Grounded theory in nursing research: Part 2 – Critique

In the first article in this series (McCann and Clark 2003), the methodological characteristics of grounded theory were examined. In this, the second article on grounded theory, Terence McCann and Eileen Clark critique the methodology. They then summarise the main differences between Glaser’s approach and Strauss and Corbin’s approach to grounded theory.

Introduction

As with all methods of research, grounded theory has strengths and weaknesses. Researchers using this approach apply both inductive and deductive thinking to the data, but the methodology is predominantly qualitative. Glaser and Strauss, in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), acknowledged using ‘frank polemic’ or vigorous debate in outlining grounded theory methodology in response to the prevailing view about social research in the 1960s. The methodology was developed in answer to criticism by positivists that qualitative research was unscientific because it lacked rigour (Smith and Biley 1997). It is noteworthy that before the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), the oral tradition was the dominant way of teaching qualitative study to prospective researchers (Charmaz 2000).
Critique of methodology

The main criticism of grounded theory method is that the epistemological assumptions have not been clearly explicated and its links with existing social theory have been decreased. The researcher is assumed to be simultaneously objective and subjective when using grounded theory, but the process of attempting this needs to be made clearer (Charmaz 1990). This tension can be seen when researchers using grounded theory, and other methods of qualitative research, are expected to maintain a degree of ‘detached closeness’ in the field (Christensen 1993). Researchers are expected to be objective in collecting data, but in order to obtain rich data, they need to get close to and be accepted by participants.

Although Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) present a more detailed account of grounded theory methodology than the Glaser and Strauss (1967) classic version, there is still an implicit assumption that researchers have a grounding in the methods of data collection that are commonly used in this approach, particularly observations and interviews. Related to this, there is an issue over the simultaneous use of conflicting terminology and sociological jargon by Glaser, and Strauss and Corbin, and researchers using grounded theory, which can lead to confusion and uncertainty in those researchers who are unfamiliar with the methodology.

Most issues with grounded theory are attributable to misinterpretation or misuse of the approach (Charmaz 1990). Recruitment of participants to studies can be problematic if participant sampling is selective or purposeful. Although sampling can be purposeful at the outset, it should revert to theoretical sampling in response to the developing categories and theories (Holloway and Wheeler 1996). A theory that is developed only from purposeful sampling will lack conceptual depth (Benoliel 1996). A factor that can impinge on theoretical sampling is the approach to data collection. Morse (2001) claims that there is some disagreement among grounded theorists about the types of data collection that are most appropriate for this methodology. The use of interviews as the only means of data collection in grounded theory studies can result in researchers concentrating on the lived experience of participants instead of focusing on the social processes that take place through time (Benoliel 1996). In Glaser’s (1992) opinion, in order
to have a proper grounded theory study it is essential to have observation as well as interviews to uncover the meanings of the participants. Similarly, studies may also concentrate on the immediate contextual factors that impinge on a phenomenon and ignore the broader structural influences on the phenomenon.

Another issue regarding the misuse of grounded theory is that some researchers undertake data analysis at the completion of data collection, rather than using a constant comparative method (Becker 1993). This undermines one of the main premises of grounded theory methodology that a cyclical approach is used in contrast to a linear method. It may also lead to premature closure, where researchers commit themselves to concepts, categories and theories that have not been saturated in the data and, as a result, the so-called theory is descriptive, lacks conceptual depth and has no basic social process (Becker 1993, Hutchinson 1993). A further potential problem relates to researchers who think mainly within a deductive framework. They may experience difficulties in adjusting to the grounded theory approach, which requires both inductive and deductive thinking, because the former requires a greater degree of abstract thinking than the latter (Hutchinson 1993).

**Approaches to grounded theory**

Researchers and theorists have diversified the use of grounded theory methodology; in particular the classic Glaser and Strauss version, now expounded by Glaser, and the Strauss and Corbin version. The diversification should not be interpreted as a case of one approach being necessarily superior to the other, but rather an indication that grounded theory is maturing and branching (Annells 1997a). Although both have evolved from the original work outlined in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967), each has its distinct epistemology and related properties (Babchuk 1996). The fact that there is now more than one approach to grounded theory is unsurprising as similar schisms have taken place in other research approaches. For instance, it is now taken for granted that there are several schools of phenomenology that can inform that method of research [for example, Heidegger’s (1962) hermeneutic-
interpretative approach and Husserl’s (1970) description of the lived experience. There are also various approaches to analysing data in phenomenology, the best known advocated by Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1975), van Kaam (1969) and van Manen (1990).

It is important for researchers to avoid ill-considered defense of one or other approach to grounded theory, but to continue to contribute to the development of the methodology (Annells 1997b). Both methods share common characteristics, but significant differences exist in the underlying philosophical assumptions. The common elements are:

- theoretical sensitivity
- theoretical sampling
- constant comparative analysis
- coding and categorising the data
- literature as a source of data
- integration of theory
- theoretical memos.

Where differences exist in these common characteristics, they relate mainly to the degree to which any element is adopted, rather than the substance of the element. Several, possibly interrelated, explanations can be provided for the differences between the two approaches. The simplest explanation is that differences always existed between Glaser’s and Strauss’s approach to grounded theory. Former students recognised that the theorists used separate modus operandi (Stern 1994). Table 1 presents a summary of the distinguishing characteristics of each approach.

There are marked differences in the epistemological underpinning of each approach; however, both are informed to varying degrees by positivism and its objectivist foundations (Charmaz 2000). Classical grounded theory is an interpretative approach to research that is guided by critical realist ontology and a postpositivist paradigm. This paradigm attests that reality exists but can only be incompletely measured in research, as a result of the inability of the researcher and researched fully to comprehend the situation, and the difficult constitution of the phenomenon (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The researcher in the postpositivist paradigm is believed to be independent from the researched (Blaikie 1993).
Strauss and Corbin’s approach to grounded theory draws on social constructionist ontology and the poststructuralist paradigm, where reality cannot be known but can be interpreted. A poststructuralist or postmodernist

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perspective, emerging in the mid-1970s, disagrees with the notion of epistemological absolutes, claiming that the social world is full of ambiguity; hence there is a need for a multiplicity of positions, while recognising the contradictions inherent in them (Hutchinson and Wilson 1994). Poststructuralism is a way of viewing the world that challenges prevailing beliefs and established truth (Kellner 1988). The main premise of poststructuralism is deconstruction, the analysis of different types of communication, in order to reveal their attitudinal and logical flaws (Derrida 1983). In Strauss’s pragmatist Theory of Action that guided Strauss and Corbin’s approach to grounded theory (Strauss 1993), the researcher undertakes a dialectic and active rather than neutral, role in the field (Charmaz 1990). The theory that is developed is based on an existence that cannot precisely be conceived, but can be interpreted (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998).

With regard to theory, Glaser emphasised theory generation through systematic data collection and analysis, arguing that theory verification and testing should be left to others (Glaser 1992). Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) instead focused on verification of theory and hypothesis testing. Stern (1994) supported Strauss and Corbin’s focus, criticising Glaser’s emphasis because of its incompleteness and the need for verification of the theory.

The focus in the field differs in each approach. Although Glaser recognised the need to consider structural factors, his main emphasis was in identifying symbols, interactions and the immediate context, and the socially constructed world of participants (Babchuk 1996). His position mirrored the classic symbolic interaction perspective, focusing mainly on a micro approach to the field of study. Strauss and Corbin’s gaze takes account of both micro and macro influences in the field. They emphasise structural, contextual, symbolic and interactional influences on individuals and groups. In addition to describing the socially constructed world of participants, they pay attention to the cultural scene (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998).

With regard to the role of literature, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) claimed that a preliminary review of the literature before beginning data collection would enhance theoretical sensitivity. The main literature review would be undertaken later, in order to support the emerging theory. Glaser disagreed about the use of the literature prior to entering the field, claiming
this would taint the researcher’s view of the field and constrain the generation of categories. He argued that the literature review should only be carried out after analysis in association with the emerging theory (Glaser 1992).

In relation to the emergence of the research problem, Glaser claimed that the researcher should not enter the field with any preconceived notions about what constituted the problem. That problem would emerge in the study in the process of theoretical sampling, open coding and constant comparative analysis in response to early interviews and observations (Glaser 1992). Strauss and Corbin (1998) proposed a much more flexible approach to the identification of the research problem. They identified four ways in which the problem could be identified:

- personal and professional experience
- professional or collegial suggestion
- technical and non-technical literature
- identified in the research study itself.

Regarding the conduct of the research, Glaser argued that grounded theory should be carried out in a flexible, laissez-faire type manner, which takes account of the principles and practices of qualitative research and the informants’ socially constructed realities (Babchuk 1996). Alternatively, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) provided a more structured or rule-governed approach to data collection and analysis. They modified the structure of grounded theory methodology from the original view of emergence of categories to the imposition of the more structured Paradigm Model to guide data collection and analysis (Stern 1994).

The Model provides a framework for axial coding, to identify links between a category and its subcategories. This involves identifying causal conditions, examining the context in which the phenomenon occurs and assessing the intervening structural conditions that enhance or constrain the action or interactional strategies or both, that relate to the phenomenon. Finally, analysis of the implications of the action and interaction takes place (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998). The framework of questions presents the researcher with the opportunity to understand the data more readily and develop theoretical codes from the data. An implicit risk in using the Model to inform the analysis, according to Glaser (1992), is that it may result in
‘forcing the data,’ the risk of developing categories that are not supported in the data (Charmaz, 2000).

Two different ways were proposed to evaluate grounded theory. On the one hand, Glaser (1978, 1992) stated four key criteria for evaluating a theory:

- **Fit** – the categories within the theory must directly relate to the data.
- **Work** – the theory should have an explanatory power and be able to interpret what is taking place within the context of the theory.
- **Relevance** – the theory is relevant because the researcher allows the core problems and processes to emerge from the data rather than attempting to impose a preconceived theory on to the area of study.
- **Modifiability** – given that the social (or clinical) world is constantly changing, the theory must be adaptable and modifiable.

In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and other qualitative researchers, such as Chenitz and Swanson (1986) and Kvale (1996), claimed that qualitative researchers should adapt the canons or standards of quantitative research, namely validity, reliability, efficiency and sensitivity (Polit and Hungler 1999). Strauss and Corbin (1998) did not identify specific canons for qualitative research, instead deferring to those advocated by other qualitative researchers. They went on to outline seven criteria for evaluating the research process (sample selection, what categories emerged, evidence supporting the categories, theoretical sampling, formulation and validation of hypotheses, modification of hypotheses, emergence of core category); and eight criteria for evaluating the empirical grounding of the study (concept generation, relationship of concepts, concept and category linkage and density, theory variation, conditions for theory variation, account of process).

Overall, Stern (1994) summarised the differences between the two approaches as:

*I think that Strauss, as he examines the data, stops at each word to ask, ‘What if?’ Glaser keeps his attention focused on the data and asks, ‘What have we here?’ Strauss brings to bear every possible contingency that could relate to the data, whether it appears in the data or not. Glaser focuses his attention on the data to allow the data to tell their own story.*
Conclusion

Researchers using grounded theory methodology do not enter the field with a tabula rasa or an absence of preconceived ideas, but bring with them their disciplinary perspective, their own philosophies and their biographies. Various philosophies and paradigms have influenced the evolving versions of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory and these, in turn, have influenced the way in which a grounded theory study is undertaken. Differences in approach to grounded theory indicate maturation and further development of the methodology rather than its demise. It is important that researchers who use grounded theory are clear and explicit about the particular approach they are using. Although each method is similar, each has distinct epistemological and methodological underpinnings, which inform the approach to data collection and analysis.

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