

Researching Coaching: some dilemmas of a novice grounded theorist

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Abstract

This article explores some of the debates of grounded theory from the perspective of a novice researcher. The aim is to show how grounded theory processes support constant dialogue between the theoretical and the pragmatic. First there is a discussion of the kind of knowledge and theory produced by grounded theory. This is followed by a consideration of the implications of the chosen perspective of symbolic interactionism for interviewing research participants, and for a literature review. The iterative nature of grounded theory is then demonstrated as performativity, a key concept from the literature review, is used to explore further some of the dilemmas of the participant interview. The article concludes with a commitment to emergence in grounded theory for both the method and the methodology.

Key Words: Grounded theory, theoretical perspectives, interviews, symbolic interaction, performativity

Introduction

Learning to use grounded theory guidelines for research is an iterative process, with decisions about method leading to questions about methodology, and these then leading back to further questions of method. To the novice researcher issues such as epistemology and the position of the researcher can initially seem either arcane or self-evident. However, as Charmaz argues, "How researchers use these guidelines is not neutral; nor are the assumptions they bring to their research and enact during the process" (2006 p.9). This article follows my own journey as a novice researcher using the debates of grounded theory to explore and develop a personal position in respect of research method.

When I set out I expected that there would be a clean, modern and rather positivist version of this story. As a child of the Enlightenment, I came to doctoral research innocently enough. I read the primers and they explained research neatly and sequentially: the question determined the methodology, which in turn determined the methods for collecting data, which would then give rise to findings. I was keen and ready to start. There were of course the apparently abstract questions of ontology and epistemology but these intellectual issues would be resolved early in the process allowing me to move to the really interesting part: the activities of collecting and working with the data.

I quickly chose grounded theory as the most appropriate approach to my question because it is conventionally regarded as working well in areas where little theory already exists. Grounded theory is widely used in areas such as education, indeed McLeod (2001 p.89) calls it a “robust method for the generation of a form of practical knowledge that is particularly well suited to making a contribution to the efficient and humane functioning of modern bureaucratic systems of health and social welfare.” While this analysis of its strengths might make grounded theory seem mainly concerned with managing activity, it is also seen as particularly suited to “the study of social psychological processes” (Willig, 2001 p.46) and thus incorporates and values the perspectives of the people involved in the relevant “system”. This preliminary understanding of the opportunities offered by grounded theory fitted well with my dual commitment to learning and to making a difference for the better. And so I set off to apply the method, from the perspective of my dual professional background.

My background as a researching professional

For many years I was a secondary school headteacher in London, and now I am an executive coach working with public sector leaders in transition. From this double perspective I am currently developing a third professional identity through a Doctor of Coaching and Mentoring (DCaM) programme as a researching professional. This third perspective on my research question provides a lens through which to see my other two roles.

As part of my preparation for my first headteacher post in 1987 I read the, then, recently published *Secondary Headship: the early years* (Weindling & Earley, 1986). This remains the most significant piece of sustained research into the world of the newly appointed headteacher. Weindling and Earley recommended that, in line with practice in a small number of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), newly appointed headteachers should be offered a mentor. The assumption was that this would be a more senior headteacher provided by the LEA. The researchers also suggested the separate provision of “a neutral person.” For a professional coach or mentor there is an immediate question about what the mentor might be if not “neutral”. From the perspective of a headteacher the need for such a distinction could seem essential in what can be a highly political and competitive environment. From the perspective of a researcher the distinction feels like what Glaser, one of the founders of grounded theory called a “juicy ... sub-problem” (2001 p.17), and it is one of many that I am looking forward to working on.

Significance of grounded theory for qualitative research as a whole

Grounded theory is an approach to research developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Glaser had a strong positivist background and Strauss brought the perspective of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: an approach to qualitative research* (1967) was the first published account of how qualitative researchers actually work with their data (Charmaz, 2006); previous qualitative research manuals concentrated on data collection rather than analysis. In the 1960’s positivist and quantitative research were strongly in the ascendancy and the work of Glaser and Strauss in explaining the grounded theory methods re-established qualitative approaches as academically credible. The wider impact of their work is

acknowledged including by critics of the approach: “There can be little doubt that (grounded theory) has been a major - perhaps the major - contributor to the acceptance of the legitimacy of qualitative methods in applied social research” (Thomas & James, 2006 p.767).

This ascendancy of grounded theory in qualitative research is perhaps attributable to two factors, the availability of guidelines, and the link to theory. Both these elements are discussed below. Additionally Glaser and Strauss were clear at the start that they were describing an approach they had taken, rather than defining an unalterable process for all time. They were not: “offering clear-cut procedures and definitions” because “at many points we believe our slight knowledge makes formulation premature” (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p.1).

Thus the first written accounts of grounded theory allowed for development and adaptation of the method by the researcher. Critics of grounded theory argue that the wide variation in approach is a key point of weakness (Thomas and James 2006) because it takes the researcher away from a standardised method. However this argument presupposes the primacy of the positivist approach. The later disputes between Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1992) which derive in part from the different traditions of their original research background demonstrate how discussing grounded theory as a method leads quickly back into the issues common to all qualitative researchers: the need for clarity about epistemology and ontology. Thus the flexibility of the methodology is a strength because it generates a constant dialogue between the theoretical and the pragmatic. A key contribution of Glaser and Strauss was to open up the issues of qualitative research to debate in a way that incorporates both method and methodology.

While there are a number of dilemmas facing qualitative researchers on which Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, and Charmaz offer different perspectives, there are some core characteristics which identify a piece of research as using a grounded theory approach. For me there are four such characteristics: the primacy of data rather than preconceived hypothesis; the placing of those contributing data to the research as participants rather than subjects; the opportunity to return to the field to collect further data; and the understanding that the research will produce a theory, and one which is not a final version for all time but which is capable of modification.

In developing my own positioning in respect of this research I have found the metaphors of the traveler and the miner helpful (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) . The miner looks for the buried nugget, while the traveller expects to be changed by the journey and to write an account of it on the return home. For me as a doctoral student there are two journeys, the one towards becoming a researcher, and the other towards finding an answer (perhaps partial, perhaps temporary, but as good as I can make it) to my research question. The participants in my research, the newly appointed headteachers, are also engaged in their own journey with its distinctive landscape.

While I seek to understand and interpret their journey at a conceptual, theoretical level, I find I am faced with two key questions: what kind of knowledge will this grounded theory research produce? And what kind of a researcher will I become? In this article I begin to explore these issues, beginning with the question of the kind of theory that will result from this research.

What is a theory?

When Glaser and Strauss made explicit their processes for working with data in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), their main point of departure from contemporary practice was the emphasis on generating theory rather than verifying theory that already existed (p.16).

As I look ahead to the destination of my journey and try to imagine what a theory might look like in this case, there are several possible perspectives. Theory can be: “systems of evolving explanation, personal reflection, orienting principle, epistemological presupposition, developed argument, craft knowledge, and more” (Thomas and James 2008 p. 771). According to Glaser and Straus (1967 p.1) a theory is what makes the research relevant, and the test of a theory is that it: “provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations, and applications”. Grounded theory was never claimed as ‘pure research’ and its relevance to lay people and to applications is central.

Glaser and Strauss saw grounded theory as achieving ‘middle range’ theories and they argue for two forms of it: the substantive and the formal. Substantive theories are ‘empirical’ and relate to a specific area of human interaction; formal theories are conceptual and relate to a number of areas of human interaction. Although they see the resulting theory as capable of testing by subsequent researchers, Glaser and Strauss argue that because the theory is grounded in the data such testing would result in modification rather than falsification. As a move away from the positivist, the approach is also expected to provide “a theory” rather than “the theory”. Charmaz (2006 p.6) summarises the characteristics of a grounded theory as: “a close fit with data, usefulness, conceptual density, durability over time, modifiability, and explanatory power.” The preferred test however remains the usefulness of the theory to practitioners and the use they make of the outcomes. This raises the issue of the kind of knowledge generated by grounded theory.

What kind of knowledge arises from the grounded theory approach?

In exploring the kind of knowledge which will come from this research, I have found Hoyle and Wallace (2005, p.16) useful. They identify five intellectual projects pursued in the field of educational leadership and management. These are: knowledge for understanding; knowledge for critical evaluation; Knowledge for action; Instrumentalism; and Reflexive action.

In all three of my professional roles, I have a commitment to the fifth intellectual project: reflexive action. As a researching professional I am constantly seeking to improve my own research practice, and developing this article has offered a contribution to that through focused reflection. I hope that the outcomes of the research will stimulate reflexive action in others: usefulness is a key element of a grounded theory. However, as this intellectual project depends on the agency of the reader it requires that I understand how the research fits with the other four intellectual projects where agency remains with me as researcher.

Glaser’s (1978) defining question for a grounded theory approach is: “What is happening here?” and this at first sight places grounded theory simply as a “knowledge-for-understanding” project. However this could be achieved while leaving the research outcome as full contextual

description. Grounded theory research methods take the researcher to another integrating level of theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that theory is what makes the research relevant, and that it helps practitioners by helping them understand more about how they are making choices in a substantive area (1967). Thus there is a link to the potential for reflective action which is a core element of a grounded theory.

Research participants have indicated their perception of gaps in the current model of coaching and mentoring for new headteachers, whether at the level of policy or of implementation. Thus there is an implicit element of knowledge for critical evaluation within the research data. However the purpose of a grounded theory study is not critical but explanatory. In this case it is not a simple review of current provision; rather it seeks to understand the underlying structures and experiences of becoming a headteacher and how coaching and mentoring are currently being used.

As a researcher I have a commitment to the third intellectual project: knowledge for action, which focuses on the needs of policy-makers. However there is the possibility that theory and policy could interact counterproductively. Thus if a policy removed agency from the headteacher in terms of whether and how to engage, this would undermine a core tenet of coaching, and also its efficacy. The issue of agency applies also to the fourth intellectual project, instrumentalism. While the research itself does not have an instrumental focus, it may be that some of the findings and recommendations will support headteachers and their coaches who chose to improve their coaching engagement and practice.

In this discussion I have considered this research in the context of the Hoyle and Wallace framework solely from the point of view of the researcher. Further interesting insights would arise from considering it from the viewpoint of the research participant, the coach, or the new headteacher. Having considered the kinds of knowledge the research might produce I now turn to a discussion of theoretical perspective, and how to position myself as researcher in respect of this research.

Theoretical perspective

The very different backgrounds of Strauss and Glaser contributed both to the initial richness of grounded theory processes and to that of subsequent debates. For example, while Glaser contributed the codification and thus demystification of research methods, and also “dispassionate empiricism”, (1967 p.6), Strauss contributed a focus on human agency and on process as the precursor of structure, (Charmaz 2006). Their different perspectives were apparently reconciled in practice in their joint research projects and particularly in the context of legitimating qualitative research. However these differences subsequently led to and legitimated divergent practices within the grounded theory family. Glaser and Strauss in 1967 anticipated the development of grounded theory methods, though later Glaser found some such developments highly problematic. However the various debates show how questions about method lead to methodological debate.

The grounded theory approach to the generation of theory focuses on the primacy of data. Thus issues arise about how data are collected and the procedures for analysis. So, placing myself as researcher in respect of these issues I find the proponents of grounded theory offering plenty of advice. Glaser offers an approach from a positivist perspective: “Because grounded theory operates on a conceptual level, relating concept to concept, it can tap the latent structure which is always there and drives and organises behaviour and its social psychological aspects, all of which are an abstract of objective fact” (2001 p.13). This seems to imply that concepts are simply there to be “mined” and would exist quite separate from human agency either of the participant or of the researcher. This conflicts with the symbolic interactionism of Strauss’ background: “a theoretical perspective that assumes society, reality, and self are constructed through interaction and thus rely on language and communication... (it) assumes that people can and do think about their actions rather than respond mechanically to stimuli” (Charmaz 2006, p. 7).

I have a strong preference for methodology which takes account of the complexity of human agency. This is consistent with how I have previously enacted the professional roles I have chosen. As a coach the agency of the client is a core tenet, and as a headteacher the support for a developing and creative use of agency in students, staff and colleague school leaders was central to my work. I am therefore strongly drawn to the perspective of symbolic interactionism with its focus on agency. However this perspective has significant implications for my practice as researcher. As one example of this, in the following section I explore the implications of symbolic interactionism for how I am using interviews to collect data.

Collecting data through interviews

While an interview process might seem a simple arrangement of question and answer, this does not hold true in practice. Firstly, I note for example that most research participants have checked with me that I am a former headteacher. This could indicate that they perceive themselves to have agency in choosing their response and that they might choose to exercise this agency differently for different audiences, including within the research process. Headteachers learn to adapt their style to a wide range of audiences of which the researcher is but one. The issue is whether and how their ability to adapt to different audiences might affect the outcomes of the research. This is a question about the agency of the headteacher in the research interview.

Secondly, Charmaz from her constructivist position argues that “an interview is contextual and negotiated” and that “the result is a construction – or reconstruction” because “interview stories do not produce prior realities” but instead “provide particular accounts from particular points of view that serve particular purposes” (2006 p. 47). Thus the question becomes one of the interaction and the social construction, achieved between the researcher and the participant.

Thirdly, Stronach and MacLure (1997) demonstrate that in using data to transform persons into portraits it is possible to construct more than one version of the same person even when using the person’s original words. They demonstrate how ordering and framing of information can make a research participant appear to undermine their own statements. The question then would be how as a researcher I can ensure that my presentation of data and theory fairly and accurately represent the concerns of the participants.

As a general point Glaser argues that these concerns of social constructivism demonstrate a commitment to Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) with its “worrisome concern with accuracy” (2002, p.1). He contrasts this with grounded theory where “the product will be transcending abstraction, NOT accurate description” (p.1, original emphasis). In a more particular point he suggests that the question of mutual interpretation may arise from the nature of the interview arrangements: “It probably applies to lengthy, in-depth interviews where mutuality can grow based on forcing type interview guides” (Glaser, 2002, p.2).

The Glaser and Strauss (1967) approach to collecting data involves developing concepts from initial participants and then moving to a new group to check facts and developing concepts, continuing this process to achieve theoretical saturation. This is not the method I have chosen for my research: I am interviewing six newly appointed headteachers three times each over the course of a year. This is because I am seeking a theory about new headteachers use coaching and mentoring during their first year in post, and therefore some element of longitudinal research is necessary. Theoretical saturation will come though further exploration with the original participants. Aware of concerns about forcing including through the use of interview guides, I have used a basic structure of four key questions in each of the first two rounds of interviews. I have then derived supplementary questions from the initial answers. The questions from the second interview arise from analysis of data collected in the first round. In the third and final round of interviews I expect to be more focussed in my questioning using data from the first two rounds to develop concepts and categories.

During the early interviews I have been drawn back to Glaser’s (1978) key question for a grounded theory study: what is going on here? It would be possible to see the “here” for the new headteacher in a wide range of different ways. At the simplest level they are each in the physical space of a particular school. For this research where the interviews are spaced across a year, the “here” also has a temporal aspect and thus can be seen as a journey. This journey could also be constructed as personal, professional, psychological, emotional, political, or a blend of these. However, despite the very different circumstances of the heads and their schools, the grounded theory process of comparison begins to yield commonalities, and thus begins to define what the distinctive “here” is for the new headteacher. The choices made by the research participants about their actions and about how they describe their experience illuminate the research by yielding commonalities and exceptions, all of which will contribute to a dense theory.

One particular choice made by research participants, that of confirming and thus highlighting my practitioner status, leads to the question of how within the research I place and manage that status and all it implies. A powerful strategy to frame prior knowledge has been an initial review of the academic literature and I discuss this in the next section.

The place of the literature review

As a novice researcher I am working to understand and accept the issues and risks of the method I am using. One key issue is the potential to see the research problem from the perspective of professional insider, as a headteacher rather than as a researcher. Glaser (2002) suggests that, for

those well acquainted with the field, personal field notes will provide distance. I have found reviewing professional literature invaluable in developing alternative frames and a way of understanding what I bring to the research that might distort it.

The initial account of grounded theory suggested that the literature review be conducted after the research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and this is one of the key departures of grounded theory from traditional and positivist research models. However, it is no longer considered essential to delay the literature review (Charmaz, 2006), and I found a preliminary literature review essential at a functional level to identify gaps in previous research.

Beginning a literature review has allowed me to reframe (and that is of course a key coaching concept) my pragmatic, lived experience as a headteacher. In early drafting I found that I came to this research with a level of anger about much educational reform since the 1980s. One of the most significant pieces of reading in the literature review was in the field of postmodernism: Lyotard (1984) on performativity. Understanding the nature of performativity gave me a lens through which to see both my history and the current experience of education. An initial literature review has enabled me to see the field through a number of alternative perspectives, and thus has sensitised me to alternative views and issues which would not have come solely through lived experience, however intense. So reading some of the literature has become a way of bracketing and interacting at an intellectual level with emotional experience. Glaser and Strauss (1967) discuss the need for the researcher to enter the field with a lack of preconceptions. A literature review enabled me to frame and understand more what my preconceptions might be, and thus enabled me to treat them appropriately as a potential source of bias (Glaser 2002).

Understanding something of performativity, however, has enabled me to raise further issues about the nature of my interaction with the research participants through interviews and I now turn to this issue.

Symbolic Interaction and Performativity

Symbolic interactionism involves the development of shared meanings through conversation, social and professional interaction. However performative utterances do not permit this: rather they change the nature of what they refer to, and can make this changed interpretation valid for the past as well as the present and the future. Thus a previously accepted consensus can be unilaterally reinterpreted or dismissed. Additionally performative utterances neither expect nor allow the addressee to give or withhold assent (Lyotard 1984), and thus they discount collaboration even when formally endorsing it.

Ball (2001) following Lyotard's arguments about the internalisation of performativity argues that that this is supported by "rituals and routines". The former are moments of external accountability such as Ofsted inspections or job interviews, the latter are the more regular monitoring through personal record keeping and task groups. Ball argues that the former "serve to naturalise the discourses of control", while the latter "address forms of identity by treating people in terms of the identities of the discourses of performativity" (p. 212). This naturalisation could be seen as a bastard form of symbolic interaction: the determination of agreed meanings through

training. Thus there is a common understanding that the Ofsted grading of 'Satisfactory' for a school means that the school is in fact 'not satisfactory'.

If the recruitment and appointment process is a performative experience, then it leaves the new headteacher, the governors and the school the question of whether and how to move from the projected image to the lived experience. As a researcher I have asked participants to give an account of their experience, and thus to step at least partly outside it. There is a question of how far working inside a performative framework might affect this reflection. Alternatively, this research process may have allowed the new Headteachers the opportunity to step outside their daily experience and review it critically. Participating in the research then may possibly have affected the new headteacher's experience and their report of it.

Conclusion

The grounded theory method appears at very first sight to offer a rule-book for conducting successful research. However the debates in the academic literature enable the novice researcher to consider alternative viewpoints, taking into account their own professional background and the nature of the research question. Thus in learning to work with grounded theory there is an intrinsic element of emergence, and this is true as much for the understanding of epistemology and methodology as for the research topic itself. If the research is to be effective, then these issues must be attended to and their consequences lived out in the research. While my question at first was whether I could trust the craft of grounded theory; my current quest is to ensure the craft of grounded theory can trust me as researcher.

And so, at the midpoint of my research, I find that working with grounded theory involves several separate journeys, both concurrent and consecutive. There is an intellectual journey as I understand more about the technical and historical debates around grounded theory, their implications and the theoretical positions which underlie them. It is also a creative journey as I understand how these relate to the question I am researching, and the professional and personal areas in which that research takes place. A central aspect of grounded theory is that data will be analysed from the start and that this analysis will influence later stages of data collection. This means that working with the data reflects back to the method and underlying methodology, so the experience is iterative, reflective, reflexive and deepening as the research progresses. I expected as the researcher to be asking the questions of my data: I did not anticipate that the data and the journey to collect it would in return ask quite so many difficult questions of me.

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