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Grounded theory

Abstract

Grounded theory has become a popular research approach for researchers in health care and the social sciences, particularly nurses and midwives. For the novice nurse researcher new to qualitative research methodology, grounded theory is one of a number of approaches that should be considered. This article provides a description of grounded theory methodology and its key components, together with examples of its practical application by reference to published studies. It aims to demystify grounded theory, providing the 'what, when, why, and how' of grounded theory, to enable novice nurse researchers to understand what it is, when to use it, why they would want to use it and how to use it in nursing research. This article enables the nurse researcher to decide if grounded theory is a research approach that he or she should use and equips nurses with the skills to judge the quality of grounded theory research that they may read.

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Article

GROUNDING THEORY has become a popular research approach for researchers in health care and the social sciences, particularly nurses and midwives (Gelling 2011, **Denscombe 2014**). For the nurse researcher new to qualitative research methodology, grounded theory is one of a number of approaches that should be considered.

Grounded theory

It is difficult to provide a definitive description of grounded theory. There are multiple approaches to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990, Clarke 2005, Charmaz 2006), which reflect how the methodology has diversified over time (Maz

2013). However, there are three basic tenets that differentiate grounded theory from other research approaches (Denscombe 2014): theory generation, an emergent theory grounded in empirical research (with an emphasis on fieldwork or practical real world research) and concurrent systematic collection and analysis of data (using theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis) (Box 1).

Box 1 Basic tenets of grounded theory

- **Theory generation**
 - An explanation for what is happening.
- **Theory grounded in empirical research**
 - An emphasis on fieldwork or practical, real world research.
 - An explanation derived from the data collected.
 - An open mind.
- **Concurrent systematic collection and analysis of data**
 - Uses constant comparative analysis.
 - Uses theoretical sampling.

Theory generation

Grounded theory is a research approach in which a theory (an explanation for what is happening) develops from the information systematically collected during the research process (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Bryant and Charmaz 2007, Hall *et al* 2013). The researcher starts by asking an open-ended question when designing his or her research: ‘What is happening here?’ The answer to the research question then emerges through the research process itself, termed an ‘inductive’ approach. For example, asking the question ‘Why is compliance with antibiotic therapy variable among patients in the community setting?’ Grounded theory provides a methodological approach to discover the explanation for this variation in behaviour, elicited by undertaking fieldwork.

In contrast, if the researcher begins the research process with a clear idea of what is happening (that is, he or she has an explanation or theory already) then he or she will want to test that hypothesis within the research process. This is a ‘deductive’ approach, because the researcher has already deduced what influences behaviour and wishes to test this out within the research process. For example, testing the hypothesis that ‘Antibiotic therapy

compliance depends on how quickly a patient becomes asymptomatic'. The researcher can then design a study which tests this 'armchair theorising' (Denscombe 2014, Charmaz 2014), the results of which will either support or reject the explanation proposed.

Theory grounded in data

The term grounded theory reflects the way that the explanation or theory which emerges from the research is grounded or justified by the data collected. There are no preconceived ideas about what is happening to guide the research process in grounded theory, in contrast with theory testing. Explanation (theory) is generated during the research process itself and substantiated by it. Therefore, grounded theory is ideally suited to researching areas that have not been previously investigated, or where existing research has major omissions and a new perspective may be desirable (Schreiber and Stern 2001). It has been widely used in social research, particularly in nursing, providing a means to explore and explain human social and psychological behaviour (Maz 2013).

Grounded theory also differs from other qualitative approaches in seeking an explanation for the phenomenon under investigation, rather than providing descriptive accounts of the subject matter (Denscombe 2014). The key focus is seeking an understanding of what is happening, to inform patient care and future research projects. Nurse researchers who are interested in why something is happening will be drawn to this methodology, which provides an explanatory framework for the topic being investigated. For example, a grounded theory study by Jeff and Taylor (2014) investigated ward nurses' experience of the introduction of a programme to enhance recovery after surgery in colorectal patients. The authors began with a broad aim, in keeping with grounded theory. Data collected through semi-structured interviews identified inconsistencies in the implementation of the enhanced recovery after surgery protocol, which was explained by a theory of adaptation. Nurses in this study adapted or adjusted to the specific situations encountered in clinical practice; their care was influenced by other ward and medical staff and the individual recovery trajectory of the patient. This demonstrates the grounded nature of grounded theory, with an explanatory framework emerging for the social behaviour described by nurses in this study.

A core component of grounded theory is the emphasis on fieldwork, closely linking any explanations that emerge from a study to what happens in the real world and grounding the

findings in the voices of the participants (Carpenter 2011, Charmaz 2014, Denscombe 2014). Therefore, it is ideally suited to the study of human behaviour and interactions in nursing practice, and is pragmatic rather than abstract in nature. This is reflected in a grounded theory study conducted by Page and McDonnell (2013), who investigated physical holding of children and young people in clinical care situations. Their findings reflected the meaning nurses and allied health professionals placed on therapeutic holding and restraint, and the confusion that arises when a child becomes distressed when being held in this way. Grounded theory creates some challenges for the nurse researcher who may already have preconceived notions about what is happening and why from his or her formal and tacit knowledge base. Denscombe (2014) acknowledges this and differentiates between the blank mind (where all prior knowledge and supposition is suspended) and the open mind. An open-minded grounded theorist is aware of concepts and theories of potential relevance to his or her study but avoids using this knowledge to make sense of the data, remaining open to discovering new concepts and theoretical explanations from the study itself. This is referred to as theoretical sensitivity (Glaser 1978).

Systematic data collection and analysis

Grounded theory is different from other qualitative approaches in requiring simultaneous and systematic data collection and analysis. Other qualitative approaches are based upon collecting large amounts of data and then 'letting the data speak for itself'. In grounded theory, concepts and theory emerge through a process of constant comparison with the data, generating questions to explain behaviour and then testing these with further data collection. While grounded theory is essentially an inductive methodology, there are some elements of deduction. As ideas about what is happening emerge in the initial data collection phases, the researcher constructs possible explanations for the observed behaviour, which indicates the next data collection step required to complete his or her understanding. This process is known as theoretical sampling (Figure 1) and reflects how the theory emerges and is tested on the data collected, supported by the theory generation ethic. Denscombe (2014) refers to the grounded theory researcher's role as being rather like

a detective, following a lead so that a picture of what has happened and why emerges as the enquiry continues: 'Each new phase of the investigation reflects what has been discovered so far, with new angles of investigation and new avenues of enquiry to be explored'(Denscombe 2014:108).

The end result of this process is a detailed explanation of the phenomenon, closely linked to the evidence collected.

Figure 1 Theoretical sampling

Data collection begins with purposive sampling of those who can provide information about

the subject area.



Through theoretical sensitivity to the data collected, explanations for behaviour are identified with hypotheses emerging and further questions identified that need answering.



Identification of participants likely to be able to answer the emerging questions and on which to test the explanations that have emerged.



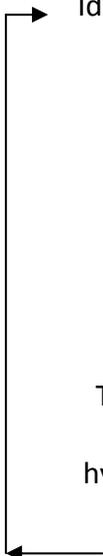
Further data collection (theoretical sampling)



Through theoretical sensitivity to the data collected, explanations for behaviour and hypotheses are confirmed or challenged, directing the researcher back to further data collection until...



The theory is fully articulated and supported by the voice of participants.



Licqurish and Seibold (2011) describe this process in their grounded theory study exploring achievement of competence by student midwives on their final clinical placement. An initial analysis of interviews directed the authors to collect data to include a broader age range of participants and to interview further students to explore the relationships between students and preceptors, confidence and competence, and the effect of negative learning experiences on student competency. Through a cyclical process of constant comparison throughout data collection and analysis, the process of achievement of competence emerged. This involved students realising the reality of the clinical learning environment and its restrictions, adapting to that environment and assimilating all they had learnt during their course in their final placement (Licqurish and Seibold 2011).

In my own grounded theory study exploring practice variation among midwives (Harris 2005), this process of moving backwards and forwards between collecting and analysing data led to midwives being included in the study who worked in a variety of models of care, expressed a variety of values and beliefs about the third stage of labour, cared for women giving birth in a variety of different places, had differing levels of expertise and lengths of service as a midwife, experienced different forms of training, expressed different aims for care, cared for different types of women and who were employed in a variety of grades and posts. What emerged was a detailed explanation for inter-practice and intra-practice variation among midwives. Decision making for care was based upon an evolving knowledge base, a number of contextual features and how the midwives interpreted their learning and the context of care through their personal value and belief systems.

The dynamic nature of grounded theory

Accepting the basic tenets of grounded theory outlined above, the nurse researcher should consider how grounded theory has diversified since it was first introduced in the sixties. Considering the similarities and differences between grounded theory approaches enables the nurse researcher to choose whether to conduct a grounded theory study based upon the original grounded theory methodology, one of the adapted versions or an adapted version of their own.

Grounded theory emerged in the 1960s with the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, describing a methodology based upon generating theory from data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This was in part a response to the

dominance of theory verification in social research at the time. Grounded theory was further developed by Glaser (1978). Strauss and Corbin (1990) went on to adapt grounded theory, introducing a framework to assist in data analysis. Their framework was informed by the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism, which focuses on the social aspects of human experience. Glaser (1992) suggested that this altered the fundamental principles of grounded theory, forcing data to fit within an analytical framework rather than allowing the theoretical framework to emerge from the data itself.

Two separate schools of grounded theory then emerged: Glaserian (or classical) grounded theory and Straussian grounded theory (Higginbottom and Lauridsen 2014). Researchers in both schools then began to approach grounded theory in alternative ways through consideration of the ontological (relating to the nature of being) and epistemological (relating to the theory of knowledge) underpinnings of the methodology. Second generation schools emerged as a result (Richards and Morse 2007, Higginbottom and Lauridsen 2014). These included dimensional analysis (Schatzman 1991), constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2000, 2006) and situational analysis (Clarke 2005). A researcher choosing to undertake grounded theory should consider both the original and the adapted versions of the methodology.

Glaser continues to adhere to the original methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Glaser 2002, 2003). Others have accepted the evolution of grounded theory while expressing caution about departing too far from the original authors' conception (Schreiber and Stern 2001). Other authors (Willig 2013, Morse 2009) have suggested that researchers should generate their own version of grounded theory during the research process, in response to classical views of grounded theory (Glaser 2003, 2009). Such adaptation is in keeping with the way grounded theory was originally designed - to be as flexible as possible in generating theory from data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Therefore, the challenge for the novice researcher is to negotiate a plethora of ways of undertaking grounded theory, in the knowledge that each approach may have both its supporters and critics. My advice would be to retain the basic tenets of grounded theory and to justify any further adaptations to published versions of the methodology where appropriate. Any nurse considering using grounded theory will therefore need to read about the current debates between the various versions of grounded theory, their similarities and differences and make an informed choice. Hunter *et al* (2011) provide insights into using

three of the versions available, in a study looking at the psychosocial training needs of nurses and health care assistants working with people with dementia in residential care.

Using grounded theory

So far, this article has outlined the basic tenets of grounded theory, the reasons a nurse may wish to consider using this approach and the variation which is evident in the methodology. The rest of this article explores using grounded theory in the research process, emphasising the differences between approaches and their practical implementation.

Reviewing the literature

Most research methods involve engaging with the existing literature before data collection begins. However, doing this in grounded theory is a contentious issue (Walls *et al* 2010, Dunne 2011). Some authors argue against undertaking a literature review prior to data collection and analysis. They warn of the danger of imposing an existing theory on data and forcing the data to fit it, rather than allowing theoretical concepts to emerge from within the study (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Glaser 1992, Glaser 2003, Glaser and Holton 2004, Nathaniel 2006, Holton 2007). They advocate reviewing the literature once the theory has emerged following data analysis (Glaser 1998). This demonstrates a critical realist stance. It presupposes that there is one reality that can be captured objectively from the data, provided the researcher avoids being sensitised to extant theory and suspends any prior knowledge to avoid this influencing the collection and analysis of data. There are alternative perspectives.

From a practical point of view, the decision not to undertake a literature review may be problematic. For example, postgraduate research students may be required to provide a rationale for their study, and indicate its potential to provide an original contribution to knowledge, before they can access research funding, gain ethical approval or satisfy formal review processes (Dunne 2011). The requirement to avoid being sensitised to the extant literature may also present a challenge for the nurse researcher, if he or she is already sensitised to the literature as a result of clinical practice and prior study.

Walls *et al* (2010) suggest that prior knowledge gained through searching the literature or from clinical practice should not compromise a grounded theory study, provided the researcher strives to be open-minded, is reflexive during data collection and analysis and

follows the principles of constant comparison in seeking explanatory frameworks emerging from the data collected. 'Reflexivity' involves the researcher being aware of their own background and its possible influence on the research process and articulating this during the course of their research (McGhee *et al* 2007) In this way, the researcher is able to remain theoretically sensitive to explanations which emerge from the data, rather than deduce what may be happening using preconceived notions.

In practice, the decision to undertake a literature review is informed by the underlying philosophy which guides the research process. The critical realist grounded theorist would attempt to suspend any prior knowledge which might influence the collection and analysis of data. The symbolic interactionist grounded theorist would acknowledge the influence the researcher has on the interpretation of the data, while the constructivist grounded theorist would recognise that the theory that emerges from a study is co-created by the interaction between the researcher and participants and is relative to this interaction.

My advice to any novice researchers would be to read more widely about the philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory to decide for themselves which philosophical stance to take. This will influence how they see themselves within the research process, the requirement to undertake a literature review and/or the requirement to try to suspend all prior knowledge.

Methods of data collection

The principle of 'anything goes' may be applied to choosing data collection tools in a grounded theory study. According to Glaser (1978), grounded theory 'transcends specific data collection methods' since any type of data can be used that elucidates the explanation or theory for the topic under investigation. Data 'in the field' is ideally suited to grounded theory methodology, and is sometimes referred to as raw data (Denscombe 2010). Multiple types of data are also often used, which allows for triangulation (Maz 2013) and testing of the emerging explanatory framework. Sometimes all methods of data collection cannot be identified at the beginning of a study, but emerge as theory develops. For example, I initially used interviewing and observation when investigating practice variation among midwives (Harris 2005). As the theory emerged, I recognised that an alternative type of data was needed to test the idea that there was an oral tradition of knowledge transfer among midwives. I therefore included a documentary analysis of historical midwifery texts. This

new data supported the notion of an oral tradition of knowledge transfer and contributed in turn to the emerging theory concerning the influence of learning on decision making and how the different learning experiences of midwives could, in part, explain practice variation.

Sampling

Researchers focus on a particular phenomenon when setting out to collect data for grounded theory research. Therefore, the criterion for selecting participants is those who can provide relevant data. For example if you were investigating the caring attributes of nurses working in emergency departments, the criterion for inclusion would be nurses working in emergency departments. This is known as a purposive sampling technique. However, the criterion for inclusion will change as the study progresses, to test emerging theoretical constructs (theoretical sampling). For example, you may have identified that the caring ability of some nurses in emergency departments appears to be directly influenced by how long they have worked in the area, with evidence of 'burn out' over time. Therefore, you may decide to target nurses who have worked in emergency departments for varying amounts of time and also include nurses who have previously worked in emergency departments, but have subsequently left. In this way you can test the emerging theoretical constructs through theoretical sampling.

Another example would be if you were undertaking interviews with nurses to explore with them their experience of offering compassionate care to older people. Following a few interviews and analysis of this data, you begin to consider that the environment may be influencing a nurse's ability to offer compassionate care. You therefore amend your interview guide to specifically explore this area with future nurse participants. You may also choose to interview nurses from another ward, perhaps one that is less busy or has a higher ratio of qualified staff to patients, to test the idea that a busier ward or lower or higher staff-to-patient ratio may also affect the delivery of compassionate care. In this way you continue to follow leads generated from within the data, which may potentially send you off in different directions to collect data from different individuals, or even to collect different types of data entirely. The ongoing selection of participants or data for collection is therefore based on the concepts and theories that are emerging to explain the nurses' ability to offer compassionate care to older people. This iterative sampling technique is used throughout a grounded theory study until no new concepts or hypotheses emerge from the

data. This means it is difficult to determine any of the following before the study starts: the sample size for the study, who will be included in the sample, and all the data collection tools needed to explain the phenomenon under investigation. Hence theoretical sampling is not driven by the participants but rather by the concepts that emerge during data collection, with the researcher adapting their sampling technique, sample size and sometimes data collection tools to elicit the answers to emerging concepts and explanations (Denscombe 2010).

In grounded theory, the point at which the researcher stops his or her data collection reflects a concept called *theoretical saturation* which is the point at which no new concepts or explanations are emerging and the theory fully explains the concept being explored (Denscombe 2014). Researchers are able to identify theoretical saturation when they start to have confirmation of all the elements of their analysis to date, with no new concepts or ideas emerging.

Theoretical sampling directs the researcher to a more in-depth focus on the concepts and hypotheses of relevance to the study. However, it is important that 'flexibility' remains. This allows the researcher to respond to opportunities that arise during his or her fieldwork, and to explore new avenues of investigation not previously anticipated. Theoretical sampling in grounded theory allows researchers to be responsive to emerging theories, to be open in terms of articulating sampling decisions and flexible in generating answers to emerging analytical questions.

Analysis, initial coding and theory presentation

The researcher begins the process of analysis by engaging with the data as it is collected. He or she continues the analysis immediately afterwards, by documenting thoughts and observations about the information collected. These are called field notes. (Box 2).

Field notes are followed by more detailed memos about emerging concepts as the research study progresses. Field notes and memos may include both descriptive and/or theoretical ideas. The researcher becomes more and more aware of theoretical perspectives as the research project progresses, through transcription and line-by-line analysis to the construction of categories and construction of the emerging theory. Memos are used to help record the researcher's thoughts, to develop ideas, to compare findings with the

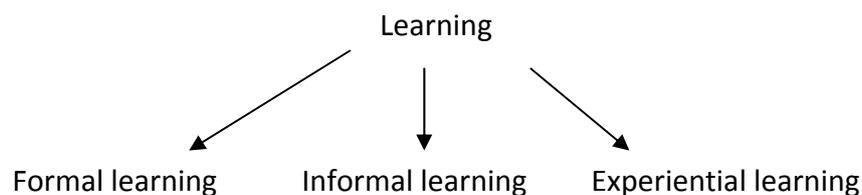
emerging explanatory framework and to revise the framework where necessary (Box 3). Further information on memos can be found in Charmaz (2014).

Box 2 An example of a field note

Is caring ability in nurses linked to whether they work with patients short or long term? Varying levels of caring ability described by this nurse, blamed another for poor care. Newly qualified nurse – would answers be the same coming from a more experienced nurse? Is this nurse telling me what I want to hear?

Box 3 An example of a memo:

Midwives talk about learning influencing their decision making. Variation in learning is apparent. There is learning when they trained and learning from experience with women, but also another type of learning which seems to happen in practice, observing and talking to colleagues. An idea for representing this might be:



Look at mapped codes relevant to learning within this framework to see if they fit.

Field notes and memos are important aspects of grounded theory. They help the researcher to construct the audit trail for generating theory from the data, from the point where the data is collected through to the systematic analysis of each data bit or data element and generation of the theory.

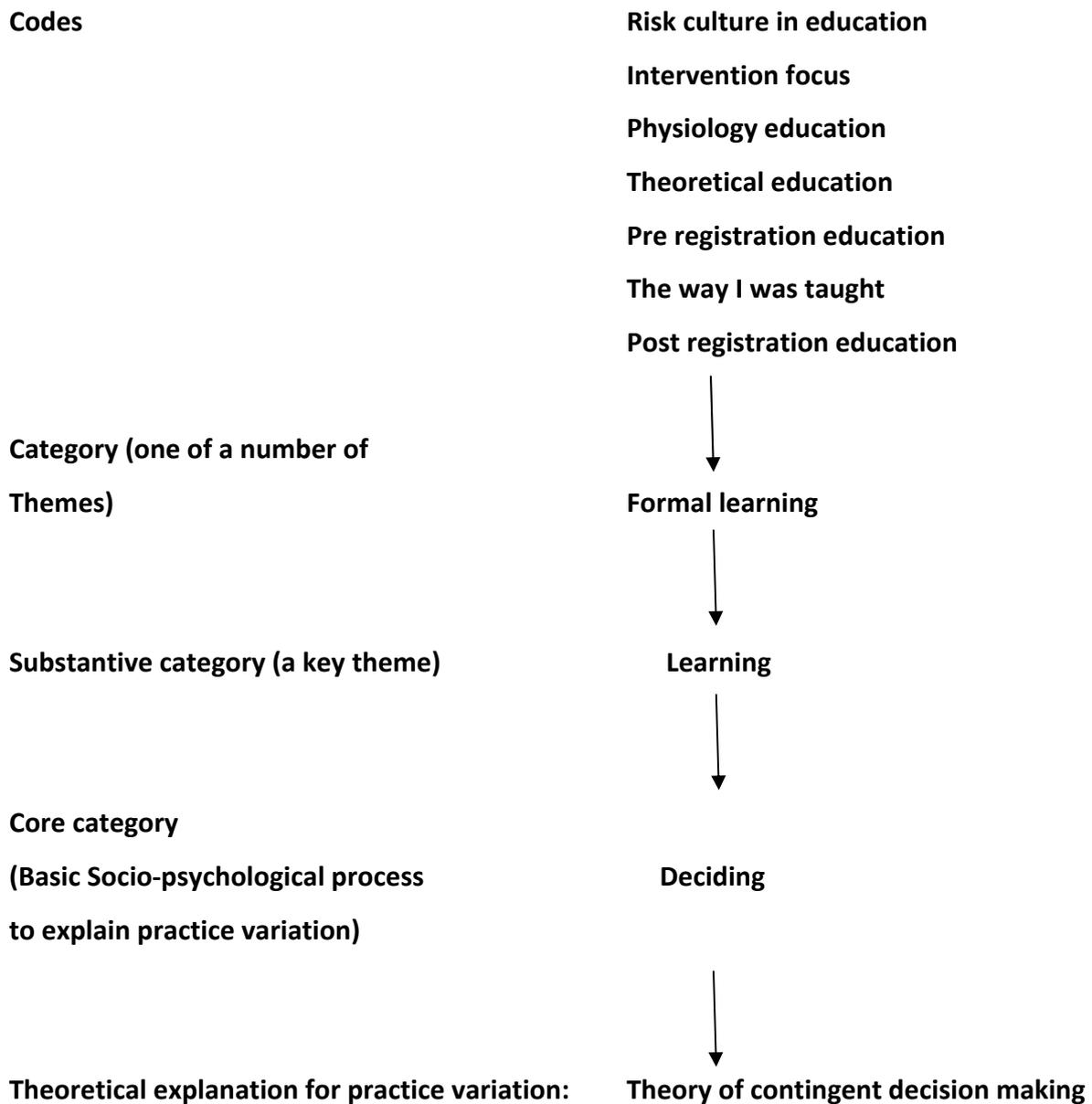
Some researchers use a computer software programme to help with analysis, to assist by organising the coding and categorising of transcribed data, but these are not essential.

Various programmes are available, such as NVivo (2014) and Atlas/Ti (2015). These software packages do not analyse the data, but provide a means for researchers to access and code the data easily.

Descriptions of the analytical processes in grounded theory vary (Dey 1993, Charmaz 2014, Corbin and Strauss 2015). However, the key principles involve moving from line-by-line coding to focussed or selective coding to develop categories and their properties and then

to establishing the complete theory, which may include the identification of a core category. (see figure).

Figure : An example of the structure of a grounded theory from a study exploring practice variation(Harris 2005)



The initial coding involves careful scrutiny, usually by a line-by-line analysis, attributing words or sentences of data to a heading or code that represents what the data bits listed under that code have in common. This is known as open coding. Open coding labels may be descriptive, labelling sets of data according to their content. For example 'classroom

learning' and 'practice learning'. This is known as in vivo coding. Alternatively, open coding labels may be more abstract, where the labels reflect the analysis emerging from the data. This is in vitro coding, where codes are not necessarily reflective of what participants actually say but rather an interpretation of what they say. For example, 'classroom' learning' may become 'formal learning' or 'rote learning' using in vitro coding.

A large number of open codes are generated in the first phase of analysis. The researcher should then collapse or reduce them to identify codes that are of particular relevance to the investigation. This involves a process of sifting, sorting, synthesising and analysing the data with reference to the initial coding (Charmaz 2014). The analysis continues with a more focussed or selective approach, looking for links and relationships between the codes so that they can be merged under broader headings, called categories). The key themes or substantive categories and the properties of those categories, emerge from this focussed coding process. For example, the properties of a category labelled 'values' may describe the differing values expressed by participants and reflect the similarities or differences between them.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) created a type of categorisation, known as axial coding to help the researcher in uncovering the properties of categories. This involves a complex framework for data analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998, Corbin and Strauss 2008, 2015). This is in contrast to the flexible emergent process preferred by some authors, as outlined above (Charmaz 2014).

As categories emerge they may be developed and refined by a process of revisiting the data, constantly comparing categories with data and categories with categories. When the researcher reaches saturation of theoretical concepts within the categories, this indicates data collection and the phase of the analysis is completed. Establishing a complete explanatory framework for the study is the final phase in the analytical process. For some grounded theory researchers a complete explanatory framework involves identifying key themes or substantive categories which explain what is happening. Other grounded theory researchers will also aim to identify a core category, a social-psychological process which enables all the nuances of the emergent theory to be explained in a single term and expresses the relationship between different categories. For example, in my own research, the core category 'deciding' emerged to reflect how midwives decided what action to take when managing the third stage of labour, in the theory of contingent decision making

(Harris 2005). 'Deciding' what to do was central to the phenomenon being studied and linked all substantive categories together to explain practice variation. The substantive categories 'learning', 'contextualising' and 'interpreting' provided an explanation for why a midwife's decisions and behaviour varied. Practice decisions were influenced by the body of knowledge a midwife used when making decisions, contextual aspects of his or her practice situation, and his or her values and beliefs. The core category should be central to the topic of study. It links categories together, emerges naturally from the data, and is determined at the end of the analytical process after all categories have emerged (Holloway and Todres 2010)

Theory types in grounded theory

Grounded theory is most often associated with the production of a substantive theory, rather than a formal theory (Denscombe 2014). A substantive theory relates to a specific situation. Formal theory is more abstract and may relate to a variety of situations.

'A specific theory of negotiating between patients and nurses about pain relief would be substantive theory. A theory about the concept of negotiation in general that can be applied to many different settings and situations becomes formal theory' (Holloway and Todres 2010).

Grounded theory researchers in nursing often focus on producing a substantive theory which is applicable to their area of interest. They aim to produce a theory with practical relevance, which may be used to improve care and add to the body of knowledge in nursing and midwifery. However, such theories may be relevant to other contexts and may subsequently be verified in a range of settings. It is important to consider whether a theory that emerges from grounded research may be generalised. The more situations a theory can be applied to, the closer it gets to being a formal theory (Howitt 2013).

Conclusion

This article aims to demystify grounded theory methodology for the novice nurse researcher, exploring the fundamental principles of this approach. Grounded theory provides an explanatory framework which grounds the theory that emerges in the voice of participants. It provides a systematic way of deriving explanations for behaviour of practical

concern, is creative, and involves the researcher in being open to what participants will reveal about the area of interest. The systematic process of concurrent data collection and analysis is open and transparent and leads to the development of a theoretical understanding of important areas of interest. Grounded theory enables the nurse researcher to go beyond description to create practically relevant substantive theory which may be relevant to other contexts.

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