
Article

The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory

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Abstract

Constructivist grounded theory is a popular method for research studies primarily in the disciplines of psychology, education, and nursing. In this article, the authors aim to locate the roots of constructivist grounded theory and then trace its development. They examine key grounded theory texts to discern their ontological and epistemological orientation. They find Strauss and Corbin's texts on grounded theory to possess a discernable thread of constructivism in their approach to inquiry. They also discuss Charmaz's landmark work on constructivist grounded theory relative to her positioning of the researcher in relation to the participants, analysis of the data, and rendering of participants' experiences into grounded theory. Grounded theory can be seen as a methodological spiral that begins with Glaser and Strauss' original text and continues today. The variety of epistemological positions that grounded theorists adopt are located at various points on this spiral and are reflective of their underlying ontologies.

Keywords: grounded theory, constructivism, constructivist, methodology, nurse/nursing

Authors' note: Jane Mills acknowledges the financial support of the Queensland Nursing Council.

Introduction

Grounded theory has proved an enduringly popular choice of methodology for nurse researchers since its development in the 1960s, with more than 3,650 journal articles published, both on the methodology itself and reporting research outcomes. Over time, the diverging approaches and positions adopted by the

founding fathers, Glaser and Strauss, have provoked much discussion (Corbin, 1998). The question of which theorist has broadened the methodology in a way that is faithful to its original intent of developing theory from data has been thoroughly debated (e.g., Boychuk Duchscher & Morgan, 2004; Heath & Cowley, 2004).

In this article, we argue that all variations of grounded theory exist on a methodological spiral and reflect their epistemological underpinnings. The form of grounded theory followed depends on a clarification of the nature of the relationship between researcher and participant, and on an explication of the field of what can be known. Constructivist grounded theory is positioned at the latter end of this methodological spiral, actively repositioning the researcher as the author of a reconstruction of experience and meaning. Here, we discuss the development of constructivist grounded theory from its beginnings in the work of Strauss and Corbin through to the work of sociologist Kathy Charmaz.

Constructivism as a methodological imperative

To ensure a strong research design, researchers must choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality. Consciously subjecting such beliefs to an ontological interrogation in the first instance will illuminate the epistemological and methodological possibilities that are available.

We do not quickly or easily reach any sort of conclusion or resolution about our own view of the nature of truth and reality. We are all influenced by our history and cultural context, which, in turn, shape our view of the world, the forces of creation, and the meaning of truth. Often these underlying assumptions about the world are unconscious and taken for granted. Constructivism is a research paradigm that denies the existence of an objective reality, “asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared)” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43).

Individuals who deny the existence of an objective reality assume a relativist ontological position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Relativists claim that concepts such as rationality, truth, reality, right, good, or norms must be understood “as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture . . . there is a non-reducible plurality of such conceptual schemes” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 8). In other words, the world consists of multiple individual realities influenced by context.

Epistemologically, constructivism emphasizes the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and participant, and the coconstruction of meaning (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). Researchers, in their “humanness,” are part of the research endeavor rather than objective observers, and their values must be acknowledged by themselves and by their readers as an inevitable part of the outcome (Appleton, 1997; de Laine, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Stratton, 1997).

In seeking a research methodology that would provide an ontological and epistemological fit with our position, we were led to explore the concept of a constructivist grounded theory. Several authors identify grounded theory when it is underpinned by a constructivist paradigm (Charmaz, 1994, 1995b, 2000; McCann & Clark, 2003a, 2003b; Nelson & Poulin, 1997; Norton, 1999; Stratton, 1997).

Grounded theory: Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin

Grounded theory is a methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in peoples’ lives (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It does this through a process of data collection that is often described as inductive in nature (Morse, 2001), in that the researcher has no preconceived ideas to prove or disprove. Rather, issues of importance to participants emerge from the

stories that they tell about an area of interest that they have in common with the researcher.

The researcher analyzes data by constant comparison, initially of data with data, progressing to comparisons between their interpretations translated into codes and categories and more data. This constant comparison of analysis to the field grounds the researcher's final theorizing in the participants' experiences.

Several permutations of grounded theory have evolved over time (MacDonald, 2001; MacDonald & Schreiber, 2001; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). Depending on the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs, there are several points of departure along a spiral of methodological development. Engaging in any form of grounded theory study, however, requires the researcher to address a set of common characteristics: theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, treatment of the literature, constant comparative methods, coding, the meaning of verification, identifying the core category, memoing and diagramming, and the measure of rigor (McCann & Clark, 2003b).

On our initial reading of the seminal grounded theory texts (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), we were easily drawn into comparing Glaser and Strauss. Reflecting on each text, we seemed to need to choose between the two. One can be blinded initially by the seeming complexity of Strauss and Corbin's procedures for coding, memoing, and diagramming, and become suspicious that "the technical tail [is] beginning to wag the theoretical dog" (Melia, 1996, p. 376).

However, our examination of each author's treatment of the common characteristics of grounded theory, first from an ontological and then from an epistemological perspective, finally crystallized the differences between the two. Our use of the terms traditional and evolved grounded theory to describe the work of Glaser (traditional) and Strauss and Corbin (evolved) is a result of this process. Strauss and Corbin (1998) themselves have described their methodology in this way. This is congruent with the metaphor of a spiral of methodological development, as opposed to a situation of binary opposition (McCann & Clark, 2003a).

By focusing on how the authors interacted with the data gleaned from their research, we could make a choice that agreed with constructivist research values. In making such a choice, however, we were conscious that this would provide only a guide, as opposed to a prescription. Rather, we would be following others with a constructivist intent in moving along the methodological spiral—further developing grounded theory (Annells, 1996, 1997b; Charmaz, 1995a, 2000; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996; Clarke, 2005; Costain Schou & Hewison, 1998; McCann & Clark, 2003a; Sandelowski, 2000).

Evolved grounded theory: Discerning a constructivist thread

Strauss and Corbin (1994) have clearly stated that they do not believe in the existence of a "pre-existing reality 'out there.'" To think otherwise is to take a positivistic position that . . . we reject . . . Our position is that truth is enacted" (p. 279). This is a relativist ontological position that leaves behind the traditional grounded theorists' subscription to the discovery of truth that emerges from data representative of a "real" reality (Glaser, 1978).

The literature, however, contains differing opinions about the ontological nature of Strauss and Corbin's (1994) work (Annells, 1996, 1997a; Charmaz, 2000). This is brought about, in part, because in their two major grounded theory texts, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) never directly address the paradigm of thought that underpins their method. In the years between editions, however, they did write an insightful book chapter that discusses the relationship of theory to reality and truth. This positions them as relativist pragmatists—stating that "theories are embedded 'in history'—historical epochs, eras and moments are to

be taken into account in the creation, judgment, revision and reformulation of theories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 280).

Undoubtedly, however, their work demonstrates a mixture of language that vacillates between postpositivism and constructivism, with a reliance on terms such as recognizing bias and maintaining objectivity when describing the position the researcher should assume in relation to the participants and the data. Nevertheless, they mix these ideas with observations such as “we emphasize that it is not possible to be completely free of bias” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 97). This has led some researchers to remark that “people can find support in it for any ontology that they wish” (MacDonald & Schreiber, 2001, p. 44), which is not to negate the value of evolved grounded theory. Rather, it can be seen as evidence of a struggle to move with the changing moments of qualitative research (Annells, 1997a).

Strauss and Corbin, in the evolution of grounded theory, acknowledge the importance of a multiplicity of perspectives and “truths” (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998) and as such have “extended and emphasized the range of theoretically sensitizing concepts that must be attended to in the analysis of human action/interaction” (MacDonald, 2001, p. 137). This enables an analysis of data and a reconstruction of theory that is richer and more reflective of the context in which participants are situated. They insist that theirs is “interpretive work and . . . interpretations must include the perspectives and voice of the people who we study [sic]” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 274; emphasis in original). Such a position clearly implies that this perspective includes relating participants’ stories to the world in which the participants live.

There are several key points of difference between the research method of an evolved grounded theory study and that of a traditional grounded theory approach. We will now discuss the common characteristics of grounded theory—theoretical sensitivity, treatment of the literature, coding, diagramming, and identifying the core category—with a view to discerning a constructivist approach to inquiry in the work of Strauss and Corbin.

Theoretical sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity is a multidimensional concept that includes the researchers’ level of insight into the research area, how attuned they are to the nuances and complexity of the participant’s words and actions, their ability to reconstruct meaning from the data generated with the participant, and a capacity to “separate the pertinent from that which isn’t” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 44).

Traditional grounded theory asks of researchers that they enter the field of inquiry with as few predetermined thoughts as possible, enabling them to “remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypotheses and biases” (Glaser 1978, p. 3). There is a reliance on the researchers’ immersion in the emerging data to increase their theoretical sensitivity. Much has been made of Glaser’s claim that the researcher in traditional grounded theory must be a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, when entering a field of inquiry (Clarke, 2005) to develop theoretical sensitivity legitimately. We would argue that he was not so naive as to think this was possible and that the emphasis should be on his expected emergence or unveiling of a separate entity called data—locating the participant as a vessel containing a precious liquor in which the researchers will immerse themselves so as to become more theoretically sensitive.

Strauss and Corbin have used a variety of techniques (e.g., questioning, the flip-flop technique, far-out comparisons) to enhance researcher sensitivity during analysis (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). They are emphatic, however, that the ideas generated from the use of these techniques do not constitute more data but “stimulate reflection about the data at hand” (Corbin, 1998, p. 122) and provide different ways of knowing the data.

If researchers believe that the product of their analysis—a grounded theory—is a reconstruction of their own making (Costain Schou & Hewison, 1998; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997; Sandelowski, 2000), the use of such techniques is defensible against the charge that they force the data (Glaser, 1992). Rather, these techniques are tools for the researcher to draw on in the act of theory development. Strauss and Corbin clearly take this position, saying, “Theorising is the act of constructing . . . from data an explanatory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationship” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 25; emphasis in original), and that theories themselves are “interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted or researched by researchers” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279).

Treatment of the literature

The area of literature and its uses are diametrically contested between traditional and evolved grounded theorists. Traditional grounded theory provides the dictum that “there is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study” (Glaser, 1992, p. 31) for fear of contaminating, constraining, inhibiting, stifling, or impeding the researcher’s analysis of codes emergent from the data (Glaser, 1992). This, again, situates the data as an entity separate from both participant and researcher.

Engaging proactively with the literature from the beginning of the research process, Strauss and Corbin identified many uses for this information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), interweaving the literature throughout the process of evolved grounded theory as another voice contributing to the researcher’s theoretical reconstruction. In the same way that Strauss and Corbin have viewed the use of techniques to increase theoretical sensitivity, the literature is able to provide examples of similar phenomena that can “stimulate our thinking about properties or dimensions that we can then use to examine the data in front of us” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 45).

The “nontechnical” literature, such as reports and internal correspondence, is seen as a potential source of data, providing information, in particular, about the context within which the participant operates, for example, their employing organization (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This then contributes to an analysis of additional data that is concerned with uncovering the meso and macro conditions that might influence the area of interest identified by the participants (Corbin, 1998).

Coding and diagramming

For traditional grounded theorists, coding from the data is the fundamental analytic tool that will uncover an emergent grounded theory from the field of inquiry. Three forms of codes are used: open, theoretical, and constant comparative (Glaser, 1992). Open coding is the initial step of theoretical analysis, developing codes from the data. This form of coding ends when it locates a core category. Theoretical codes are “conceptual connectors” that develop relationships between categories and their properties (Glaser, 1992, p. 38). Constant comparative coding describes the method of constant comparison that imbues both open and theoretical coding.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) have used complex coding methods as strategies to examine the interface between structure and process. This demonstrates Strauss’s pragmatic concern about the interplay between social groups and the worlds within which they live (Corbin, 1991). Glaser first introduced theoretical coding in grounded theory with the use of the 18 coding families that the researcher is able to draw on to develop conceptual analysis (Glaser, 1978). Strauss and then Strauss and Corbin followed on from this but focused on one particular coding family, the “Six Cs,” which identifies the causes, consequences, and conditions affecting categories identified by the researcher. Annells (1997c) has argued that this reflects Strauss’s pragmatic concern with the management of problems through contextualization.

In their later text, Strauss and Corbin (1998) simplified their paradigmatic framework to ask questions about the conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences of categories, thus making links between the ideas being conceptualized from the data. This form of coding is called axial coding. They also qualified the use of the paradigm, saying that it provides a guide for axial coding, to provoke thinking about the relationships between categories and their properties and dimensions, but that it should not be used rigidly lest it prevent the researcher from “capturing the dynamic flow of events and the complex nature of relationships” (p. 129).

Another tool that evolved grounded theorists can use to expand the dimensions of their analytic work is the conditional/consequential matrix. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have described this as “an analytic device to help the analyst keep track of the interplay of conditions/consequences and subsequent actions/interactions and to trace their paths of connectivity” (p. 199). Using the matrix, the researcher is able to locate an interaction that appears repeatedly in the data and then trace the linkages from this through the micro and macro conditions that might influence it (Corbin & Strauss, 1996). This allows the researcher to reconstruct the original data in such a way that its broader context becomes apparent.

Diagramming is central to the coding processes, and Strauss and Corbin use it extensively. Initially in the coding process, logic diagrams such as flowcharts are used. When undertaking higher level analysis, researchers use both the conditional/consequential matrix and integrative diagramming, illustrating the complex interplay between the different levels of conditions (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

Rather than viewing axial coding and the conditional matrix as constraints to theory construction (Charmaz, 2000), we argue that they are tools for reconstructing a grounded theory that is both dense and significantly analytical, as well as representative of structure and process. As evolved grounded theory developed, Strauss and Corbin (1998) became more emphatic in their argument that the tools for increasing theoretical sensitivity and coding processes need to be used with a degree of flexibility and creativity—an approach that is reflective of their constructivist intent. They used the metaphor of a “smorgasbord table” (p. 8) to describe their techniques—a table from which grounded theory researchers can pick and choose according to their “tastes.” From this table, thoughtful constructivist grounded theorists can choose techniques to use in their reconstruction of participants’ stories into theory.

Identifying the core category

The central point of a grounded theory, the core category, integrates all of that theory’s various aspects. Strauss and Corbin (1998) developed the process by which the core category is identified to acknowledge the role of the researcher as the author of a theoretical reconstruction. This occurs during the process of selective coding. In particular, Strauss and Corbin achieved this through their exploration of the centrality of the story, their narrative rendering of the analysis, to the eventual development of the core or central category.

In writing a story about the analysis, Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocated that researchers describe their “gut sense” about the subject matter of the research (p. 150). The story line is the final conceptualization of the core category, and as such, this “conceptual label” must fit the stories/data it represents (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 121). This process acknowledges the reconstruction of the participants’ stories by the researcher and the fulfillment of their obligation to “give voice—albeit in the context of their own inevitable interpretations” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 281).

For traditional grounded theorists, the dichotomy between emergence and construction continues in the identification of the core category. For Glaser (1978) “it always happens that a category will emerge from among many and ‘core out’ ” (p. 95) of its own accord.

Constructivist grounded theory: Charmaz

Ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist, constructivist grounded theory reshapes the interaction between researcher and participants in the research process and in doing so brings to the fore the notion of the researcher as author. A student of Glaser and Strauss, Charmaz (2000) has emerged as the leading proponent of constructivist grounded theory.

Opposing our argument that there is a discernable constructivist thread in the strategies of Strauss and Corbin, as discussed previously, Charmaz (2000) has argued that in their development of “analytic questions, hypotheses [relational statements], and methodological applications” (p. 513), they assume the existence of an external reality. Discussing the position of Charmaz’s form of constructivist grounded theory, Annells (1997c) has suggested that it applies the strategies of traditional grounded theory within a constructivist paradigm thus rejecting notions of emergence and objectivity.

We found a number of articles about constructivist grounded theory during our review of the literature. These came from the disciplines of education (Jones, 2002; Jones & Hill, 2003), psychology (Corbet-Owen & Kruger, 2001; Dodson & Dickert, 2004; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Stratton, 1997), occupational and environmental medicine (Gustafsson, Dellve, Edlund, & Hagberg, 2003), and nursing (Annells, 1997c; McCann & Clark, 2003a; Norton, 1999). Without fail, each of these authors/researchers drew on the work of Charmaz (1995b, 2000) in formulating their argument for assuming a constructivist approach to their own studies. Charmaz has contended since the mid-1990s that a constructivist approach to grounded theory is both possible and desirable, because, “Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524).

Focusing on the data and the possibilities for meaning that can be constructed from them, Charmaz (1995b) has used grounded theory to elicit multiple meanings. Following Charmaz, researchers need to go beyond the surface in seeking meaning in the data, searching for and questioning tacit meanings about values, beliefs, and ideologies. There is an underlying assumption that the interaction between the researcher and participants “produces the data, and therefore the meanings that the researcher observes and defines” (Charmaz, 1995b, p. 35; emphasis in original). To enrich these data, Charmaz (1995b) has positioned the researcher as coproducer, exhorting them to “add . . . a description of the situation, the interaction, the person’s affect and [their] perception of how the interview went” (p. 33).

Treatment of the data and their analytical outcomes is the main theme of Charmaz’s (2000) explanation of how researchers undertake studies using constructivist grounded theory. There is a sense that researchers need to immerse themselves in the data in a way that embeds the narrative of the participants in the final research outcome. This immersion is played out through the use of coding language that is active in its intent and that “helps to keep that life in the foreground” (p. 526). Charmaz advocates that the researchers as authors include raw data in their theoretical memos and that they continue with this strategy as their memos become more complex and analytical to keep the participant’s voice and meaning present in the theoretical outcome (Charmaz 1995b, 2001).

Charmaz (2000) developed the theme of writing as a strategy in constructivist grounded theory in her later work, when she advocates a writing style that is more literary than scientific in intent. She has argued that constructivist grounded theorists are impelled to be analytical in their writing but that their style of writing needs to be evocative of the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2001). The researcher’s

voice need not “transcend experience but re-envis[age] it . . . bring[ing] fragments of fieldwork time, context and mood together in a colloquy of the author’s several selves—reflecting, witnessing, wondering, accepting—all at once” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996, p. 299).

It is a delicate balancing act, enabling participants’ accounts to retain a degree of visibility in the text so that the reader can make the connections between analytical findings and the data from which they were derived (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Jones, 2002). Making such connections clear, however, demonstrates the value the researcher places on the participant as a contributor to the reconstruction of the final grounded theory model. It also meets the researcher’s ethical obligation to “describe the experiences of others in the most faithful way possible” (Munhall, 2001, p. 540).

For constructivist grounded theorists Charmaz’s (2001) work provides guidance in making meaning from the data, and rendering participants’ experiences into readable theoretical interpretations. Emergent in her writing is a recognition that constructivist grounded theorists need to think about the thorny question of how to resolve the tension that exists between developing a conceptual analysis of participants’ stories and still creating a sense of their presence in the final text.

Historically, grounded theory has been judged as silently authored, that is, researchers have maintained a position of “distant expert” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513). Revealing the researcher as the author of a coconstruction of experience and meaning is an important next step in grounded theory research. In part, Charmaz’s work in developing a methodological model of constructivist grounded theory addresses this.

Conclusion

Constructivist grounded theory can be traced from the work of Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998) underpinned by their relativist position and demonstrated in their belief that the researcher constructs theory as an outcome of their interpretation of the participants’ stories. Strauss and Corbin’s focus on the provision of tools to use in this process confirms their constructivist intent.

Following Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998) Charmaz (2000) is the first researcher to describe her work explicitly as constructivist grounded theory. With an emphasis on keeping the researcher close to the participants through keeping their words intact in the process of analysis, Charmaz has striven to maintain the participants’ presence throughout. A key point is creative writing as a form of expression that has the potential to communicate how participants construct their worlds.

Grounded theory is a research methodology that has an enormous appeal for a range of disciplines due to its explanatory power. This power illuminates common issues for people in a way that allows them to identify with theory and use it in their own lives. Researchers, who first identify their ontological and epistemological position, are able to choose a point on the methodological spiral of grounded theory where they feel theoretically comfortable, which, in turn, will enable them to live out their beliefs in the process of inquiry.

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