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Grappling with the literature in a grounded theory study[1]

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Abstract

Student researchers often struggle to understand how to use literature in a grounded theory study where timing and knowing what to read are critical. Despite substantive theoretical documentation on this topic the reality of working through abstract ideas is more challenging. There is a fine line between not doing a literature review in the area of study and being informed so that a study is focused. In this paper a practical example will be presented illustrating how the student can integrate literature yet stay away from preconceived notions. The topic is interprofessional practice.

Key Words
Grounded theory, Interprofessional practice, Qualitative literature integration

Introduction

Over and over again student researchers grapple to understand the place of the literature review in a grounded theory study. While the theoretical ideas are well documented in texts on research methodology (Chenitz, 1986; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) integrating abstract concepts in practice is sometimes more challenging. Glaser (1998) recognises that reading the literature is problematic while Strauss and Corbin (1998) expect most professionals are familiar with the literature in the field. Misunderstandings arise from the

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tendency for novice researchers to take a purist stance whereby they accept the general advice to stay away from the literature literally. While the beginner researcher receives that interpretation happily, supervisors and institutional review committees are rather more nervous of such a simplistic approach. Those responsible for student researchers seek some reassurance that the student knows what they are doing, has a general focus, and is at least safe to enter the field.

Preparation for any research study is always essential and some pre-research literature reading is still necessary to "frame the problem in the introduction to a study" (Creswell, 1994, p. 23). At the very least, a literature review is needed to find out if the proposed study or something similar has been done before. In addition, this early literature review may be used to prepare a research proposal for an ethics committee, so sound preliminary work goes some way to demonstrate that the researcher knows exactly what she is doing even if she does not know what she is looking for. Thus the mental wrestle quickens with the need to be general but focused, yes, to look at some literature but no, stay away from the main area of interest.

Not surprisingly, student researchers may feel baffled with instructions that are apparently contradictory. This is complicated further, as many qualitative researchers work in an environment where clinicians are increasingly asked to justify decisions with the best evidence (Street, 2001). Such issues serve to emphasise that part of being a qualitative researcher is learning to move beyond the either-or way of thinking, in order to embrace both-and thinking that recognises complex possibilities, many truths and viewpoints, and different ways of experiencing reality (Zohar & Marshall, 1994). In this paper the issues and strategies for grounded theory literature integration will be discussed and illustrated with a practical example.

What are the Issues?

Clearly literature review in a grounded theory study must include literature on both the topic and the grounded

theory method. For example, student researchers grappling with the literature will quickly find the debate about emergence versus sensitisation that arose during the period of "reformulation and repudiation" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 512), which occurred almost a decade ago. Under reformulation Strauss and Corbin (1990) sensitised grounded theory researchers to the specific techniques required to ensure the reliability and validity of data collection and analysis in a qualitative study. Although sensitisation supposedly refined the original methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) the detailed explanations and underlying prescription stimulated a fervent response from Glaser (1992). Glaser repudiated the developments, defending the original methodology that, according to him, was much more flexible.

Charmaz (2000) notes that Glaser challenged the analytic questions, hypothesis testing, and methodological techniques underpinning sensitisation, arguing that emergence demanded that the researcher collect and analyse data without forcing previously prepared questions or explanations upon it. New researchers though welcomed the introduction of axial coding, with its specific questions related to causal conditions, context, strategies and consequences. This coding, dimensionalising and the conditional matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) certainly strengthened theory verification. In the meantime Glaser (1992) concentrated on theory generation (Charmaz, 2000) and many student researchers got lost along the way.

Indeed Charmaz (2000) suggests "grounded theory methods have come under attack from both within and without. Postmodernists and poststructuralists dispute obvious and subtle positivistic premises assumed by grounded theory's major proponents within the logic of the method itself" (p. 510) while Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) developed the method in very different directions. In this context it is not unusual that student researchers, particularly those using the method for small-scale research projects, struggled to understand a method that was evolving and changing.

Study of the method itself therefore is important so that the researcher grasps the issues and is better placed to conduct a trustworthy study. Reading may include examination of the philosophical perspectives and the paradigm of inquiry (Annells, 1996), literature on evolving methods (Melia, 1996; Robrecht, 1995; Schreiber & Stern, 2001; Stern, 1994), and possibly a review of Chenitz's (1986) useful, compromise position that explains how to write a research proposal for a grounded theory study. Equally the most recent debate on the objectivist and constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2000) clarifies many of the issues raised over the last decade and moves grounded theory forward into the twenty-first century.

So far it is evident that the literature review is vital to research as it supports knowledge generation as a scientific, scholarly process. Credible knowledge that will withstand public scrutiny is necessarily embedded in sound research design, and develops new knowledge that goes beyond the existing literature and research. It is apparent as well that there is a fine line between not doing a literature review in the area of study and being informed so that a study is focused in the particular area of interest even though the specific problem is unknown in the early stages of a research project.

Dey (1993, p. 63) extends this argument noting that "there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head" (Dey, 1993, p. 63) and ignoring the literature in the beginning of a study does not mean discounting it altogether (Dey, 1999). "The issue is not whether to use existing knowledge, but how" (Dey, 1993, p. 63). Chenitz (1986) simplifies many of the issues suggesting that a literature review is required to write a research proposal that will meet academic purposes and "demonstrate knowledge about the phenomena and methods for study" (p. 44). An ability to think through issues and to question underlying assumptions is critical here, as the researcher develops "a cautious and skeptical attitude about the

literature throughout the study" (Chenitz, 1986, p. 44). Thinking ability also affects the student's response to strategies for grounded theory literature integration.

The Glaserian Strategy

The Glaserian position on literature review is quite clear. Glaser (1998) states "do not do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is to be done; and when the grounded theory is nearly completed during sorting and writing up, then the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison" (p. 67). This position supports emergence and supposedly keeps the researcher free from any preconceived documented concepts. It also assumes that the student has plucked a research topic out of thin air and has read little in the area of interest. The reality is quite different in that students generally study a speciality, developing a research interest as a result of exposure to wide-ranging ideas over time. An increasing number of clinicians also support evidenced-based practice and are familiar with the wide range of literature readily available on the electronic databases.

Glaser's main objection to an initial literature review is that the researcher may be sidetracked by received knowledge and interpretations that support taken-for-granted assumptions, which are not relevant in the new area of study. When the research goal is discovery, to explore the main concern of participants and find out how they continually resolve that concern, energy need not be wasted on speculating about the problem. Doing grounded theory is rather like being a detective – all will be revealed in time once the researcher talks to the people and asks questions intended to draw forth the truth.

Students who search the literature are also vulnerable as, according to Glaser, there is potential for the researcher to feel daunted by writers and specialists in the field to the extent that the new researcher questions any ability to create some knowledge of value. Furthermore, new researchers examining the literature prior to a study may

be influenced by the "rhetorical jargon" (Glaser, 1998, p. 68) so that they sound like the literature, repeating popular, anecdotal ideas. Those problems certainly occur with some students but are less likely once the student has mastered critical analysis. Equally, others may not be "suited to doing grounded theory … [feeling] at a loss not being able to preconceive the data" (Glaser, 1998, p. 62). The successful grounded theory researcher must be capable of conceptualisation and must be prepared to put aside personal perspectives in the interests of understanding the participant's viewpoint.

The Strauss and Corbin Strategy

Strauss and Corbin (1998) have updated the original grounded theory approach to literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) recognising that "the researcher brings to the inquiry considerable background in professional and disciplinary literature" (p. 49). Strauss and Corbin argue that at the beginning of a project literature is useful "to formulate questions that act as a stepping off point during initial observations and interviews" (1998, p. 51). The earliest questions identified in the literature clarify the general research purpose and some of the concepts to be investigated. While the researcher cannot know which concepts, or indeed if any, will have the same emphasis once data collection and analysis proceed it is likely that some will remain to be integrated into new interpretations of relationships and processes.

As a study progresses literature becomes an effective analytic tool to stimulate thinking. "Insights do not just occur haphazardly; rather, they happen to prepared minds during the interplay with the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 47). During analysis the researcher uses literature to heighten theoretical sensitivity, all the while comparing and contrasting interpretations with occurrences in the data. The research analyst is expected to contain biases by engaging in reflexive interpretation. The key here is that "it is by using what we bring to the data in a systematic and aware way that we become sensitive to meaning without forcing our explanations on data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998,

p. 47). Literature thus furthers conceptual ordering or theory development. However, although it is automatically assumed that the research analyst will examine personal assumptions, values, stereotypes and biases and methodically analyse data to ensure that the knowledge generated is rigorous, managing the process is much more complicated.

Pre-Study Literature Search

In this information era where researchers are expected to keep up-to-date in the field of study how is it possible to stay away from the literature? Which literature? It is all very well to state that "to avoid reading the literature beforehand is a strategic grounded theory pacing" Glaser, 1998, p. 68), and while it is respectfully suggested that such a stance was perfectly reasonable in a very different research context (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it is unreasonable in this day and age where information management is a speciality in itself. Glaser (1998) urges researchers to leave existing knowledge alone, to be open-minded, so that the problem in the area of interest will not be pre-empted but will be defined by the study participants. Students embrace this idea enthusiastically reminding supervisors that if they cannot know what the study will be about examining literature in any area wastes time. Open-mindedness though is not blank-mindedness (Denscombe, 1998).

What students tend to misunderstand is that every research study is about something in the beginning, and in grounded theory work the initial focus develops further or moves in different directions once participants add in data. Nonetheless, everything is data (Glaser, 1996), something to be constantly compared and analysed with anything else that is data, and that includes literature that may have been examined at some time or other. Glaser's position is somewhat ideal. It is perhaps timely to remind ourselves that all research begins with an idea, albeit a fuzzy idea, and usually the researcher is sufficiently interested in that idea to pursue it further in order to focus the research and

provide a rationale for the study, which will withstand academic review.

Fortunately Glaser acknowledges the problems of presenting a proposal to dissertation committees and funding agencies and recommends that the researcher not waste time and "do what the people want" (1998, p. 72). If the literature is accurate or inaccurate "it will be constantly corrected, put in perspective and proportioned in relevance by the constant comparative method" (Glaser, 1998, p. 72). Any previous review will become integrated as a part of the whole. In this sense literature takes its place as part of the macro-context shaping a study, or can be woven into the micro context if it is relevant to emerging concepts. The macro context incorporates data about the broader collective and institutional aspects of society while the micro context "takes a more involved and close-up viewpoint on individuals" (Layder, 1993, p. 5). It provides contextual data but need not derail the research analyst searching for alternative ways of looking at the world.

Some literature, but what, when and how?

The theoretical challenges of literature integration will now be shared using an example of a doctoral research project that focused on interprofessional practice (McCallin, 1999a, 1999b). The research began with a general interest in examining nursing practice in the changing context. Informal talks with registered nurse students had revealed serious reservation about service provision in restructuring organisations. Nursing practice was strongly influenced by organisational change that was shaped by health reform on a scale that was perhaps unprecedented in the history of health service delivery in New Zealand.

In order to understand better some of the contextual issues the national and international literature about health reforms was examined to clarify the common trends. Reading revealed that changes were by no means confined to nurses. Everyone working in the health sector was affected to some degree or other. Surely nursing practice did not sit in isolation in such a volatile environment? Perhaps scrutiny of one professional group was too narrow?

Could the topic be refined to explore professional practice in the changing health sector?

Bishop and Scudder's (1985) suggestion that "only minimal consideration has been given to the moral issues involved in the day-to-day health care and to the ongoing relationships of physicians, nurses, and patients" (p. 2) stimulated thinking. That statement mirrored some of the issues raised by registered nurse students discussing practice problems and was in keeping with the public debate on health reform in which consumers, and health professionals, questioned current health restructuring. Maybe this was a study about morals and ethics and professional practice?

General reading continued until thinking halted again. Englehardt (1985) suggested that there were no differences between the professions of nursing and medicine in caring for patients as each profession simply had a different accent and emphasis. Conflict and tension was more likely caused by power and authority relationships in hierarchical organisations. Perhaps long-term study within the discipline of nursing had de-sensitised me to the wider issues common to all health professionals working in the health reform environment? Even though nursing practice was the general area of interest was it not unwise to view nursing as a separate entity when practice responsibilities and professional boundaries were blurring across the health professions? But, what exactly was the problem? The issues were broad. Confusion reigned.

Why Insist on Emergence?

Glaser's (1992) style of grounded theory was selected for this project precisely because of its ability to support the emergence of problems that were to be identified by the participants. Grounded theory is based on the belief that, as individuals within groups comprehend events from a personal perspective, common patterns of behaviour can be discovered (Glaser, 1998). Hutchinson's (1993) idea that people make sense of their environment despite apparent chaos was intriguing. That certainly supported

observations of professional practice in the changing context.

Grounded theory looked promising, as the methodology had the potential to explain what was actually happening in practical life, rather than describing what should have been going on. The premise was useful initially because there were so many different perspectives in the literature on nursing practice and the health reforms that it was difficult to define the problem area. The grounded theory method was ideal, as it created a scientifically legitimate space to encourage participants to explain their main concern and how they continuously resolved that. Concepts did not have to be identified as predetermined variables, but would emerge from observation and discussion with participants.

At that stage reading began in the general area of the professions (Abbott, 1988; Dingwell & Lewis, 1983; Ehrenreich, 1978; Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Johnson, 1972)? The logic behind that decision was that most nurses worked with health professionals from other disciplines and background data of the macro context might be useful. Then a new keyword, "interprofessional workgroup" appeared on the databases and became a springboard for literature searching. Further scanning of the databases refined the focus to interprofessional practice. That concept was daunting and there was no doubt that the researcher was in a field "knowing nothing" (Glaser, 1998, p. 54).

The search for literature on interprofessional practice began. According to Glaser (1978) that move was not strictly in accordance with the emerging grounded theory method, as the researcher runs the risk of preconceiving the problem area. Some sense of direction though was needed to satisfy university authorities and ethics committees. It was also clear that any literature was data that could be neutralised or integrated as long as it was constantly compared with emerging concepts (Glaser, 1998). Fortunately, the literature revealed that there was little published research on the concept of interprofessional practice (Bishop & Scudder, 1985; Casto & Julia, 1994;

Gabe, Kelleher & Williams, 1994; Leathard, 1994; Ovretveit, 1993; Petersen, 1994; Soothill, Mackay, & Webb, 1995). Most readings proved to be anecdotal accounts of interprofessional teamwork. The huge literature on teams was not reviewed then as it seemingly had potential to emerge as a significant concept. However, selected general management literature was perused for a sense of organisational issues associated with change and restructuring (Drucker, 1994, 1995; Handy, 1990, 1994; Morgan, 1986; Senge, 1990).

The medical sociology literature was also scanned (Freidson, 1986, 1988, 1994; Nettleton, 1995; Turner, 1987). This was considered important to further understanding of the sociocultural influences on professional practice, and to gain some insights into the historical influences that had shaped the health professions. Familiarity with the nursing literature alone was increasingly inadequate for the study that had moved beyond the boundaries of nursing, so a baseline understanding of the medical profession, the dominant disciplinary group Among the health professionals, was sought. Substantial controversies and contradictions surrounding power relationships in the health professions were revealed (Ashley, 1976; Bishop & Scudder, 1985; Daniel, 1990; Davies, 1995; Fox, 1992; Hugman, 1991; Willis, 1989; Witz, 1992). In fact, this heightened sensitivity about interprofessional tensions made me wary about predetermining problems that supported unsubstantiated myths and assumptions.

In summary, the reading about interprofessional work revealed a new emphasis on the development of teamwork Amongst health professionals (McCallin, 2001). As a result, the researcher concluded that the interdisciplinary team was the prevailing research area even though the actual problems of practice remained ill defined at that point in time. In the final presentation much of the literature discussed was integrated into separate chapters that presented the macro context of the research. For example, the readings about the professions, power and social control became a chapter on the historical backdrop of

teamwork; material about health reforms was written up in a chapter on the political context of health reform; and literature on teams and teamwork was reviewed after data was analysed and presented in another chapter on teams and teamwork in restructuring organisations. This illustrates well that the literature became "a valuable and essential source of information" (Chenitz 1986, p. 43) even though the focus of the review changed as the main concern was clarified.

Conclusion

In this paper strategies for grounded theory literature integration have been reviewed and illustrated with an example. Today, literature cannot be ignored and it is important that grounded theory researchers have a sound theoretical understanding of the methods of integration so they are well positioned to generate rigorous knowledge that will contribute to scholarly knowledge development in the discipline of nursing.

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