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Eliciting Spill: A methodological note

Alvita Nathaniel, Ph.D.

Classic grounded theory is an inductive process that focuses on the experiences and perceptions of research participants (Glaser, 1978, 1998). Although grounded theorists may utilize other types of data, most are likely to gather information through qualitative interviews. The theorist seeks to understand what is going on as people resolve their main concern in a given substantive area. People know what is important to them and most want to tell their stories. They feel encouraged to talk when they recognize that their stories are valued. Once the informant realizes that he or she is being heard, the story flows. This is what Glaser refers to as “spill.” When this occurs, the theorist becomes a vessel to receive the story. As Glaser describes it, “The researcher will become a ‘big ear’ to pour into incessantly” (1998, p. 124). But, as easy as this seems, the researcher must overcome certain positivist tendencies to allow this to happen. Rather than asking a list of pre-planned questions, the grounded theorist will try to develop one question that will trigger the telling of a story. Eliciting spill requires a deliberate process that employs a deep understanding of the fundamentals of classic grounded theory. Derived from Glaser’s writings, the following are suggestions intended to help the novice grounded theorist to elicit spill.

Prepare for the Interview

The theorist must understand how the classic grounded theory method guides every step of the process. Grounded theories emerge from data: they are not preconceived. For that reason, the theorist should choose a broad substantive area. It is more likely that the researcher will be able to recognize important concepts and patterns of behavior if the area of study is relatively broad. For example, life transitions pose many problems which must be processed or resolved. These periods of change provide rich data for analysis and culminate in important theories. The researcher must be open to hearing the story from the informant’s perspective. After all, the focus of the research in classic grounded theory revolves around the participant’s own perception of a problem in their lives and their struggle to resolve the problem. Attentively listening to participants’ stories and

remaining open to their ideas and interpretations is the only way the researcher can arrive at new knowledge.

To avoid preconception, which halts the generation of new knowledge, it is best if the theorist reviews the literature after the GT process is well underway. However, because of institutional pressures, it is likely that most researchers will conduct a literature review early in the research process. So, an alternative to delaying the review of literature is to consciously put aside what has been learned from the literature and enter each interview with an open mind, free of preconception. This requires conscious effort and time for decompression between the literature review and data collection.

Choose the Right Sample

A grounded theory emerges from a group's main concern and how it is continually processed or resolved. As the theorist seeks to understand what is going on with a group of people, he or she should focus attention on that specific group and give careful attention to choosing an appropriate sample. The researcher may want to interview a few people close to those involved in the substantive area under study to learn more about associated social-structural processes, to theoretically sample, and so forth. However, the theory is properly discovered by sampling those directly involved. For example, if one wishes to know about the transition from freedom to prison, interview prisoners; if one wishes to learn about nurses' moral dilemmas, interview nurses.

Choose the Right Setting

Except in the case of field research, most interviews should be conducted in settings conducive to open and free discourse: places where both researcher and informant are comfortable enough to be truly present, without pretence or fear. The setting should be a physically comfortable, neutral space where the informant feels free to honestly disclose personal and sensitive information. The wrong setting can be a strong impediment. For example, an experienced grounded theorist described his first interview with a top-level leader. He conducted the interview in the informant's office. As you might expect, the informant answered each question with the officially correct and proper answer—he was “properlining.” A second interview in a neutral place yielded a wealth of information. The informant no longer

felt restricted by his official role and was able to communicate on a human-to-human level.

Ask the Right Question

Grounded theory seeks to conceptualize a main concern as experienced and perceived by the participants in a substantive area, so it must be a concern *for those individuals* and not simply a professional concern of the researcher. The researcher chooses the substantive area and sample population and allows the main concern to emerge from the study. Few informants will have much to say in response to a problem that they do not perceive as a concern. If the researcher ends up asking lots of questions to elicit information, he or she has probably asked the wrong “spill” question.

When crafting the spill question, the researcher should be careful to avoid false assumptions that will derail the theory. The researcher should not assume, for example, that parents love a child, alcoholics wish to be sober, or middle managers wish to advance in an organization. Perhaps a parent despises a child, an alcoholic enjoys drinking, or a middle manager is comfortable in a current position. If the posed question assumes a falsehood, spill cannot occur.

A good question is clearly stated, simple, and free from confusing connotations. The question should include common language appropriate to informants’ education and cultural group and should be as free as possible from connotations that confuse meaning. Many terms in common usage have contradictory meanings and are easily misunderstood. The researcher should avoid professional jargon, which creates power imbalance and can become a barrier to genuine human-to-human discourse. If the informant understands the jargon, he or she may feel compelled to match the language to impress the researcher with his or her knowledge. On the other hand, the informant cannot answer meaningfully a question that is unclear.

Blend

Unless conducting a field study on how informants react to conspicuous researchers, the researcher should attempt to blend with them. Blending means looking and sounding like the people one is with. People are more likely to speak openly and honestly

if they are comfortable in the presence of another. Most people are comfortable with others that seem to be like them. Within reason, the researcher should dress in a manner that blends with the informant. If the informant is an executive who wears business suits, the researcher should not arrive in blue jeans. If the informant is a patient in a free clinic, the researcher should avoid dressy clothing and jewelry.

The researcher should attempt to be inconspicuous in sound as well by matching speech volume and cadence to that of the informant. For example, questions delivered in a rapid, clipped Manhattan speech pattern might be a put-off in an Alabama nursing home. Again, this is a rule-of-thumb that requires reasoned judgment; but, most people are more comfortable with people who are like them and are more likely to spill when they feel comfortable.

Encourage Spill

People want to be heard and respected. Certain purposefully used communication strategies convey respect and encourage spill. Giving nonjudgmental, undivided attention will send a message that the informant has a contribution that is worth hearing. The researcher should begin the conversation with an open, non-judgmental question that encourages the informant to tell his or her own story. The question can begin with the words, "Tell me about...." or "What was it like when...." In many cases, this is all that is required to elicit spill. If the informant is comfortable and has a main concern, the story will flow. Unless it is culturally inappropriate, the researcher should make good eye contact and listen carefully without worrying about the next question. If the narrative stalls, the researcher can encourage the informant to continue by using statements such as, "Go on," "Tell me more about that," and so forth. Gaps in the narrative and periods of silence allow the informant to gather thoughts and give the impression that the researcher believes the story is worth waiting for.

Telling the truth can be dangerous. Grounded theory studies in the past have uncovered questionable business practices, unethical medical acts, and so forth. During the interview, informants will try to measure the danger they will put themselves in if they spill this type of information. This is one of the reasons that Glaser (1998) discourages audio taping. Most

people hesitate to disclose sensitive or dangerous information in the presence of a tape recorder. Conspicuous note-taking can have the same cooling affect. So, the researcher is more likely to elicit sensitive information without audio tapes or note taking. If one must tape or take notes, it should be done as inconspicuously as possible.

Conclusion

Spill is more likely to occur if the researcher follows the fundamental rules of classic grounded theory, sets the stage, and seeks the truth as known by the informant. Theory emerges from stories that people tell about a concern that they have experienced. The researcher must choose the right sample, choose the right setting, and ask the right question. Strategies to encourage spill include making the informant comfortable, blending, asking open ended questions, and listening. Through knowledge of GT methodology and use of subtle yet effective communication strategies, the researcher can elicit spill — the grounded data of GT research.

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