CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY: A GOOD RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR SOCIAL WORK?

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“…how one goes about doing research is intimately connected to what is going on in the world and how one sees social work. Research perspectives are not ahistorical and methodologies are not innocent sets of techniques. Certain methodologies matter because they support and sustain particular approaches to social work practice.”

(Trinder 1996: 234)
INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

- Social work research is inextricably linked to social work practice and both practice and research are situated historically and socio-politically in wider contexts.
- The practitioner researcher cannot therefore claim a detached objectivity and instead assumes a position of reflexive participant in the research process.
- In moving beyond the pursuit of objective, value-free inquiry social work researchers can integrate more achievable standards of recognition and regulation of bias with social work’s traditional values such as respect for the client’s experience, anti-discriminatory practice and concern with social justice

THE FIT BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH & QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

• “Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice and therefore will normally involve knowledge generated directly from practice itself in a grounded way”.
  
  (Practice Research: The Salisbury Statement 2009:3)

• “…. The processes of doing grounded theory research are similar to the processes of practice. Learning how to do this type of research and the use of findings may feel natural to social work practitioners, like sliding a hand into a well made glove.”
  
  (Gilgun 1994: 115)

• Gilgun charts numerous parallels between practice and qualitative research including the need to think inductively and deductively while examining information from a variety of sources before drawing conclusions, the need to modify one’s approach in response to new information, the use of in-depth interviewing, observation, document review, process recording and case reporting in both social work and research and an emphasis on naturalistic settings (Gilgun 1994)
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

“*The word* **qualitative** *implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured…….* Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.”

(Denzin and Lincoln 2013: 17)
DEVELOPING A RESEARCH DESIGN

• In designing research, choices are made at the levels of

1. paradigm
2. methodology
3. methods of data collection

An approach is developed, consistent at these three levels that is appropriate, effective and efficient in addressing the research questions.
Qualitative research may be delineated with reference to four major paradigms:

1. positivist and post-positivist
2. constructivist-interpretative
3. critical (Marxist, emancipatory)
4. feminist-post structural

with each paradigm encompassing multiple perspectives within the overall tradition (Denzin and Lincoln 2013: 26)
The constructivist-interpretative paradigm which assumes a relativist ontology (many possible realities), a subjectivist epistemology (understandings are co-constructed by the researcher and research participant) and naturalistic (non-experimental) methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln 2013: 26-27)
METHODOLOGY

- Methodological approaches consistent with qualitative research include ethnography, phenomenological approaches, narrative approaches, grounded theory, case-study analysis and action research (Padgett 2008).

- Strauss and Corbin defined Grounded Theory as
  "a general methodology, a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data"
  (Strauss and Corbin 1994:275)
• **Glaser and Strauss (1967)** in their book ‘The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research’ articulated a systematic, qualitative research methodology. Their work challenged the hegemony of quantitative research methodologies in the social sciences, by producing a systematic approach to qualitative research and empirically grounded theory building, based on an **inductive method**.

• Charmaz defines induction as
  • “A type of reasoning that begins with a study of a range of individual cases and extrapolates from them to form a conceptual category”
• (Charmaz 2006:188)
OVERVIEW OF GROUNDED THEORY

• “Initially developed and elaborated by Glaser and Strauss and later by others, grounded theory focuses on systematically analyzing qualitative data to elucidate the key forms of action undertaken by participants in a particular situation. Some more contemporary versions of grounded theory have......[addressed] recent poststructural/postmodern concerns with difference, reflexivity, relationality, positionality, and so on (see Charmaz 2000, 2006).”

(Clarke and Friese 2007: 363)
GROUNDED THEORY: DATA ANALYSIS

• Coding
• Coding to Categories
• Categories to Concept/Themes
• Themes to a Theoretical Concept(s)
• GT involves cycles of data collection, coding, memo-writing and theory building through the emergence of categories in the data. A method of constant comparison of new data collected through theoretical sampling, with both existing data and the emerging analysis was utilized to delineate the properties of emerging categories until a point was reached where no new information came through (this they termed ‘theoretical saturation’).

• Categories were then analysed in the light of existing knowledge to form ‘core categories’ or concepts, which informed the substantive grounded theory
Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later Glaser (1978) used the term ‘theoretical sensitivity’ to explain the use of extant theory at an advanced stage of the coding process to describe and delimit core categories and concepts which have emerged through iterative cycles of inductive reasoning and abstraction. They define ‘theoretical sensitivity’ as an

“ability to have theoretical insight into [one’s] area of research, combined with an ability to make something of [one’s] insights”

(Glaser and Strauss 1967:46 cited in Kelle 2007:197)
While early grounded theorists sought to discover patterns of behaviour in the data and conceptualize their properties through abstraction (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; 1992) constructivist grounded theorists seek to understand difference and variation among research participants and to co-construct meaning with them (Charmaz 2006).
“….Constructing constructivism means seeking both respondents meanings and researchers’ meanings. To seek respondents’ meanings we must go beyond surface meanings and presumed meanings. We must look for views and values as well as acts and facts. We need to look for beliefs and ideologies as well as situations and structures. By studying tacit meanings we clarify, rather than challenge respondents’ views about reality.

(Charmaz 2000: 525)
C.G.T. EXTENDS THE FOCUS TO THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCE

- Charmaz acknowledges that a risk in any inductive method such as the constructivist approach is overemphasis on the individual, emphasising the active, reflective actor to the neglect of the larger social forces acting upon him or her and she is mindful that the researcher needs to learn how social forces affect the actor and what if anything the actor thinks, feels and does about them (Charmaz, 2000).
C.G.T. EXTENDS THE FOCUS TO THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCE

• Constructivist Grounded Theorists extend the focus of grounded theory to
• “…postmodern deconstructions, interconnecting social worlds, arenas, matrices of structure, trajectories of action, resources, hierarchies of power and influence, social policies, hierarchies of suffering, situated and local readings of ordinary people and their lives.”
• (Charmaz cited in Denzin 2007:456)
• My first task was to become familiar with the data through listening to the tapes and producing and reading the transcripts.

• Mason’s (1996) work guided this initial reading. She suggests data may be read literally, interpretatively or reflexively and that many qualitative researchers make readings of their data on all three levels.
CGT: THE PROCESS

- Codes, categories and concepts are the building blocks of grounded theory from its foundations in the data to eventual generation of a theory that explains what is going on in a given situation, as it is represented in the data and as it relates to other situations, issues and ideas extending beyond the data.

- “It would seem the best working model places these terms in a hierarchy from bottom to top: respectively code, category, concept. The resulting hierarchy will not however appeal to those GTM researchers who see the hierarchy between category and concept as far more intricate”. (Bryant and Chamaz 2007:18)
CODING

• For Holton coding ‘gets the researcher off the empirical level by fracturing the data’ (Holton 2007:266) which is then brought together in new ways that conceptualize and explain what is happening in the data.
CODING

• **Open Coding**

  Transcripts are examined line by line to identify features of the data for example themes, thoughts, feelings, actions, issues or events which are coded or named. This phase generates the initial set of codes and is known as ‘open coding’. Code names may be taken directly from the data (an in vivo code). Alternatively the researcher may apply a code name that captures something essential to the coded data. Coding proceeds systematically across the entire data set, with words, lines or entire passages either forming a new code or being added to an existing code that is adequate to capture the intrinsic meaning expressed in the text.

• **Focused (Substantive) Coding**

  At this next level of abstraction codes are grouped together according to emerging issues and themes. Codes emerge from the data and are not imposed on it.

  Patterns are seen to be

  “…..empirical relationships (and not just superficial regularities) identified within the data.”

  (Dey 2007:177)


**CODES TO CATEGORIES**

- *Categorisation of Codes*

- Using analytical approaches such as ‘asking questions of the data’ (Strauss) and what grounded theorists call ‘the constant comparative method’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967) similarities and differences between codes are identified and codes that fit together are clustered in more abstract patterns or categories. Analytic memos are written to record the relationships among the clustered units of data in order to maintain a close link between analytic interpretation and the empirical data.
CATEGORIES TO CONCEPTS

• Categories are refined through a process of checking the fit of each category with the coded data it represents and also with each of the other categories and thereby the entire data set.

• Theoretical sampling (further data gathering in relation to a particular theme) and negative case analysis (instances in the data that disprove an idea or vary from a theme) may be used to explore problems, refine ideas and clarify emerging themes.

• The refined categories clearly named and their properties well defined, then form the basis of theoretical constructs or concepts.
Theoretical Concepts

In this phase of the analysis the categories are reviewed and analytical memos are reread and synthesized. Final analysis is undertaken and themes emerge at a further level of abstraction, which capture the issues, processes and relationships identified and described in more detail in the earlier phases of analysis.

This final stage of analysis also involved processes of abduction whereby the analysis is related back to the primary research question and to the literature.

“Careful analysis of relevant extant literature after developing one’s grounded theory can provide cues for raising its theoretical level….”

(Lempert cited in Charmaz and Bryant 2007:19)
Extract from Transcript: “...it’s bridging the gap to the community and to make sure they’re followed up and there is something done you know...and not just sending them out again.....”

- Open Code: Bridging the Gap
- Focused Coding: Liaising and Co-Working
- Category: Role of Social Work in the E D
- Theme: Co-constructing Social Work in Context
- Theoretical Concept: Social Work a Thirdspace
DATA ANALYSIS FROM SW IN ED STUDY

• Extract from Transcript: “Well I was devastated. I didn’t know what to be doing with myself, you know, I just felt everything you know, my world had collapsed, I kind of felt that nothing was worthwhile because you had no one to go home to, the person that was there had just disappeared and you didn’t know what to do with yourself…..”

• Open Coding: Loss of Meaning
• Focused Coding: Pain & Loss
• Coding to Category: Feelings and Experiences of Trauma
• Theme: Effects of Trauma
• Theoretical Concept: Trauma-Entering a Liminal Space
“we’re far less assessment guided than other disciplines…and more about the meaning for the person and the person’s perception of the problem…rather than someone else’s diagnosis or diagnostic model”

- Open Code: Focusing on Meaning
- Focused Code: Developing a Social Work Process
- Coding to Category: How Social Work Works
- Theme: Co Constructing Social Work in Context
- Theoretical Concept: Relationship-based Social Work - Creating a Thirddspace in Responding to Trauma
THE CASE FOR GROUNDED THEORY

- The well defined processes of the grounded theory method provide a clear framework for data analysis.
- GT is compatible with NVivo Qualitative Analysis Software.
- A Grounded approach ensures that interpretations are based on the collected data and that pre-understanding from social work practice and extant theory are applied for their relevance to the emergent issues rather than pre-imposed on the study.

The procedures of grounded theory

“…..force the researcher to break through assumptions and to create new order out of the old.”
(Strauss and Corbin 1990:27)

- Gilgun’s suggests that

“Researchers use a grounded theory when they want to take a fresh look at phenomena”
“CGT...addresses how people’s actions affect their local and larger social worlds” (Charmaz 2006:132).

Each study has a specific index of time, space, culture and situation and theories generated are evaluated as “plausible accounts” (Charmaz 2006: 132) rather than as objectively verifiable.

“The aim of qualitative research is instead to contextualize the findings in the interactive world in which they are generated” (Denzin and Lincoln 2013:19).
QUESTIONS & COMMENTS
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