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The Literature Review in Grounded Theory: A response to McCallin (2003)

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Abstract

The paper by McCallin (2003) is a useful contribution to the debate surrounding the role of the literature in Grounded Theory (GT). For the purpose of this paper and with reference to McCallin (2003) the issue will be discussed in relation to the purpose of a review within GT. It will be argued that the misunderstanding about the function of the literature within a GT study arises partly as a result of the confusion caused by the continual re-writing of the method. Further it will be argued that a preliminary reading of the literature is entirely consistent with the principals of GT. Finally some practical suggestions will be made as to how the issue could be dealt with in a way that is unproblematic for GT.

How to deal with the literature in GT has clearly been an issue from its inception because its role is different within this methodology. This is likely to be as a result of misunderstanding the role of the literature in GT, confusing it with its traditional role in research. However this leads to tensions between the requirements of those supervising the research project and those of GT (McCallin 2003). Conventionally the purpose of a literature review in research is to identify a research problem, refine a research question or hypothesis, determine gaps or inconsistencies in the body of research as well as identifying suitable designs and data collection methods for a study (Polit and Beck 2006). Within GT the literature is viewed simply as more data to be synthesised and integrated into the emerging theory (Glaser 1998). The researcher using GT is mandated to stay open to the concepts being generated from the data and not from the literature so as not to preconceive or be derailed (Glaser 1978; Glaser 1998).

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Central to GT is the idea is that the literature is not used as a source of concepts. Therefore it is very important for those new to GT to realise this through a meticulous reading of the original GT literature, coupled with high quality teaching in research methods classes. However, thinking of GT as just another qualitative methodology is problematic for those trying to understand the role of the literature. Its continual rewriting confuses those new to it (Glaser 2003). Not only are those trying to understand and use GT confronted by what appears to be two versions of the method, but the different perspectives also, such as constructivist (Mills et al. 2006), feminist and critical theory (Charmaz 2000). While these different perspectives discuss the literature as data, they do not emphasise its full conceptual integration into the emerging theory, leading to a misunderstanding as to the role of the literature in GT. No wonder that those new to GT end up so confused.

It is a common misconception to think that GT advocates no reading of the literature. While Glaser (1978) advises the researcher to enter the field with as few predetermined ideas as possible; that "sensitivity is increased by being steeped in the literature that deals with both kinds of variables and their associated general ideas that will be used" (p2); this does not mean no reading of the literature.

McCallin (2003) is right when maintaining that usually funding committees, research supervisors and dissertation committees demand that the student includes a literature review in any research proposal and this is acknowledged by Glaser (1998). At a minimum those conducting research need to demonstrate that a problem worthy of research exists and that they have the necessary skill to conduct such a study. The question then becomes one of what literature to read rather than whether to or not. Grounded Theory answers that question unequivocally-read the literature but in an area which is different from the research (Glaser 1978) essentially to avoid the relevant literature until at least the core category begins to emerge (Glaser 1998). Also there is acknowledgement that some researchers enter the field with clear questions in mind, a

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general perspective or some concepts already in mind as a result of some previous training (Glaser 1978). This is seldom a problem since the procedures of GT and trusting in emergence will challenge any preconceptions. Whatever the source of bias, the constant comparative method done carefully as outlined, will counter them (Glaser 1998). The inference here is that provided the researcher is open and follows the procedures of GT, preconceived ideas will be corrected whatever their source. Presumably this also includes the literature. Those who are intent on doing a good GT study are unlikely to have a clear idea of what the study will be about, since this only emerges as data are collected. While Glaser (1998) argues that reviewing the literature before knowing what the study is about is a waste of time, McCallin (2003) maintains that a study must begin somewhere. As an example, when reviewing the literature for a PhD thesis on how nurses pick up on patients worsening conditions, the initial literature review examined such issues as the signs and symptoms of physiological deterioration, clinical decision making, knowledge in nursing and nurse-doctor professional relations. While some of this literature was useful for integration into the emergent theory, other more relevant literature was included such as the subjective nature of evidence and argumentation theory. There was no way of knowing beforehand that the inclusion of such literature could have been anticipated. McCallin (2003) dealt with this in a similar way.

In conclusion, the key to doing a good GT study and overcoming the potential problem of reviewing the literature prior to data collection is to maintain theoretical sensitivity through constant comparison and memo writing particularly, as well as following the other steps of GT judiciously. This will ensure that researchers stay open. Provided that those embarking on a study using GT accept that they may well end up doing two literature reviews and fully understand the purpose of each, then a preliminary literature review arguably is not the problem that it is sometimes considered to be. One of the reviews could be in an area that puts the study into some context and the

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other one used as data to fully integrate the theory. This is entirely consistent with the views of Glaser (1998) when he advocates doing some preliminary reading. Finally, GT methodology is pragmatic and Glaser (2001) advises to do whatever is required to get funding or satisfy a supervisor or dissertation committee. A preliminary reading of the literature followed by a review in the substantive area, together with a thorough understanding of GT is suggested as a way of dealing with the issue of the literature review and should satisfy everyone while staying faithful to the principals of GT. Stay open and trust in emergence in the confidence that any preconceptions will be corrected.

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