



GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

An international journal

From the Editor

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From the Editor

In 2009, we issued a special call for papers, Along the GT Learning Curve, to focus on the novice experience in learning and doing Classic Grounded Theory (CGT). We especially welcomed papers that demonstrate the challenges, rewards and lessons learned and that offered advice to others undertaking their first CGT study. It has taken some time to bring this issue to publication; to select the papers and to work through various iterations of review and revision. We are very pleased to finally present this issue with six papers from a wide range of professional fields including business, psychology, education, social work and medical sociology. The range of disciplines alone speaks to the reach of CGT as a research methodology.

These papers are presented as good examples of the novice attempt at that first CGT study; they are not presented as perfect but rather as examples from which we all can learn. For the novice, reading these papers should give encouragement and some appreciation for the rewards of choosing to do a CGT study. For the more experienced grounded theorist, they serve to remind us that we have all been there; finding our way through that first effort, reading the books and trusting that the method would work. None of us produced the perfect CGT study!

Many of us also found ourselves faced with seemingly incompatible social structural constraints imposed by supervisors, ethics committees, institutional and organizational gatekeepers. But, through the process we learned a great deal. First and foremost, we learned that 'just doing it!' is the only way to learn CGT with the potential to improve with each study that we undertake and with each study that we take the time to read and methodologically analyze.

My comments here are not intended as criticism of the six papers but rather as my perspective on the methodological realizations that each provides, the areas for improvement

and the lessons learned. Generally, the papers suggest challenges that are frequently encountered by the novice CGT researcher. These include conflating CGT with qualitative research, preconceiving the study through a literature review at the outset, adopting a conceptual framework to guide the study, using interview protocols, etc. Some of the qualitative remodeling probably follows from the need to accommodate supervisor and university degree requirements that are often inconsistent with CGT methodology. Other challenges are openly acknowledged by the authors as they recount how they had to work through the confusion and even regression in coming to understand what each stage of the CGT process entails. These papers clearly demonstrate that 'reading' CGT as an intellectual exercise is just the beginning of 'doing' CGT and that each novice attempt is simply a first step in the process of truly understanding why and how CGT is a different methodology (Christensen, 2007) and not simply a variation of qualitative research.

What lessons are there for us in these papers? Elizondo-Schmelkes (this issue) reminds us that the motivation for undertaking a CGT study is often a life cycle interest (Glaser, 1998: 48-49) and that while we will situate our study in a particular substantive area (in her study, the post graduate experience), the latent pattern of social behaviour discovered will frequently have general implications well beyond that particular social situation. We may then begin seeing that latent pattern in many areas of our lives as well as in other CGT studies - with the danger of developing what Glaser (2005) has termed 'pet' theoretical codes. Elizondo-Schmelkes also reminds us of the sense of freedom that the theorist experiences in discovering the autonomy and creativity that comes in doing CGT.

Gordon (this issue) reminds us of the power of CGT to offer theoretical explanation for areas of professional practice where theories are lacking. She suggests as well the power of a good CGT to influence not only professional practice but also to enhance social understanding of a problem. Her struggles to set aside personal and professional biases and professional knowledge and to remain open to what emerged from the data, trusting that the CGT process would indeed produce a theory are challenges that most of us can readily

The Grounded Theory Review (2011), vol.10, no.2

acknowledge from our own novice efforts. Her confidence grew with her experience in using the methodology and with recognizing the grab that her emerging theory had for those in her substantive field. She was on to something and they knew it!

Loy (this issue) takes us inside his experience as a novice with a revealing reflection on how he discovered CGT, why he was attracted to using the methodology – again, extant theory was non-existent or did not ring true for him. The challenges he faced in sorting through the different ‘versions’ of CGT, in managing ‘stakeholders’ to his research and degree process, and in embracing the experiential nature of CGT are all common bends in the road along the CGT learning curve. His approaches to confronting these challenges may serve as good advice and inspiration to others who find themselves similarly challenged. His recommendation of writing a ‘big memo’ to help in pulling the theory together echoes Glaser’s frequent advice at seminars to write a working paper as a first effort at presenting an emerging theory.

Oturu (this issue) also indicates that he selected CGT because of a recognized lack of good theory to guide practice in HIV treatment. Like Gordon (this issue), Oturu also acknowledges the challenges of setting aside professional knowledge to allow the relevant concerns of his population to emerge through data analysis. He recognizes as well the critical importance of using the full CGT package (methodology) and not simply ‘cherry picking’ specific CGT methods. His efforts to comply with institutional requirements for his PhD degree, necessitating the use of interview protocols and transcription of interviews, led to his adopting two methodological ‘innovations’ which he has labeled ‘transcoding’ and ‘transmemoing’ (p.66). While perhaps interesting solutions to imposed institutional requirements, without sufficient experience in applying CGT procedures, such variations run the risk of derailing important methodological clarity early in the novice’s learning journey.

Oturu and Loy both declare their philosophical stance as social constructionist and appear to struggle with the idea of CGT as a general methodology that can accommodate any philosophical perspective (Holton, 2007). The struggle is perhaps understandable given their declared stance but it is

The Grounded Theory Review (2011), vol.10, no.2

important to recognize that as social constructionists, they have simply chosen to limit the type of data that they use with possible implications for the emergent theory. This limitation of data is their choice as researchers but it is not a limitation of CGT as a methodology; like all CGT studies their resultant theories could well be modified with the analysis of additional types and sources of data. Their choice of data certainly did not undermine the emergent theories as both authors produced award winning studies.

Selymes (this issue) reminds us that being too steeped in the literature and the jargon of our professional field can be a challenge to remaining open in a CGT study. Her study is complex and at times somewhat inaccessible due to heavy dosages of psychological terminology. She starts with a preconceived professional concern and may then have found herself consumed by the rich data that her study generated. It appears that she may have been overwhelmed with too many potential core categories and was perhaps reluctant to transcend the detail in the data to focus on one latent pattern. Regardless of these pitfalls on her novice journey, her concept of self-victimizing is excellent.

Stillman (this issue) demonstrates a clear intellectual understanding in her exposition of the methodology but intriguing questions come to mind. As a substantive theory of school counselors, why did her data collection in this substantive area cease after only seven interviews? While she chose then to theoretically sample other substantive areas (hospitals, non-profit boards), she presents her concept of working the system as a substantive theory applied to school counselors? It would be interesting to learn more about her decisions in terms of theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis. Did she lack access to sufficient interviews with school counselors? Or, was the scope (and thus the title) of her study fixed by social structural constraints within the research proposal process of her institution? Or, was she simply attracted to exploring her core concept in other substantive fields? Her theory of working the system most certainly has general implications that many of us will recognize well beyond the field of education.

It is our hope that the reader will find the six studies presented here not only interesting reading from a

The Grounded Theory Review (2011), vol.10, no.2

substantive perspective but will also see in these novice efforts both the challenges and rewards that await along the GT learning curve. It is our hope that reading these papers will inspire not only novices but also the more experienced to 'just do it!'

~ Judith Holton

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