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A Partial Application of Classic Grounded Theory in a Study of Poverty in Greenland

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Abstract

This paper describes a partial application of the classic grounded method in a research project tasked to surface an understanding of poverty, and offer policy recommendations for change, to the Government of Greenland. The aim of analysis was to find the core category and related categories though analysis stopped short of conceptual completeness and conceptual integration. The theory explains that from the perspective of social sector administrators, there is a concern as to how to transition clients from a state of damaging dependence to a less dependent state. The administrators process this concern by engaging in proactive steering within a societal structure which is characterised by a lack of capacity and discontinuity, and in a context of overwhelm. The theory developed was successfully applied to satisfy the objectives of the research project.

Introduction

In a study of poverty and its possible alleviation in Greenland, classic grounded theory (CGT) was partially applied to produce a new perspective to inform policymakers (Sørensen, 2010).

As a self-governing entity within the Danish realm, Greenland is financially subsidised by Denmark, and without this subsidy, Greenland would most likely be in a state of severe poverty equal to the poorest of developing nations. Social-structural issues regarding health, education and employment exacerbate poverty-related problems, which are more pronounced in Greenland than in other parts of the Danish realm, or in Western Europe as a whole. Startling examples of such problems are the high rates of suicide and sexual abuse, and that the number of abortions equals the number of births (GrønlandsStatistik 2013; Statistics Greenland 2013). In many respects, the situation of Greenland's population is closer to that of the indigenous people of North America than to its European neighbours.

In relation to poverty, the three primary tasks of Greenland's government are firstly, to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves due to lack of income; secondly, to take care of those who are unable to take care of themselves, e.g., due to age or handicap; and thirdly, to help people and families to become independent of

public assistance. To inform this work, the Government commissioned a wide-ranging study. The research design was complex and included analyses of quantitative data, comparison of poverty definitions, quantitative measurement of poverty, and comparisons of quantitative measurements of poverty. There was also a qualitative study of data collected from interviews with people in the administration and their clients, private entrepreneurs and members of the general public.

In particular, the Government requested a discovery of the meaning of poverty in the local Greenlandic context. This discovery was to be based on available quantitative data and on collected qualitative data. As far as possible, this discovery of the meaning of poverty should also include a discovery of clues to resolve some of the problems that were connected to poverty. Thus, part of the task was to give policy recommendations to the Government.

The CGT study

Given this brief, classic grounded theory became an obvious choice of methodology. The consultant however, was not fully familiar with CGT and while CGT studies can be time-consuming, this part of the study had to be completed over a period of approximately four months. The consultant therefore needed to develop theoretical and practical insights into CGT methodology and its application, swiftly. To facilitate this process the consultant participated in a valuable CGT Workshop in the United Kingdom in February 2010, and sought equally valuable guidance from Olavur Christiansen, a Fellow of the Grounded Theory Institute. Given the time-frame, it was deemed impossible to use the CGT procedures in full as prescribed by Barney Glaser (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Glaser 1998, 2001) therefore, analysis had to be selective.

As is common with CGT, the data collected was mostly qualitative and obtained by interview; participants were mainly public employees within the educational and health sectors, and their respective clients. The selection of 70 interviewees during field work largely followed the prescribed CGT procedure for theoretical sampling. In total, Greenland has about 56,000 inhabitants covering an ice-free area of 410,000 km². Nuuk, the capital, has 16,000 inhabitants with a further 32,000 inhabitants living in 16 towns, and 8,000 more inhabitants living in approximately 60 settlements. Most settlements comprise 50-75 people while a few are larger and have 200-500 people (Statistics Greenland 2013). The focus was on four geographical areas indicated by the quantitative data to be quite different from each other: Eastern Greenland (1 town, 1 settlement), Southern Greenland (1 town, 1 settlement), Central Greenland (1 settlement), and the Northern Greenland (1 town, 2 settlements). The a priori selection of these populations may be seen as a data selection approach designed to maximise the differences.

Since time was limited, the aims for analysis and the generation of theory were to find the core variable and several other high-level concepts. Based on the procedures executed, we are confident that we have developed useful categories that reflect the actual situation and that analysis sufficiently conceptualises the relationships between the categories. This new perspective enables us to proffer some new solutions to

poverty-related problems in Greenland. The core variable selected was one of several potential core categories and therefore whilst useful, the opportunity remains for developing a major CGT study.

The beginning of theory generation: current understanding

From the perspective of administrators in the social sector, the problem relates to their clients and in particular to the clients' states of damaging dependence. The administrators' main concern is to do with the need to transition their clients into a less dependent state; a state they attempt to bring about by changing clients' behaviours. This process of proactive steering is undertaken within a societal structure which is characterised by a lack of capacity and discontinuity, and in a context of overwhelm.

Damaging dependence

Traditional Inuit virtues such as humility, reservation and reticence are still practised in Greenland, but as a consequence of damaging dependence they are expressed in the form of subordination, meaninglessness and powerlessness. Where a desired state might be an inter-dependence based on family ties and social relationships, damaging dependence is based on an over-reliance on others and is perpetuated by a cycle of self-destructive behaviours. The following data-slices illustrate this concept and its significance.

Damaging dependence is seen in cases where a student or apprentice is unable to complete training due to a lack of trained teachers and is therefore unable to work and support herself. It is also seen where opportunities to work and self-support are limited. For example, the availability of work can be unreliable and dependent on the unpredictable conditions of natural resources: the fish processing factory might only work every other week and sometimes not at all. It may re-open or may not. This has a strong impact on the income levels of the towns and settlements and affects an individual's ability to self-support.

Abuse of many types underpins psycho-social and health issues often leading to dependence on public sector support. Compounding an original stress, a social situation that requires a response from an often ineffective or non-existent public authority can leave the client in isolation and 'paralysed'. Families de-railed by similar events must seek assistance from other family members, friends or the public system. It is also not rare for the economic resources of functioning families in the towns to be (ab)used by less well-off family members from settlements or from family members who might be drug or alcohol addicts. In these cases entire families can be drawn into a state of damaging dependence.

Proactively steering behaviour

The challenges for the social workers in proactively steering clients' behaviour are significant and their efforts are often futile. The social workers are heavily overburdened and there is a very high turn-over of employees. The following data-slices illustrate the concept of proactively steering the clients' behaviour and its significance.

In the small towns and settlements of Greenland, there is almost an over-reliance on teachers to guide the young and the challenge for teachers is to proactively steer their students' behaviour both within the educational setting and without.

Similarly, social workers wish to proactively steer the behaviour of their clients to (i) ensure proper livelihoods for children, young people and families, and in particular (ii) to assist in detoxification or prevention of drug abuse and (iii) to assist in keeping 'law and order' at night-time, often addressing petty crime. Also, proactive steering of behaviour is observed in psychologists' efforts to treat and support sexually abused or traumatised children and young people.

An unintended consequence of social workers' efforts to proactively steer client behaviour toward problem prevention and problem solving behaviours is that these efforts can themselves lead to damaging dependence, increasing the burden on the social structures. For example, the processes used by the social workers often rely on 'external means' that do not enhance or engage the resources of the 'self' of the client, and instead perpetuates the problem by keeping the client dependent on 'externals', e.g., threats of withdrawal, rewards of delivery and cash.

The process of proactively steering client behaviour will not be elaborated in this paper as the substantively coded data has not yet been conceptually integrated into the theory. However, the considerable overburdening of the social workers was recurrently indicated in the data and studies from the wider research project have indicated that the overwhelm experienced by social workers in Greenland is strongly correlated to the issues of discontinuity within the basic social structure, and the lack of capacity within the public system. Indicators of discontinuity and lack of capacity follow.

Relocations, terminations and lay-offs throughout Greenland's public system have caused the disruption and loss of knowledge and skilled labour in the public system with huge attendant problems amounting to inefficient service delivery. Social projects are discontinued due to the persistent lack of professional staff, such as social workers and/or psychologists. In the remote settlement structure of Greenland, social services and support are provided randomly or through monthly visits from the central administration.

Lack of capacity and discontinuity are seen in nearly all towns and settlements, for example, there is an almost persistent lack of teaching staff available to fill vacant positions and those positions that are filled by qualified teachers frequently become vacant again, leaving a knowledge vacuum in the locality. Therefore, it is difficult to increase capacity through the recruitment, development and retention of qualified employees. The lack of an 'academic' or 'learning' environment often means that staff find it difficult to develop professionally and professional challenges remain unmet. Other professionals working with 'heavy' social cases often leave their positions due to an absence of collaboration and feelings of isolation. This situation is accentuated by the often inefficient political leadership of the towns.

This lack of capacity of the social structures is exacerbated by the problem of discontinuity within. Both factors contribute to the sense of overwhelm experienced by the administration which causes staff to leave and results in a further reduction in capacity and discontinuity. The lack of trained staff impacts on the efficiency of work and service delivery to clients. For example, data showed that many foster families had too many children placed with them. This had a negative effect on the care of the foster children who would often end up in a more severe situation than before being removed from their own families or former foster families.

A suggested definition of poverty and its related solution(s)

One possible definition of poverty is the psychological distress caused by living in a state of damaging dependence; of being unable to utilise the resources of one's self in order to obtain a balanced 'dependency-independency vis-à-vis others'.

An opportunity of grounded theory is that key dependent and independent variables are identified. If an independent variable is changed, it will cause a change in each of the dependent variables. It is speculated that a key independent variable in this study is the resources of self and one way to enable an individual to utilise these resources is to develop the self, in particular, their self-confidence. An outcome of this study was therefore to recommend that a poverty reduction strategy for Greenland should take its point of departure in proactively steering behaviour with the aim of building the self-confidence of its clients. The societal structure being characterised by discontinuity and lack of capacity however, does not facilitate a fundamental social process in which one of the key solutions to address poverty concerns is sustainable confidence building. Nonetheless, data has shown that where there is *sustained trust* among the parties encouraged by transparency, access to information and information exchange, sustained trust contributes to positive behaviour change. Two examples are the reduction in drug abuse and an increase in the number of youth enrolled in education. The aim is therefore to reduce the burden on the system by increasing the self-reliance of clients and stepping outside of the cycle whereby support creates future damaging dependence.

At the operational level courses and training of social workers, teachers, and other public employees will embrace the concept of 'proactively steering behaviour' through the development of sustainable confidence building facilitated by sustained trust between social workers and clients. Supplementary and supportive approaches have also been identified including the adoption of a programmatic approach to social preventive work. This means combining different solutions more effectively than what has previously been done in traditional practices; for example, a 'family programme' that addresses, in a flexible manner, client-related training and support in (i) parental responsibility and the safeguarding of children and youth, (ii) education and housing, (iii) family economy/budgeting, and (iv) family and rules and regulations of the public sector.

Opportunities

This study has explained a main concern of administrators in the social sector of Greenland and has gone some way to explain how the efforts to address the main concern worsen the problem. This understanding has enabled the development of a strategy to work within the constraints of a lack of capacity and discontinuity to improve the self-reliance of its destructively dependent population. It has been achieved through the partial use of the classic grounded theory method. An amount of data far in excess of the needs of a grounded theory was collected and only partially analysed. This analysis has emerged some relevant concepts and whilst the relationships between them are not yet fully understood, a core category is tentatively recognised, and some of the relationships postulated. Further selective coding, memoing and eventually sorting would reveal a more conceptually integrated theory. It is a credit to grounded theory that even in this partial state, the resultant theory is useful.

Moving forward, a paper in progress will compare the understanding of poverty generated by this study with other internationally recognised definitions of poverty. We also identify an opportunity to conduct a study across national borders to develop different understandings of poverty. We plan to discuss the implications of this theory for practice and seek to determine its contribution to knowledge by comparing it to extant theory and literature.

It is our hope that this study will encourage CGT consultants to feel increasingly confident with this method and to include this option in their contract proposals.

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