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## **Reading with Methodological Perspective Bias: A journey into Classic Grounded Theory**

*Rick Deady*

### **Introduction**

The following is a naïve narrative of my journey into classic grounded theory (CGT) and the consideration of the possible existence of methodological perspective bias when reviewing literature. Whilst research bias has been viewed from a number of differing perspectives, such as sample bias, interviewer bias, publication bias etc (Sica, 2006), there appears a dearth of discussion within the literature on methodological perspective bias, as well as, a reluctance to publicly acknowledge the existence of such bias. For the purpose of this paper the concept of bias is defined as “a source of systematic error ... deriving from a conscious or unconscious tendency on the part of a researcher to produce data, and/or to interpret them, in a way that leans towards erroneous conclusions which are in line with his or her commitments” (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997, p.1).

Some time ago I was given a PhD thesis to read, my colleague thought I might be able to offer some useful insights since it was relevant to a study I was engaged in. The methodology used by the PhD candidate was Classic Grounded Theory (CGT), with which I had passing familiarity following the usual methodological investigations and decisions required of an MSc student. Like many MSc students I needed to qualify my research method in terms of its fit with the proposed study under investigation. I was, however, more familiar with positivistic methodologies. Although convention states that the research method should fit the study question, in order to develop my research skills I was keen to experience the use of a qualitative methodology, consequently I targeted the study towards an investigation of psychiatric nurses’ lived experiences (Deady, 2005), a subject

area that lent itself to a qualitative methodology. I began to study seminal texts on qualitative research that were available to me at the time (e.g. Banister et al, 1994, Cresswell, 1994, 1998, Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, Moustaka, 1994 Silverman, 2000, Slevin, and Sines, 1999/2000, Strauss, and Corbin, 1990) and became more familiar with different methodologies such as phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory<sup>2</sup>. I concluded that phenomenology was the methodology suited to the study. The methodology had easily identifiable qualitative data analysis (QDA) stages, whereas the general method of Grounded Theory, purporting to handle both qualitative and quantitative data, was to me at the time, more difficult to comprehend. Some of this difficulty related to the unique terminology used, such as emergent fit, substantive coding, theoretical coding and memoing, which appeared different to other methodologies, apparently not an uncommon experience for researchers considering CGT (Roderick, 2009). As a result, given the time constraint of my MSc it was more constructive for me to use what I viewed as a more conventional qualitative research methodology and chose phenomenology. I became familiar with phenomenological methodology; in particular, the discussions on bias, the concept of 'bracketing', and epistemological arguments as to whether it was ever fully achievable. There is an abundance of advice about avoiding bias throughout the QDA research process (Silverman, 2000, Moustakas, 1994) and as a novice researcher I accepted them.

### **Current Perspectives on Bias in Qualitative Research**

The arguments on bias in contemporary qualitative literature have, however, largely centred on bias during the research process, that is, during subject selection, data collection, analysis and publication (Mehra, 2002, Petegrew et al, 2008, Silverman, 2001). In addition, some authors (e.g. Denzin, 1989) comment on the issue of bias that the researcher brings to a study when choosing a research topic. For Mehra (2002) this bias can influence a study from start to finish, hence, the dictum that qualitative researchers need to

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<sup>2</sup> At this time I initially made the error of seeing Grounded Theory as a purely qualitative methodology as it appeared in qualitative literature as such.

be self-aware of their personal bias throughout the research process through reflexivity. There is, however, little or no discussion about possible methodological perspective bias when conducting a literature search or review. Whether it is achievable or desirable to attain a state of complete non-bias is at best questionable and remains an ongoing debate in the qualitative literature (Silverman, 2000, Mehra, 2002). There has, however, been considerable debate within CGT circles on the notion of "staying open" when using and reviewing literature (Glaser, 2005, McCallum, 2006, Andrews, 2006, Nathaniel, 2006, Thulesius, 2006, Ekstöm, 2006). For Glaser (2005) the goal in conducting CGT is to help the researcher stay open to the non-forced, non-preconceived discovery. With these discussions in mind this paper will explore whether the dominant methodological perspective of the researcher and/or the reader of literature reviews influences the construction of the literature review.

### **The Awareness of Staying Open**

My re-reading of the aforementioned doctoral thesis following an increased familiarity with CGT prompted this question. On the initial reading I felt that it was a poor piece of work for what was supposed to be a doctorate. It seemed "woolly," and I found myself wondering where the concepts being discussed had originated and how they were validated. In essence I think I was unconsciously looking for the QDA markers, such as 'report rich narratives' (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007, p.20), familiar in phenomenological research as exemplified by the work of Colaizzi (1978 in Smith, 1996) and Giorgi (1985). However, following workshops on CGT I became intrigued with this methodology. In particular, the realisation that CGT was not a methodology guided by one theoretical perspective (Glaser, 2005). The notion "all as data" (Glaser, 1998) was particularly intriguing, as I had felt that other methodologies tended to have gate-keeping rules to prevent use of casual or serendipitous observations. In this regard, Glaser appears to suggest that CGT is not a method that can be conducted to a prescribed order as by its nature it embraces what Gibson (2005, p.43) termed epistemological anarchy. The notion of finding something in the data, wondering where more data could be found, following its

threads through theoretical sampling and attempting to capture the underlining pattern in the data requires the researcher to remain open to the non-forced, non-preconceived discovery of emergent theoretical codes (Glaser, 2005). In this way data had to earn its relevance in the study.

With this in mind I re-read the thesis, and on this second reading I found it insightful, it made sense and it had grab. I realised that I had previously read it with the methodological bias of a phenomenological perspective and this meant I had misinterpreted some commentary as subjective and wondered at the absence of other data. In short, I had misunderstood the methodology being used and so had missed the point of the argument being presented. This observation suggested to me that familiarity with CGT was a necessary prerequisite in order to understand the theoretical significance of findings being presented. Consequently, I began to speculate whether the methodological perspective of the reader could either blind one to the theoretical framework being presented or lead one to misinterpret the literature due to methodological bias. For example, I realised that CGT did not require “face sheet variables” such as gender, age, ethnicity etc; if these issues were relevant they would emerge from the data analysis as part of the constant comparison process (Glaser, 1998). Whilst these variables have to earn their relevance within the data of CGT, within QDA methodologies the exclusion of these variables within sample selection is viewed as anomalous. As a consequence, I suggest that this ‘earned’ relevance of data in CGT may be lost in the reading of CGT literature by the novice or methodologically biased reviewer. The question this observation raised in me at the time was whether it is the responsibility of the reviewer to be ‘competent’ in reviewing CGT literature or whether it is incumbent on the CGT researcher to explain the method as a prerequisite for understanding the findings/theory.

One might argue that my inexperience in research and research methodology was responsible for this misperception of the doctoral study. However, I think the issue was more significant than this and that the bias arose from reading a CGT study from a purely phenomenological perspective. Obviously, phenomenology and CGT arise from different

traditions; the former a philosophical tradition and the later from sociological tradition. Glaser (2005) has argued that the training of some disciplines e.g. nursing, favour descriptive rather than conceptual approaches, which may account for the popularity of phenomenological approaches in this discipline. Nevertheless, nursing researchers have been accused of “method slurring” (Baker et al, 1992). I suggest that this slurring occurs because both methods are generally poorly understood and that novice researchers may choose to ignore differences between them when reviewing literature in order to avoid an internal debate of theoretical frameworks in favour a global understanding of what is essentially being reported in order to find a research gap. For example, although both methods encourage no literature reviews before investigations, they treat the phenomenon of bias in different ways. Whilst some phenomenological perspectives (Heiddeger, 1962) encourage the researcher to suspend preconceptions, CGT encourages the researcher to use these experiences to become more theoretically sensitive. In a simplistic way phenomenology appears to view the researcher’s bias as a potential unwanted by product to be ‘bracketed’ and as such remain unquestioned. CGT, on the other hand, sees researcher bias as a potential source of data that needs to be managed productively. For example, whilst phenomenological methodology encourages a theoretically descriptive account of what may be happening that is largely epistemological in nature, and so not grounded in the data, CGT requires an emergent fit that explains its relevance, or not, in the process presented. As a result, in dealing with the issue of bias Glaser (1998, p.143) comments “that bias is just one more variable and it is automatically controlled for amongst honest researchers.” The researcher realises that no matter how he may initially be distorting the data, as incidents are compared and the category patterns out then the distortions will be revealed.”

Consequently, a greater understanding of CGT allowed me to recognise that my original phenomenological perspective had biased the initial reading of the doctoral thesis as a subjective discussion. The researcher in question often articulated her thoughts and feelings on what she was

discovering and how this had informed her actions and theoretical development within the study. The memos she had generated, and presented in her dissertation, which I initially viewed as subjective/interpretive commentary, were in fact the articulated management of the emergent theory where concepts were being related to concepts. I had not understood the significance of the memoing process in articulating conceptual emergence and those were the core of the write up.

### **Memoing and Staying Open**

Reading novice accounts of doing CGT are abound with comments of 'how do you memo', and the advice often given is that there is no one way (Glaser, 1998), accordingly there is an absence of exemplars in CGT. I now understand that his lack of an imposed framework allows the investigator to remain open to his/her own method of conceptual emergence. As a result, a lack of experience and understanding of the process and function of memoing used in CGT had biased my understanding of what the CGT researcher was presenting. For example, whilst QDA methodology encourages the recording of the decision making processes, the memoing process of CGT is distinctly different to that of reflexivity, keeping of a diary or as an aid memoir. Memos, Glaser and Holton (2004) argue help the analyst take data to a conceptual level, whereas, QDA methods lead to "flat, descriptive and often superficial presentations" Glaser (2005, p.3). As Glaser (1998) states "memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analysing data and during memoing." As a result, the constant comparison process together with memos continues throughout and informs the whole research process and is an effective way of dealing with preconception and staying open. Although Martin (2006) has suggested a four phased process in relation between an emerging grounded theory and the existing literature in staying open, it is this process in particular, I believe, that is little understood by those outside CGT. Martin's phased approach articulates well the emergent thinking of the grounded theorist when engaged with the literature in an open and critical manner. Whereas in QDA

methodology all apparently relevant themes are accepted without the necessary rigour of their relevance to the phenomenon under investigation and so do not have to "pattern out" (Glaser, 2005, p.13).

Furthermore, the literature review in QDA methodology is also accepted as evidence for support of the findings rather than being applied with rigour to their relevance to the findings, that is, only elements that support or do not support the findings are identified. Consequently, although there is a debate as to the validity of reviewing literature prior to CGT studies (e.g. McCallum, 2006a, Martin, 2006a), the location of the literature review in CGT after the identification of the core category has, I believe, a number of advantages, first it becomes a source of data to be further analysed for theoretical completeness. In this way the literature review does not transport potentially bias views or frameworks from previous studies into the current study before discovery has occurred. In this regard, Glaser (1998, p.71) argues that using literature as more data to be tested insulates against the negative aspects of bias that are inherent in what he terms "theoretical capitalism," where authoritative works/authors may have the effect of preconceiving the novice GT researcher through literature reviews before a study has begun or findings are influenced in light of what is already known instead of generating categories and their properties to be compared to what is emerging. Secondly, using literature as data, I believe, requires a fundamentally different process to traditional literature reviews, in that it is more focussed in its application rather than being a global review. As a result, it has the potential to identify subtle differences between the existent literature and the research findings and so generate original findings.

It is clear from the literature that there are challenges to understanding many aspects of CGT methodology, even for the 'expert'. For example, Glaser's (2005) commentary on Ian Dey's critique of CGT, where he challenges Dey's naïve observation of Theoretical Code selection as an arbitrary act, Glaser suggests results from Dey's lack of experience in doing CGT. I believe that Glaser is suggesting that for a clear understanding of CGT it is necessary to understand the

process involved and this understanding can only be achieved experientially, by actually doing CGT research. Whilst, Moore (2009, p.8) argues that “the epistemological assumptions related to grounded theory are not clearly explained, which appears to have led to misinterpretation and misuse of the method,” my experience is that both Glaser and Moore are correct. Whilst some theoretical aspects of CGT are currently difficult to comprehend from the CGT literature, and whilst one can read extensively about GT, it is in the doing that a greater depth of understanding of the method and its findings are achieved. Nevertheless, whilst efforts have been made more recently to make CGT methodology more transparent and accessible (Grounded Theory Review, 2005, 2006) to the novice, Johnston’s (2009, p. 20) study highlights the current difficulty in academia in getting CGT published due to journals and reviewers often being inhospitable or ignorant of the intricacies of papers written using CGT method, suggesting methodological perspective bias.

### **Reviewing with or without Methodological Perspective Bias**

McCallin (2006, p.53) has argued that “while methodological issues are foundational to rigorous research, so to is the issue of thinking and how the researcher integrates methodology with the overall process,” Accordingly, it is argued here that if a literature review is to be undertaken before any qualitative research the potential for introducing bias has to be acknowledged and managed and that it is incumbent on the reviewer to highlight what this bias may be, methodological or otherwise. In this regard, McCallin (2006, p.56) further argues, that the timing of a literature review may be much less important than previously thought and that “Surely critical analysis of existing literature, regardless of timing, opens up the mind to the strengths and limitations in received writing, and for consideration in relation to the developing theory.” As a consequence, reviewing literature from a particular frame of reference or perspective begins to influence a study from the outset and may influence or prejudice the process thereafter in the choices researchers make. This, however, may not necessarily be a problem, so long as the perspective is acknowledged from the outset and

critically discussed.

As a novice Grounded Theorist I feel that the initial exposure to CGT has challenged many of my traditional views of QDA research that on the one hand imposes procedural frameworks on the analytical process (Colaizzi, 1978, Giorgi, 1985), whilst on the other hand infers the neutrality of the literature review within the study. It seems self-evident that if researchers are going to argue for the rigour and validity of their work then bias needs to be acknowledged and dealt with explicitly throughout the whole research process, and the neutrality of the reviewed literature cannot be assumed. Acknowledging and managing bias liberates the research process from speculation as to the transparency of the study. It has been exemplars of CGT methodology that have demonstrated to me the need for rigour throughout the research process, including the literature review (Glaser, 2005). As a consequence it is argued that all literature should be viewed as data in need of critical analysis and not just used to support findings or as an introduction to a study. As it stands, readers are required to take on trust that the review is not methodologically biased in anyway and to make a judgement, based on the discussion, whether what is presented is comprehensive and inclusive of all methodological perspectives. This position is clearly unachievable given the limitation on space in many journals and beyond the resources and experience of many researchers. I suggest that, at best, many researchers review as much literature that is available within their sphere of practice, through a particular theoretical or methodological perspective. This is not to suggest that reviewing from a dominant perspective is necessarily wrong or that some perspectives are superior to others, in fact, it is the diversity of perspectives in research that enables problems to be viewed from different theoretical frameworks and add to knowledge. However, if an author of a review believes that there was no perspective that influenced the review this should be stated, conversely, if they believe that a particular perspective did influenced the review then this should be stated as a limitation.

Certainly White (HRMAS Newsletters, 1998) has argued for researchers to declare their frame of reference (e.g. feminist, social interactionist) as in all other aspects of their research. The advantage to the reader, I believe, would be to highlight an awareness of potential limitations in the scope of the review or question the influence their own perspective has on interpretation. For example, when feminist researchers acknowledge that they intend to challenge a particular dominant paternalist world view, one might not expect to see a strong paternalistic argument, however, it sensitises the reader to the need to understand a feminist perspective in order to understand the review/study. Currently in the majority of research articles the perspective of the researcher is unknown until the methodological section of the paper. What is being suggested here has the potential to strengthen the established function of the literature review by acknowledging the frame of reference (biases and perspectives) from the outset, which tends to be the norm in much feminist research?

In contrast, a brief examination of contemporary literature reviews in qualitative papers (Hall, 2009, Smith, 2009, Shapero Crane et al, 2009, and Baltimore and Crase, 2009) highlights eclectic perspectives that are often not made explicit. Although the focus is on the subject matter, there is little evidence to suggest any guiding principles or framework for the literature reviews. If the sole purpose is to identify a gap in the literature, then they are successful, however, it could be argued that a list of the papers reviewed and a statement of the gap found would suffice. This is not to say that authors of the papers were not being analytically critical when they reviewed the literature, they may often follow established guidelines for critiquing qualitative research articles (Greenhalgh and Taylor, 1997, Mays and Pope, 1996, 2000), however, in the absence of a transparent framework or perspective there is always the possibility of unacknowledged bias. Accordingly, I suggest, as with much feminist research, researchers should apply the same rigor to the literature review as they do to the methodological aspects of their studies. In this way the perspectives of researchers are made explicit from the start, potential limitations identified and

perspective bias established and acknowledged.

### **Methodological Acknowledgement in Literature Review**

In many respects I believe that CGT addresses this issue by identifying the nature, purpose and function of the literature review (McCallum, 2006, Andrews, 2006, Nathaniel, 2006, Thulesius, 2006, Ekstöm, 2006). In CGT the role of the literature is clear; it is a source of data that it is part of the constant comparative analysis process once the core category, its properties and related categories have emerged (Glaser, 2004) a role that is different to QDA reviews. As a result, although the researcher's personal bias may be present at times during literature review it is patterned out by the emerging theory. As a consequence, I believe that CGT research has increased credibility as it articulates all aspects of the literature within the research process and uniquely the role of the literature within a study, a characteristic it shares with systematic reviews (Magarey, 2001). Therefore, it is argued that the accusation of methodological perspective bias can be directed at much qualitative research that does not articulate its frame of reference or the purpose of the review beyond identifying a research gap. Whereas, the challenge for researchers using CGT is to articulate the methodology in a language and manner that makes it more accessible and understandable to novice researchers and readers from all theoretical perspectives. In this regard, presenting exemplars of the memoing process used to identify the emergent theoretical codes would allow a more transparent view of the researcher's conceptual progression, as well as, allowing commentators to analyse the validity of the actions taken.

### **Conclusion**

At this stage in my research apprentices I believe that there is evidence to suggest that methodological perspective bias can occur both in the analysis and presentation of literature reviews and that this bias is met with CGT methodology. Consequently, qualitative researchers not using CGT need to ask themselves the question "what perspective do I represent?" "how may this perspective influence my reading?" and how should I factor it out? Whilst CGT, in this

regard, offers a potential solution to address methodological perspective bias during literature review, there is a need for CGT's to articulate this process in a language that is accessible to all levels of researcher ability and practice.

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