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Kara L. Vander Linden, Saybrook University, USA

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Patterns of Theoretical Similarity

Kara L. Vander Linden, Saybrook University, USA

Abstract

Classic grounded theories explicate patterns of behavior used by individuals within a substantive area to address problematic areas that they are working to address. Through the brief examination and explanation of two classic grounded theories conducted by the author, overlapping patterns of theoretical similarity are discussed despite the theories' emergence from different substantive areas. The future development of formal grounded theories from these and other substantive grounded theories is discussed.

Keywords: theoretical similarity, grounded theory, navigating new experiences, surviving the complexity.

Years of conducting classic grounded theory (CGT) research and overseeing CGT research by doctoral students have reinforced Glaser's (1978) statement that "The goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of human behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved" (p. 93). Due to the theoretical nature of the patterns of behavior discovered, theories developed using CGT often depict overlapping patterns of behaviors and concepts despite emerging from different substantive areas. This article will exemplify this by examining two CGT studies conducted by the author in two different substantive areas: adult learning experiences and grandparent-headed households. First, a summary of each study will be provided. Then a discussion of areas of theoretical similarity between the two studies will be presented. Finally, next steps in the development of formal grounded theories are presented.

Navigating new experiences

Navigating (Vander Linden, 2005) explains three cyclical stages of going through a new experience and factors that may affect the process. In the mapping stage, people engage in locating (assessing one's location in relation to a goal), surveying (information gathering), and plotting (creating a plan). In the embarking stage, people move through the experience using normalizing (creating a new normal) and strategizing (overcoming obstacles encountered). In the reflecting stage, people reflect on the experience. These stages are affected by properties of the experience (complexity, newness, structure and control, a

catalyst, etc.) and factors that affect the person (emotions, goals, competency, obligations, perception, perspective, modus operandi, etc.).

Surviving the complexity

Surviving the complexity (Tompkins & Vander Linden, 2016) is a survival process of taking on the caregiving role and doing what one can despite multiple factors that make the situation difficult. The theory introduces three types of complexity: situational, relational, and emotional. Throughout the process, the caretaker engages in surviving behaviors to do what he/she can within a complex situation. The process begins with a trigger event (tragic or destabilizing) that leads to the caregiver (parent) abdicating the role to another. Stage 1, rescuing, is engaging in temporary, emergency action (helping-out, stepping-in, and taking-in) to save others from harm. Within rescuing the new caregiver engages in adjusting (figuring out the new role and aspects contributing to the complexity of the situation) and accepting (coming to terms with the situation). Rescuing ends as the new caregiver is faced with the decision to abdicate the role or move to stage 2, taking-on, where the caregiver consciously commits to take-on the caregiver role and the inherent complexity it brings for a longer duration. While taking on, the caregiver engaged is quieting the chaos (bringing order to confusion through stabilizing and normalizing), doing one's best, and problem solving.

Areas of commonality

Both theories identify common patterns of behavior used by individuals resolving problematic aspects within the substantive area and factors that influence these behaviors. Significant concepts that emerged in common between the two theories included: complexity, emotions, power and control, obstacles and problem solving, normalizing, and change.

According to navigating "an experience can be complex due to (1) the number of different components involved; (2) the interactions between the components; and, (3) the impact of the interactions" (Vander Linden, 2005, p. 27). Similarly, surviving explains that complexity results from a "layer of complications created by behavior and beliefs of people within a situation and influenced by community and societal rules, regulations, and expectations" (Tompkins & Vander Linden, 2016, para. 4). Both theories acknowledge that patterns of behavior occur within the context of systems and these systems are complex. Thus, complexity may a condition present in many systems and, as such, a condition within many grounded theories which explain systems.

Surviving identified one specific type of complexity as emotional and navigating also identified the role emotions play as an influencing factor on behavior. Both theories explained that emotional responses guide a person's actions, behaviors, and choices. Thus, emotions are often a common concept in our theories about patterns of behavior.

Concepts relating to power and control also emerged as significant to both theories. "Power is the ability to affect a situation, outcome, or person's behavior and often is tied to a

person's position; whereas, control is exercising some degree of influence over these areas" (Tompkins & Vander Linden, 2016, para. 8). Both perception and utilization of power and control influence when and how people think they can influence a situation or outcome, and thus also influence behavior.

In both theories, people encountered obstacles and used problem solving to address obstacles. In navigating, problem solving was referred to as strategizing; in surviving, it was referred to a quieting the chaos. In both concepts, people identify and develop strategies to deal with factors and conditions to minimize their impact on the situation.

Two final concepts common to both theories are normalizing and change. While not directly identified by either theory, change is a theoretical concept both have in common. Both theories identify a change process occurring in the lives of people within the substantive areas and behaviors used in response to change. In the theories, normalizing was identified as a behavior used in response to change. "A person often experiences an increased sense of disequilibrium as unexpected factors and conditions are encountered" (Vander Linden, 2005, p. 109). The person strategizes about how to address the unexpected factors and conditions encountered and then normalizes to create a new norm and sense of stability. The same idea also appears in surviving within quieting the chaos. Since addressing change is a main concern for people within both settings, it is not surprising that there is commonality with the patterns of behavior used in these theories.

Formal grounded theory

Just as theoretical patterns occur across data in the development of substantive grounded theories (SGT), through the examination of theoretical similarities across SGT the level of generalizability can expand the core category into formal grounded theories (FGT). Glaser and Strauss (1971) defined formal theory as "theory developed for a formal or conceptual area of sociological inquiry" (p. 177) which vary in levels of generality from substantive theory. They further stated, "if the focus of level of generality is on generating formal theory, the comparative analysis is made among different kinds of substantive cases and their theories" (p. 178).

Initially, the theorist may approach the focus on the level of generality in developing a FGT in two ways: looking for new variation and raising the level of abstraction. In looking for new variation, he or she may look at SGT that share similar contexts and/or conditions. When there exist similar contexts or conditions, the theorist may find new conceptual variation of existing concepts that may have emerged from varying substantive areas. For example, in navigating and surviving, problem solving was a behavior used to address obstacles. However, each theory presented different problem-solving strategies and techniques which can be further developed to broaden the generalizability of a FGT. As in developing a SGT, seeking theoretical saturation and accounting for conceptual variation may lead the theorist to gather and analyzed data, this time from varying substantive areas to more broadly expand the generalizability these concepts.

Comparative analysis of SGT and data from varying substantive areas may begin to raise the level of abstraction of the theoretical concepts. Just as the theorist asks, "What is this data a study of?", "What category does this incident indicate?", and "What is actually happening in the data?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57), asking similar questions of the concepts within the SGT may lead to the discovery of concepts with broader generalizability. For example, as mentioned earlier, change is a concept in common between navigating and surviving however neither theory explicitly identified it. It was through asking "What is happening in theory?" and "How do these core variables relate?" that the concept of change emerged as a more generalizable concept. As the level of abstraction is raised the level of generality increases.

These initial steps in generating a FGT are just that, initial steps. After years of working in CGT research, this researcher is ready to further expand her scope of knowledge and skills to begin generating FGT. Glaser (2007) found that some have cited FGT as a possible area for future research but few have followed through. Hopefully the next 50 years in the history of classic grounded theory will see further development of formal grounded theories.

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