Commentary on "Constructing New Theory for Identifying Students with Emotional Disturbance"

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First we would like to commend and thank Dr. Dori Barnett for her willingness to submit her work for the purpose of acting as a constructivist grounded theory research exemplar, with the understanding that she was subjecting her work to the scrutiny of researchers from another grounded theory tradition. We have developed this commentary on Dr. Barnett's work in the spirit of respect and colleagueship that was recommended in the guest editorial of this Grounded Theory Review issue. We acknowledge that her study is very significant and will be very useful to practitioners. Our purpose is to use the research exemplar to identify differences between this type of research and that of classic grounded theory.

Readers who have been schooled and grounded in classic grounded theory methodology will have noticed at least five major differences between the constructivist grounded theory exemplar and classic grounded theory. This commentary will delineate and describe these differences.

1. Development Versus Discovery of the Research Problem

In the constructivist grounded theory exemplar, the research problem was developed through a preliminary review of the literature. This review revealed a gap in the literature and the problem of how practitioners distinguish between emotional disturbance and social maladjustment. In classic grounded theory, the researcher decides to do a study in an area in which s/he is interested and begins to collect data with no preconceptions (personal, professional, literature-based). The study problem is discovered as data are collected in the substantive area in which the researcher is interested.

In addition, the questions asked are distinctly different in constructivist grounded theory, which begins with very specific questions such as the way practitioners define and distinguish between emotional disturbance and social maladjustment. In contrast, the classic grounded theory research begins the study with a desire to find out what is going on in a particular substantive area. The research problem is not preconceived prior to the study beginning, and even when the research problem has been discovered, the questions asked of the data are very different that in constructivist grounded theory. In classic grounded theory, there are three very open questions designed to help the researcher determine what the data are indicating rather than in answering a set of predetermined questions. In classic grounded theory, these three questions are asked during data collection and analysis: What is this data a study of? What category does this incident indicate? What is actually happening in the data? (Glaser, 1978, p. 57).

2. Timing and Approach to Review of the Literature

Constructivist grounded theory begins with a review of the literature which is necessary to find out what has been done and not been done in an area so that the study problem can be identified/ articulated. In classic grounded theory, Glaser advises researchers to delay the review of the literature so as not to be unduly influenced by it (Glaser, 1992) and so that s/he can be open to finding what is in the data, rather than forcing the data to fit pre-existing concepts (Glaser, 1978, p. 31). The research problem and the resolution of that problem are found in the data, that is, they are "grounded in the data"- hence the term grounded theory. The classic grounded theory research does not turn to the literature until the core category, that represents how the problem is continuously being processed, has been found along with the theoretical code of how all the codes/categories relate to this core category. At this time, the literature is reviewed to identify if, and how, other scholars have found similar categories with potential relevance. The classic grounded theory often can act as an overarching framework for a substantive area, making sense of a seemingly disparate body of facts/theories. Glaser (1978) affirmed that "a well done grounded theory will usually, if not invariably, transcend diverse previous works while integrating them into a new theory of greater scope than extant ones" (p. 10).

Although the 'ideal' approach in classic grounded theory is to delay review of the literature to avoid preconceptualization of a substantive area, this is frequently impossible due to requirements of institutional review boards and/or funding bodies. In such instances, Glaser recommends that the review of the literature be done to allow the research to continue but the researcher needs to acknowledge that there may be some preconceptions that s/he will need to be careful not to overlay on the research data. However, classic grounded theory is "self-correcting" in that through constant comparison, if done according to the tenets of classic grounded theory will correct preconceptions and bias.

3. Methodological Versus Philosophical Positioning

Dr. Barnett points out that her philosophical position is grounded in a constructivist grounded theory orientation which involves an epistemologically subjective and an ontologically relativistic stance.   A relativist stance assumes that theoretical analyses derived from the grounded theory process "are interpretive renderings of a reality, not objective reportings of it" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 206). Meaning is constructed through the qualitative researcher's interpretive understandings, an emic perspective that assumes a relativist and reflexive stance toward the data (Charmaz, 2009). This takes account of multiple realities. The limitations of such a perspective are outlined in the paper by Dr. Andrews. This philosophical position guides the research method, the decisions that are made, and the research product. In contrast, Glaser has repeatedly asserted that classic grounded theory is a methodology that is not contingent upon any particular philosophy, and that the classic grounded theory researcher can ascribe to any philosophical orientation as long as all such views are suspended so as not to preconceive the study, and to allow the grounded theory to emerge.

In addition, constructivist grounded theory researchers view their work as a construction or co-construction (with research participants) through the researcher's interpretation of the participants meaning. If data are co-constructed, what is the relative contribution of participants and the researcher to that co-construction? This is problematic since such an interpretation is dependent on the researcher's view (Charmaz, 2006) suggesting that the views of the researcher are privileged above those of participants. In contrast, classic grounded theory tries to understand the action in a substantive area from the perspective of

participants or in the words of constructivist grounded theory multiple perspectives, while the role of the researcher is one of discovery. However those multiple perspectives are conceptualised in classic grounded theory but remain at the descriptive level in constructivist grounded theory. It is not surprising that the end product is very descriptive concepts or themes. Theories generated using constructivist grounded theory tend to be plausible accounts rather than theories that can claim any objective status (Chamaz, 2006); so why use the term "theory" in describing this methodology?

Classic grounded theory does not in fact make the claim of "objective theory" in relation to theories generated since they are a theoretical abstraction of the doings of people and is readily modifiable. It is not representative of an objective reality as constructionist grounded theorists maintain. Again the dichotomy between reality as relative or objective is evident. As argued by Dr. Andrews, when adopting a position of subtle realism then this dichotomy is resolvable. The role the researcher has in co-construction is not made explicit in constructivist grounded theory, therefore, it is difficult to determine the relative contribution of the researcher to the analysis and how the findings have been influenced. There is the danger that the perspectives of participants are overshadowed by those of the researcher. Classic grounded theory takes the view that the perspective of the researcher is a source of bias. The classic grounded theory researcher is not meaning making but rather discovering the substantive problem and finding the ongoing resolution or processing of that problem.

Charmaz paradoxically concludes that grounded theory need not be tied to a single epistemology or to a specific theoretical perspective, yet tries to do just that by discussing grounded theory exclusively in terms of constructionism to overcome what she perceives to be the objectivist nature of grounded theory as originated. Glaserian grounded theory has been linked to interpretativism (Norton, 1999) yet is criticised for being positivist in nature (Charmaz, 2006). Clearly it cannot be both and this highlights the confusion that is evident in the literature discussing this methodology. It suffers from what Johnson (1999) terms varied understandings of its nature and purpose.

4. Other Methodological Differences

Dr. Barnett describes the three types of coding found in constructivist grounded theory: open, focused, and theoretical whereas in classic grounded theory there are two coding phases open (which continues until the core category is found) and selective (in which only those categories that relate to the core category are saturated and the theoretical code is found). Although the notion of open coding as labelling concepts is somewhat similar to that found in classic grounded theory, the meaning of the theoretical coding is very different. In constructivist grounded theory, theoretical coding is when the researcher "merges concepts into groups or thematic categories" which is a process that occurs during both open and selective coding in classic grounded theory. In classic grounded theory, the theoretical code is how the grounded theory gets integrated; it is the "conceptual model of the relationship of the core category to its properties (e.g., causes or conditions) and to the other (non-core) categories" (Hernandez, 2010, p. 159). Within constructivist grounded theory there is no attempt to integrate the core category with other categories since theoretical coding plays no part in the analysis.

There are other differences in terminology between classic grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory. In classic grounded theory the core category is essential to the development of the substantive theory, while this is not the case in constructivist grounded theory. Charmaz maintains that a core category is not necessary, but this is

considered one of the defining characteristic of classic grounded theory. Without a core category then a study cannot be characterised as a grounded theory study (Murphy et al., 1998). Also, the term theoretical sensitivity does not carry the same meaning in both methods. In constructivist grounded theory, theoretical sensitivity "relies on the researcher's intuitive and interpretive analysis of the data" (i.e., is researcher-driven) whereas in classic grounded theory, theoretical sensitivity is the deliberate attempt to suspend intuition/preconceptions and uncover what is found in the data, that is, what the data are indicating/disclosing (data-driven). The prior knowledge of the researcher is also used to enhance theoretical sensitivity even if derived from the literature. In constructivist grounded theory the literature is used to develop aims and objectives as well as questions to be asked of participants. This may lead to preconception and studying the professional problem. In classic grounded theory the function of the literature is to enhance theoretical sensitivity initially and ultimately to be used as data for constant comparison purposes.

In constructivist grounded theory, the researchers is viewed as a "reflexive participant in data collection and analysis" whereas in classic grounded theory the researcher is a discoverer of what can be found in the data when it is approached in an open, non-preconceived manner. In constructivist grounded theory, process is deliberately built into the analysis; however the classic grounded theory theory can be a static or a process theory.

5. Research (Theoretical) Product

The research product in both constructivist grounded theory and classic grounded theory is a theory but there are differences. The constructivist grounded theory product is a rich, descriptive theory that captures the "core social and psychological processes" that practitioners were using to distinguish between emotional disturbance and social maladaptation. In classic grounded theory, the research product is an explanatory theory which explains how the problem of the substantive area is continuously being process, solved, or resolved. Classic grounded theory takes account of the multiple perspectives of participants, but raises these to the abstract level of conceptualization.

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