A Comment on Gerunds: Realizing the Researcher's Process

Amy Russell, Texas State University

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Abstract

This conceptual discussion briefly presents the unique process that classic grounded theory researchers may encounter when undertaking the analysis and interpretation elements of the research process. Grounded theory researchers may discover their own researcher gerunds, much like the naming of theoretical codes in grounded theory. The author formulates the researcher gerunds she experienced and presents these in the context of her dissertation study.

Keywords: conceptual discussion, learning grounded theory, the new grounded theory researcher.

Introduction

Testing and questioning represent constant comparison in data analysis. The researcher may sometimes have self-doubt and may question his or her abstractions of the data. This self-doubt is better served through testing codes in constant comparison, and allowing said codes to emerge from the data. As I learned to trust myself as a new grounded theory researcher, testing as a learning action became requisite, since this led to revisiting data for constant comparison and checking for substantive coding, fit, and flexibility. Questioning and testing my conceptualizations ensured I would follow the outline for data analysis: (a) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (b) integrating categories with their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.105). Questioning and testing the fit and flexibility of codes, categories, and properties grounded my process of theory generation. Glaser (1978) believed that the researcher "should not be afraid of his own fear; for that itself may block the creative process" (p. 20). Embracing this fear and using it in the grounded theory process have been invaluable to me as a grounded theory researcher. Self-doubt in this learning process led to a more theoretical sensitivity and testing action, and as such relieved the fear that I would be unable to conceptualize the theoretical codes, which reflects the next section of the researcher gerunds of waiting and trusting.

Waiting and Trusting

Glaser (1978) stated generating grounded theory "takes time [and is a] delayed action phenomenon" (p. 18). Patience in the process is challenging, especially when excitement builds as codes emerge. The researcher must trust in emergence, whether discovering a category or naming a theoretical code. Trust requires waiting for

emergence. There is nothing passive in waiting and trusting because the researcher is constantly thinking about the data. As memoing occurred and links made between codes and basic social processes, three epiphanies would then come that would finally turn the coding toward a more fitting direction. Glaser (1978) stated that this self-pacing recipe forces patience. Waiting and trusting also involve relinquishing control; the researcher has no control over the data or the direction the discovery takes.

Reflexing and Owning

Reflexing and owning required insight and accountability in my previous practice experiences and studies. For social workers, previous practice experience presents a unique issue when doing grounded theory. Reflexivity, a feminist concept, means that a person must reflect on contexts of past experiences (Hurd, 1998). As a community mental health worker in the field nearly ten years, I pride myself on the ability to assess severe and persistent mental illness, which I found myself doing in one interview. I recovered quickly when I recognized this behavior and returned to the method. It is no accident that classic grounded theory is very forgiving because details are inconsequential. The researcher simply abstracts data to find deeper meaning. This event was a very powerful and liberating realization. The simple awareness of what was occurring helped me redirect my energies back into conceptualizing theory. For social workers doing grounded theory, this issue must be addressed before entering the field to avoid falling into comfortable practice skills that are antithetical to the process of classic grounded theory.

Reflexing and owning also help the researcher put away predetermined ideas of what is meant by "remain open to what is actually happening" (Glaser, 1978, p. 3). My proposal and past studies quickly became secondary to my intrigue with the data. Toward the end of data collection, however, these past studies and literature would again surface. Knowing the consequence of forcing data, I adamantly restricted any entertainment of existing theory relevance. If I thought connection (Relational-Cultural Theory) was a concept, it was put to a rigorous test of fit. I recognized and owned that my previous studies might impede theory generation.

Ruminating and Obsessing

Glaser (1978) stated that theoretical pacing requires distraction with other endeavors. Because unrealistic deadlines stunt creativity, the method must not consume all the time of the researcher. This behavior was difficult for me as I found myself ruminating and obsessing over codes, theoretical sampling, and the abstractions of the data. I did plan distractions. I genuinely enjoyed and was inspired by this study, thus ruminating and obsessing were not always troublesome. It is a perfect fit with my melancholic nature.   Perhaps Glaser knows this about classic grounded theory researchers. Glaser (1978) spoke of a "transition from input into depression and out through writing memos" (p.24); this was the "drugless trip" (Glaser, 1978, p. 24): the researcher's absorption of data through data collection and coding. Ruminating, I

believe, is parallel to the process of constant comparison. Going over the data repeatedly, contemplating it, and chewing "again what has already been chewed slightly and swallowed" Mish, 1978, p. 1030) was helpful in conceptualizing the data. Grounded theory has exceptional power over minus mentorees (Stern, 1994). This power presented difficulty later because I could not distance myself from the data to name all the theoretical codes, and the inability to distance self from the data was when obsession led me to my committee members for assistance in order to lead me out of a mental fugue.

Conclusion

To conclude this brief comment on the unique process of the classic grounded theory process, and the evident gerunds that occur, I realized that, when thinking of researcher actions and conceptualized codes, gerunds can be helpful through the experiential process of the grounded theory method. The researcher is all things: designer, data collector, sole coder, analyst, and author. In these roles, I found that not only were participants resolving their main concern but I was also discovering it. Action is implicit for both researcher and participants. This is part of what Glaser (1978) called the self-pacing process. Self-pacing is a three stage process to generate theory: (a) input, (b) the drugless trip, and (c) saturation. Transposing these stages onto researcher gerunds reveals that input and the drugless trip are like questioning and doubting, waiting and trusting, and ruminating and obsessing. Saturation is similar to reflexing and owning. The researcher must find his or her own personal recipe to ensure the process is genuine as he or she searches through the dictionary for just the right word, and as he or she discovers his or her own researcher gerunds.

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