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Grounded Theory: Study of Aboriginal Nations

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Abstract

Recently, Elers (2016) published an article stating the importance of using Classical Grounded Theory (CGT) when researching indigenous populations. This article puts forward CGT as a viable and necessary tool for researching this complex subject as it requires researchers to utilize multiple data sources and, as in this particular project, can be used by multiple disciplinary teams. Canada has much to do to rebuild the trust of the indigenous people of Canada. CGT shows promise as a methodology that gets to the root of the issues and offers one of the best opportunities to develop a theory that can be part of the constructive healing process going forward.

Keywords: Aboriginal, indigenous, TRC, labour readiness, grounded theory, research teams.

Introduction

The project started eight months ago and continues to be a work in progress. This short analysis provides some insights of the challenges and importance of classical grounded theory (CGT) for a critical area of Canadian research. It is not possible to highlight all the findings at this stage therefore the purpose of this paper is to put forward some of the lessons learned. The first and most important lesson to be shared is Glaser's dictate that "All is Data" (Glaser, 2007).

Study outline

The study started with a call from a Canadian research government funded agency looking at pathways to improve education and labour opportunities for Aboriginal youth. The process required interviews and focus groups to be conducted across a region. Concurrently some team members explored literature looking for existing and past insights of specific challenges and opportunities for education and employment. The research team consisted of professors from different universities and backgrounds. The team included Psychology, Anthropology, Education and Business researchers. The literature review material, while being collected concurrently during interviews, was not shared with the research interview teams until after the groups had completed their initial comparative analysis.

One challenge faced by the research team was the diverse level of individual knowledge members had on Aboriginal culture and history. From a researcher's perspective, the flexibility of the CGT methodology was key to researching the job and education

phenomena. Ehigie and Ehigie (2005) highlight that in certain areas of research it is important for team members to have an understanding of the participants they are studying. As put forward by Elers (2016), indigenous research is well suited to CGT and this view is supported by his personal comment received from Barney Glaser "It is all just data with patterns in it" (Elers, 2016, p. 114)

Past quantitative research of education and employment, does not answer the question, why Aboriginal education and employment levels fall far below the national average. During data collection, it became clear the issue was complex and went beyond poor education and labour statistics. CGT provides a framework that supports multiple data sources and allows the data to lead the researcher forward. It was important that all members approach the phenomena with an open mind and willingness to allow the data and process to drive the direction of the study. Classic grounded theory (CGT) researchers need to ask themselves the questions: "What perspective do I represent?" and "How may this perspective influence my reading?" (Deady, 2011, p. 51)

The goal of improving labour and education opportunities was the primary focus, but to understand the phenomena it is necessary to understand the history of Canadian Aboriginal people. Since before confederation the Aboriginal people in Canada faced programs of assimilation and cultural suppression. Aboriginal youth were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to residential schools where they were restricted from practicing their language, culture and in many cases physically and sexually abused. In the 1960s, now known as the 60s scoop, Aboriginal children were put in care of non-aboriginal families removing all ties to their families, language and culture. The last of the residential schools was closed in 1996 and the government of Canada in 2016 apologized for the actions of the past including before and after confederation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was created in 2008 to understand and provide a process to redress past actions. (TRC, 2015). The commission interviewed survivors of residential schools across Canada. The study completed in 2015 put forward a call to action with 94 recommendations, which the government of Canada in 2016 agreed to implement. Broken treaties, racism, illegal seizure of land, human right violations as defined by the United Nations and a multitude of other actions bring us to 2017. The repository of data that we need in order to study and understand the past should include data on what happened and why.

The history books were distorted to hide the true story of the Aboriginal people of Canada. The TRC call to action looks to correct this with a new education process to be implemented for all k-12 schools (TRC, 2015).

The data

The core analysis is based on interview data collected from individual participants and focus groups from specific regions of Canada. Additional data included research reports, statistics, treaties, and government documents.

The challenges

The initial challenge was the size and diversity of the research team. The team members with more Aboriginal knowledge shared required protocols and provided culture awareness without presenting preconceived conclusions. All team members understood the importance of letting the participants fully provide their thoughts and experiences. Cultural awareness is critical for the interview process as it could make the difference between an open or closed communication. It is also necessary for a researcher's "theoretical sensitivity, without which grounded theory analysis is compromised" (Glaser, 1998 p. 123). Memo writing was left to individual team members: one of the advantages of CGT being that it allows each researcher to develop his/her own memo writing and sorting process. (Glaser, 2014).

The data analysis issue of moving from the descriptive to the abstract is a consistent problem for novice researchers. While the narratives were emotionally charged and the similarity between participants from totally different regions was evident it is important to move from the descriptive and to conceptualise (Glaser, 2007).

The researchers continue to engage in constant comparison, comparing incident-to-incident, incident to concept, concept to concept with the ultimate aim of emerging the substantive theory (Glaser, 2007; Holton, 2007). The compelling stories made it difficult for some team members to move to the abstract. Common incidents and concepts were identified in all regions including intergenerational trauma, racism, culture, spirituality, physical, emotional, resilience, celebration, trust and many more. Analysis continues to define the research path forward, the literature set aside for the moment since "more focused reading only occurs when emergent theory is sufficiently developed to allow the literature to be used as additional data" (Heath & Cowley, 2004, p. 143).

This study is unique in the blend of professionals and a strength of CGT is that it permits this diversity. This study is also a testament to the researchers' dedication to let the data guide them to a powerful grounded theory which can be used to support the Aboriginal people.

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