be had around whether being a pharmacist is relevant to a project on medicines use
14 being undertaken entirely separately from pharmacy service delivery. However, such a debate
15 is moot given that professional ethical frameworks (based on bioethical theory of
16 benevolence and non-maleficence) compel UK pharmacists to always intervene if the
17 inappropriate use of medication is disclosed.

18 The dilemma in the case study research, then, was not about *whether* to disclose
19 APR's role as a pharmacist but rather *how* to manage the theoretical juxtaposition of his
20 simultaneous roles as healthcare practitioner and researcher to ensure the collection of good
21 quality, relevant data. The actions and impressions of each character, a pharmacist and a
22 researcher, would need to be played simultaneously, but carefully. To do this, we engaged
23 with the process of reflexivity.

1 **REFLEXIVITY**

2 Simply put, reflexivity involves researchers considering themselves and their practice
3 to make implicit biases and effects explicit.⁴³ As such, qualitative researchers do not seek to
4 paint themselves out of research but to be open, honest and explicit about the ways the
5 research may be influenced by any given researcher. It is a means of holding both subjective
6 and objective roles in relation to the participant and the data produced, acknowledging that
7 researchers are both close to, and distant from, participants and data which themselves exist
8 within particularly interpersonal networks.⁴⁴ This is different to reflexivity in education and
9 professional development which is more closely aligned with reflection, and personal and
10 professional development. Reflexivity is not simply reflection.⁴⁵ It is not a case of asking
11 *what went well in that interview?* and *how might I do better next time?* Granted, reflection of
12 this nature is important in qualitative research but reflexivity goes beyond that to locate the
13 researcher as a dynamic, active participant in the inherently social interactional space of
14 research and the knowledge produced from it.⁴⁴ Woolgar's notion of a continuum of
15 reflexivity is useful to further explain this.⁴⁶ At the one end of the continuum is 'benign
16 introspection' (or reflection), which is concerned with the process of research and the
17 verification of results where researchers ask themselves, for example, how well their research
18 captured the perspectives of research participants and how accurately methods were
19 reproduced across participants. This positions the topic of research as separate to, and
20 removed from, researchers, their lives and experiences where the truth about a particular
21 phenomenon is best captured through the use of standardized methods.

22 Reflexivity sits at the other end of the continuum and turns the evaluative gaze away
23 from the deployment of research methods and on to the researcher themselves. This approach
24 does not privilege one theoretical position about a particular phenomenon but, rather,
25 understands social life as constituted by multiple actors, experiences, structures, perspectives
26 and knowledges.⁴⁷ As such, the research encounter and the researcher themselves are

1 implicated in this dynamic landscape and the process of reflexivity is focused on untangling
2 just how that is. Below we suggest that drawing on theoretical frameworks can be a useful
3 lens through which to do this untangling work.

4 While the necessity of reflexivity is clear, the question of *how*, practically, to be
5 reflexive is more opaque. We suggest that keeping a reflexive journal and using the content
6 of this journal as an entry point into theory, which in turn enhances the rigour of reflexivity,
7 is a useful approach for engaging with a systematic process of reflexivity. Reflexive journals
8 are not intended to record the process of research (e.g. methods and findings) but, rather, to
9 archive researchers' subjectivities, beliefs, attitudes and thoughts throughout the lifetime of
10 research, including planning and writing-up phases. Ortlipp provides an excellent account of
11 her reflexive journal-keeping during her qualitative doctorate, noting in particular the circular
12 effects of reflexivity as her research design continually evolved in light of her reflection.⁴⁸
13 Moreover, she gives good examples of the sort of things researchers might focus on in
14 reflexive journals. She writes, for example:

15

16 *"I felt strange acting in the role of interviewer ... Because of my relationship with three*
17 *of the participants...I knew that they knew my perspective on assessment to some*
18 *degree. I didn't put this out in the open, and wonder if I should have? I felt as though*
19 *it was a bit fake and not like the equal conversation that it could be if we just sat around*
20 *and discussed assessment issues and if I felt free to say more... The dual role of*
21 *interviewer and ex-colleague/friend was difficult. Also, having my own opinion and*
22 *experiences and wanting to join in the discussion was an issue, however I did resist*
23 *this."* (Research journal, 29/3/00)

24

1 These kinds of reflexive, unstructured and personal accounts of researcher
2 positionality can be triangulated with research data to produce an audit trail where researcher
3 bias is not eliminated but dealt with explicitly, centre-stage.⁴⁹ Integrating this kind of
4 reflexive writing with qualitative data can be challenging as researchers should not
5 undermine their data by overly attributing participants' narratives to researcher influence.
6 However, giving these reflexive accounts equal, or at least some, space within research
7 publications and reports is a good way to both qualify potential bias or researcher influence,
8 and to engage in debate about issues like subjectivity, impact, and researcher positionality on
9 data collection and analysis. The Discussion section of academic papers, student theses, and
10 research reports are good places for this debate yet are often side-lined in favour of
11 standardized descriptions of research processes, limitations, and ideas for future work.

12 **Theoretically-informed Reflexivity**

13 In the case study research, it was through the use of a specific theory that informed
14 the process of reflexivity that we identified the issue of identity duality as one with potential
15 impacts on data quality. To make sense of the dilemma and how we might best navigate the
16 issue, we turned to theory. Engaging with theory to inform and analyse reflexive journal
17 entries enhances the credibility of reflexive practice and can also lend insights into analysis of
18 research data. We particularly identified sociologist Erving Goffman's work on 'dramaturgy'
19 as particularly useful. Briefly, Goffman's theory uses the analogy of a theatrical performance
20 to highlight the ways in which people engage in 'impression management' and present
21 themselves to others in diverse ways depending on context and audience.⁵⁰ Partly taking his
22 lead from Jacque's monologue in Shakespeare's *As You like It*, Goffman argued that people
23 adopt different masks to play different roles in social interactions depending on the
24 expectations of a particular situation and how individuals wish to be perceived within it. For
25 Goffman, people (actors) both *give* and *give off* impressions; impressions are *given* through

1 purposively-used props and verbal signals whereas impressions are *given off* through non-
2 verbal cues that verify, or undermine, the impressions actors give. The theatrical analogy
3 continues in Goffman's treatment of the physical and symbolic spaces of such performances
4 and he distinguishes between front and back regions, or front and backstage. Performances on
5 the frontstage are given with the audience in mind and carefully managed according to the
6 formal and informal rules governing that particular space, while actors backstage are able to
7 relax and often deliberately shake off the impressions cultivated frontstage. To demonstrate
8 this, he used the example of restaurant waiting staff moving between formal frontstage
9 performance in the dining room where guests are served and the backstage region of the
10 kitchen where gossip, swearing, sexual remarks, 'sloppy' posture, shouting, and playing are
11 common.⁵⁰

12 While Goffman's theory has been critiqued for focusing too closely on everyday
13 mundanities rather than wider social structures, it continues to hold traction in the social
14 sciences as a framework for understanding self-presentation.⁵¹ Recently, for example,
15 researchers have examined the relevance of Goffman's work in the online world, applying his
16 notion of impression management to Second Life,⁵² social media⁵³ and online dating
17 profiles.⁵⁴

18 Goffman's analogy of masks seemed an entirely appropriate theoretical lens through
19 which to consider self-presentation in research encounters during the case study research.
20 Given that we wanted to collect honest data about participants' use of medicines even where
21 this use might be non-adherent or risky, we designed the research so that when interviewing,
22 APR's onstage identity was that of a researcher, not a pharmacist. Although health
23 professionals are well-versed in emotional labour⁵⁵, we felt that the potential power
24 asymmetry⁵⁶ between APR and our participants presented a significant risk that participants
25 would feel compelled to act as 'good patients'. As such, Goffman's theory was used to

1 facilitate discussions with participants, explaining to them that APR's role in the interview
2 encounter was as an open-minded researcher and that, although was also a pharmacist, this
3 pharmacist identity would be 'put to one side' during the interview. The success of swapping
4 masks or identities is reliant upon a degree of audience complicity.⁵⁷ Not only must the
5 performer deliver their 'lines' convincingly to control the impression that they are giving, the
6 audience must also be willing to believe and be convinced by the identity performance being
7 given. Using theory through Goffman's mask analogy to navigate the potential complications
8 of inhabiting dual roles built rapport between researchers and participants through
9 conversations about identity and authenticity in the research encounter. While most decisions
10 around mask-swapping are consciously or unconsciously kept from audiences (to facilitate a
11 more convincing performance of an 'authentic' self), we actively engaged participants in
12 conversations about APR's diverse roles, masks and identities, and which he would occupy
13 during the research. In doing so, we made audience complicity explicit and actively asked
14 participants to be complicit in APR's performance while he inhabited a researcher (rather
15 than pharmacist) role. We believe that APR stepping outside of his pharmacy role and
16 engaging participants in conversations about this decision led to better quality, more honest
17 data about medicines use and, crucially, misuse.

18 As well as helping us to design and carry out our data collection, we also employed
19 Goffman's theory to help our data analysis. Adopting the perspective of a pharmacist, the
20 analysis might use a positivist perspective to dissect participants' experiences of adherence to
21 identify facilitators and barriers, linking responses to stimulus, focusing on specific
22 medicines using a pharmaceutical gaze. However, adopting a social science perspective, the
23 analysis could remain open to, and engage with, participants' constructed life worlds and
24 medicines use within it, using a sociological imagination to understand lived experience.

1 However just as an actor can move between the front and backstage regions, APR
2 could move back to his pharmacist identity to support participants as a pharmacist, if needed.
3 The metaphorical ‘researcher mask’ and ‘practitioner mask’ are inter-changeable and can be
4 deployed at the discretion of an individual within any given context – be it clinical or
5 research-oriented. This approach enabled APR to fulfil his commitment as a qualitative social
6 researcher (who traditionally would not be expected to intervene), as well as fulfilling his
7 professional obligations as a pharmacist (who is statutorily compelled to intervene). For
8 example, when participants disclosed potentially dangerous medicines use practices, APR
9 was able to adopt his pharmacist mask to offer advice. It should be noted, however, that
10 moving to the ‘practitioner mask’ in this way was only ever done at the end of the interview
11 itself to ensure that this role slippage did not disrupt the flow, rapport or quality of the data
12 collection.

13 Engaging with Goffman’s theory of self-presentation presents a novel approach that
14 enabled the navigation of ethical and legal concerns, while undertaking robust data collection
15 using a method that was theoretically sound. Goffman’s theory of identity helped us to be
16 flexible, providing a theoretical scaffold to understand and navigate the role of the researcher
17 on data collection and analysis. This ensured that the study design and data collection were
18 carried out rigorously and transparently by providing a theoretical backdrop to support our
19 decision-making and ensuring the context of our findings are explained to other researchers.
20 Contextualising the design, data collection and analysis of the case study project to specific
21 or multiple theoretical positions can help readers understand the how the project was
22 conducted in action. Exposing and making explicit researchers’ theoretical positions
23 improves, in our opinion, the dependability and rigour of the findings.

24 Identifying and using this specific theory was only possible because researchers had a
25 degree of knowledge of broad theoretical landscapes outwith medical or health sciences

1 disciplines. While an in-depth knowledge of theories from across diverse disciplines is
2 practically challenging, we advocate for an open-minded approach and, where possible,
3 interdisciplinary working for medical and health sciences researchers to find the most
4 appropriate theoretical frameworks for navigating complex issues during data collection.

5 **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

6 Theory is important in all aspects of qualitative research. In this paper, we have outlined the
7 place of theory in qualitative research planning, data analysis, and data collection. We have
8 particularly attended to the question of theory in processes of data collection which can be
9 overlooked in qualitative research reports. We have argued that since data collection is not an
10 asocial process, and researchers always bring subjectivities to their research, theory can
11 provide a useful tool for navigating and articulating these complex issues. In doing so, we
12 have extended Meyer and Ward's⁵ approach to the integration of theory into healthcare
13 research which focused solely on theory's relationship with research design and data analysis.
14 To do this, we have drawn on an illustrative exemplar case study of research on medicines
15 use and our employment of sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theoretical
16 perspective to manage the competing expectations that occur when healthcare practitioners
17 enter into new roles as researchers. To deal with such complexity, we introduce reflexivity as
18 a practice to locate researcher bias from the outset. By using reflexivity to identify Goffman's
19 dramaturgy as a way to underpin our approach to data collection, we have identified a
20 mechanism by which dual-identity healthcare professional researchers can engage in high-
21 quality data collection. Medical and health sciences researchers' engagement with theory
22 around identity and role-swapping is not limited to Goffman though. Other theory-informed
23 approaches to data collection could draw on Foucault's work on power, using this theoretical
24 framework to weigh up the balance of power between researcher and participant during data
25 collection.⁵⁸ Alternatively, McIntosh's 'white privilege' framework might be useful to

1 untangle the politics of race and ethnicity in data collection encounters.⁵⁹ By using theory to
2 underpin methods of data collection, healthcare professional researchers will be
3 demonstrating reflexivity.

4 In making our argument, we advocate medical and health science researchers being
5 attuned and open to theoretical perspectives outside of their own discipline. As the academic
6 world becomes increasingly globalized and inter-disciplinary⁶⁰ such boundary-crossing will
7 not only become commonplace, but also increasingly necessary. Shifts in medical and health
8 science education towards, amongst other things, social determinants of health, clinical skills
9 and communication competence⁶¹ will bring both researchers and students into contact with
10 theoretical frameworks from non-medical disciplines. Within this somewhat eclectic
11 theoretical landscape, we encourage medical and related health researchers to use theoretical
12 ideas in the way French philosopher Michel Foucault suggested - as ‘a kind of tool-box [to]
13 rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area’.⁶¹
14

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Healthcare practitioners

*I don't use inhalers which is **what most people want to know**, why don't you use inhalers and I say "well I haven't been asked to". I mean I can't run.... But I don't have any lung problems. I mean up until a fortnight ago, if I just acted normally, I can get about and life is alright... I live here on my own, which I'm quite proud of. I do my own dusting and cleaning, not as often as I used to. I do my own washing and ironing, my own cooking such as it is. So life is alright. There are a lot of people worse off than me....I am going for my flu jab on Saturday morning.*

Figure 1: Example of coded text. Coded text is shown in bold/black and descriptive code is shown above

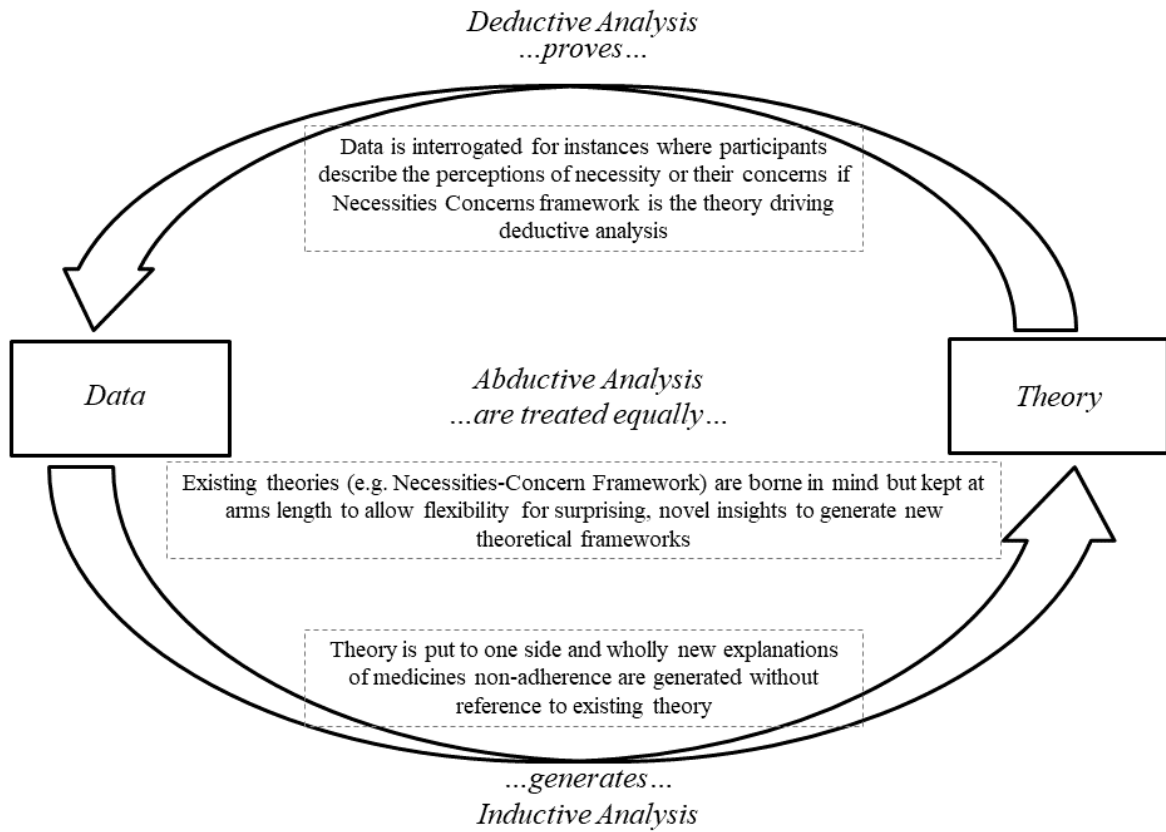


Figure 2: Relationship between theory and data in deductive, inductive and abductive analysis