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Methodological Issues: Have we forgotten the place of thinking here?

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The article "grappling with the literature in a grounded theory study" (McCallin, 2003) has stimulated a lively discussion in the international grounded theory research community. In this paper, I reply generally to my colleagues' responses and raise some further issues that I do not believe have been addressed to date. In particular, I question if current discussions about the place of literature review are incomplete if methodological matters are debated in isolation from issues of thinking. The purpose of this paper is to argue that although literature review is preferably minimised initially, simply focusing a study, in reality timing does not matter, as long as the analyst is critically analytical of literature at all times, and does not allow existing knowledge to pre-empt identification of the research problem or formation of the emergent theory. In a less than perfect world, some researchers who do not have the luxury of grounded theory supervision will review literature in advance, and others will include a review as per the methodological ideals. What is important however, is how literature is managed and how the researcher thinks about the material he or she is exposed to. In other words, is literature integrated theoretically into a study or simply regarded as the received view of science and material to be accepted without question? The intent of the paper is not to remodel classical grounded theory but more to bring into the open some hitherto unexplained aspects of grounded theory thinking, which also affect what happens methodologically and ultimately, the rigor of the finished product. These issues are explored briefly.

Background

Originally, "grappling with the literature in a grounded theory study" (McCallin, 2003) was written as a teaching

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tool for masters' students beginning grounded theory research projects. In one of my roles as a teacher I had noticed in grounded theory research supervisions that many students always asked the same questions. "Where should I begin? What should I read? What do I do about literature?" While the answers to those questions were available in the literature, ease of access to material was variable. In New Zealand most masters' students work full-time and study as well; time is precious. Some students were looking for shortcuts that could have saved them time as they organised study with hectic professional lives. Others, studying in distance learning situations, usually had immediate access to electronic databases, although library books had to be inter-loaned from various universities throughout the country, sometimes overseas.

Coupled with this was a situation whereby the luxury of being a full-time scholar with unlimited time to review literature on methodology, seemed to be something of the past. In addition, there were, and still are few classical grounded theory researchers in New Zealand, so students studied with supervisors who did not understand the methodology and certainly few had the luxury of working through apprenticeship-style supervision in their research work. Therefore, the intent of the original paper was to provide a quick overview of significant issues and to highlight the practical problems that influenced research design. The paper has been well received by students and stimulated a lively discussion with more experienced grounded theorists, many of whom will be involved in supervisions as well.

Responses

Most of my colleagues are in agreement that a grounded theory researcher will look at some literature prior to a study. Vivian Martin's notion of "phasing" is especially useful, reflecting the tensions between emergence and "the subversive potential of grounded theory to push pass disciplinary boundaries by broadening the relevant literature" (Martin, 2006, p. 1). Perhaps more important is her point that arguments about timing of

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literature review can serve as red herrings and confuse researchers that are essentially asked to distance themselves from pre-conceived problems (Glaser, 1998). In contrast, Tom Andrews suggests that continual re-writing of the method is problematic. If the researcher fails to appreciate the relevancy of literature and its integration into the emergent theory misunderstandings are perpetuated. Hans Thulesius questions if the strategies outlined in the original paper are an important modification of how to use literature in classical grounded theory. Although my initial intent was not to modify grounded theory I certainly bring a critically analytical mind to the debate, hence the questions. Helene Ekstrom draws attention to theoretical and pragmatic issues as does Alvita Nathaniel. Alvita goes on to argue that inquiry begins when a knowledge gap is evident. Of particular interest to this paper, is the point that gaps are not always visible unless the researcher has a broad understanding of a wider body of knowledge. In other words knowledge gaps may be unknowable and unpredictable; problem identification is emergent, as is the direction the research will take. For me, those methodological issues trigger links into complexity thinking that emphasises "knowing the unknowable, managing with the unmanageable, and organising within the unorganisable" (Flood, 1999, p. 129). These ideas seem to be very similar to the way grounded theorists work and think. Therefore, while methodological issues are foundational to rigorous research, so to is the issue of thinking and how the researcher integrates methodology with the overall process.

On thinking and critical reflection

Since writing that paper, and with further supervision experience, I have observed that a "true" grounded theory researcher does not ask the questions mentioned earlier. These people "just get on and do it!" The potential grounded theorist will ask for references to get a handle on the method while "other students", the ones who ask the aforementioned questions, tend to seek a blow by blow account of what might happen in the research, often trying to control the area of research, not to mention the problem

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identification. Such responses suggest interplay between an individual's learning styles, thinking capability, and methodological issues.

As a teacher, when a student asks "what" questions and insists on staying at that level of analysis I am on the alert, wondering about their thinking capability. Being thoroughly socialised in assessment procedures and the various levels of analysis in academia I tend to equate "what" questions with descriptive analysis, "how" questions with interpretive analysis, and "why" questions with critical analysis. Yes, I can hear some of your arguments already. They are beaming down to the South Pacific from various parts of the world. And no, the argument is not simplistic. Perhaps in the midst of complexity we might forget to return to the basics and check out the fundamental thinking competence. For example, one of the hallmarks of classical grounded theory is conceptualisation. As we are too well aware, there are rather too many grounded theory studies that fall into the realms of qualitative data analysis, suggesting that some would be grounded theorists are better at description and interpretation rather than conceptualisation. I know it is no longer fashionable to quote Piaget because critical analysts have found his sample to be biased, but perhaps some of my questions are accounted for by the fact that the majority of the population will be concrete thinkers (descriptive analysis focusing on the what questions) and only a small percentage are able to hypothesise and conceptualise.

These analytical issues trouble me and have taken me beyond the practicalities of literature review and its timing to consideration of an even more critical issue, namely grounded theory thinking. Have you ever wondered about the sort of person who becomes a grounded theory researcher? Who are these people? Is there something specific that stands out in them that means they have an inherent ability to manage the method effectively? Reflection suggests that an effective grounded theory researcher thinks in a particular way. The person is comfortable with emergence, capable of conceptualisation. Similarly, the competent grounded theorist is an able

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inductive-deductive thinker, at one and the same time. To engage in constant comparative analysis and follow through the principles of theoretical sensitivity certainly demands that the researcher think specifically as well as generally about the emergent theory. The ability to engage in creative thinking is also fundamental for analysis, if the researcher is to be open to emergence and not constrained with the rational, rule-bound thinking that characterises the received view of the world (Zohar, 1997).

This creative dimension to thinking may be inherent in the individual. Part of creative thinking is a willingness to take risks and the ability to deal with chaos (Zohar, 1997). Managing uncertainty, being a grounded theorist demands risk-taking thinking if any sense is to be made from apparently unconnected data. Being open to emergence and finding a coherent pattern of behaviour suggests a certain cerebral ability to think flexibly about the world and organise it into some shape or form, despite apparent chaos. Likewise, have you ever noticed how many grounded theorists love to do puzzles, or have a history of doing so as a child? It is possible that organising the chaos of hundreds of pieces of seemingly unconnected bits of cardboard, when there is only a general picture to indicate where the patterns exist, demonstrates a particular way of thinking. When some of these skills synergise you might notice the grounded theory thinker acting rather like a detective. While researchers seldom focused solely on exposing negative behaviours, grounded theorists have a keen interest in discovering how groups of people behave in various situations. Asking questions, especially the why questions is common, as they seek to understand how and why others behave as they do.

These observations suggest that an effective classical grounded theorist must be a critical thinker, if not a complexity thinker. The critical thinker examines assumptions and taken-for-granted understandings of the world. This type of thinker looks at the breadth and depth of the argument, weighing up the evidence and sources of knowledge before a conclusion is reached. The grounded theorist seems to work similarly in that he or she

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constantly compares data across a study, theoretically samples to expand explanations, and present a conceptual explanation that is theoretically sensitive.

Conclusion

While methodological debates serve many purposes highlighting misunderstandings may constrain thinking in that novice researchers are paralysed from thinking at all, let alone researching. Novice researchers have to learn how to research. Some grounded theorists have the privilege of working with a trained theorist; many do not. Those in the latter category will no doubt learn through trial and error learning. Those of us who have thankfully passed the novice stage might want to reconsider our arguments for methodological rigour. I believe that the well-prepared researcher should know what to do and why. Handling the "how" is less specific. That aspect tends to happen during the research process. However, a critically analytical researcher is better situated to learn through experience and still remain methodologically rigorous, as the theory is generated. Does this mean that the timing of literature review is much less important than previously thought? Surely critical analysis of existing literature, regardless of timing, opens up the mind to the strengths and limitations in received writing, and for consideration in relation to the developing theory?

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