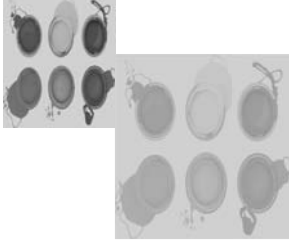# CHAPTER 2

Grounded Theory Approaches

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Introduction

This chapter is about using grounded theory. It focuses on the development of grounded theory, the underlying assumptions of the approach and the ways it is used in research. The chapter will cover theoretical as well as practical issues relating to the use of grounded theory. The origins of grounded theory lie in the micro-sociological tradition of research and, as such, each section has been written with a view to relating that tradition to research topics in psychology. The chapter begins with a background and history of grounded theory. It continues with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological issues that underpin the grounded theory approach. The chapter provides a detailed description of what one needs to consider and do in carrying out a piece of grounded theory research. Examples and reflections on practice are given throughout, and ethics considerations are also discussed.

History

Grounded theory is an approach used to study action and interaction and their meaning. It was developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, two American sociologists working at the University of California, San Francisco, in the 1960s. They developed the approach while studying the way in which health professionals cared for the ill in American hospitals, and especially how they managed the issues of death and dying. Their interest in the topic developed from the observation that discussions of death and dying were at the time absent from the American public sphere. They wanted to explore how that absence affected those contexts in which death and dying occur and so their study explored how a social issue (absence of public discussion on death) impacted on professional practice in a clinical setting. The social issue they identified was the lack of public discussion around death and the process of dying. *Awareness of Dying* (1965) is now a seminal text, as is *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), which Glaser and Strauss wrote to outline the research approach they were using.

Glaser and Strauss continued to work together for a number of years before developing separate intellectual trajectories. Glaser's approach emphasises the emergence of theory from the data without the imposition of the analyst's conceptual categories onto the data. Glaser's work emphasises the opportunity grounded theory offers for developing 'formal theory' (see, for example, Glaser, 2007). Strauss's take on grounded theory emphasised the symbolic interactionist roots of the approach, which concentrate on the construction of meaning through everyday interaction. Strauss, with Juliet Corbin (1990), wrote a detailed book on 'how to do' grounded theory, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, which is still widely used. Anselm L. Strauss passed away in 1996 (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 5). Barney G. Glaser is still writing and teaching on grounded theory, and runs workshops in a number of cities.

Since its early days, grounded theory has been developed by a number of Glaser and Strauss's students as well as others (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). It is still a popular approach for studying action and interaction and, although Glaser has always maintained that it is or can be a mixed-method approach, it is frequently used for qualitative research in areas such as nursing, social work, clinical psychology and other helping professions.

Ontology

The ontological orientation of grounded theory has its roots in early sociological thought, pragmatism and **symbolic interactionism** (Star, 2007), which draw on European (French) and North American social science at the end of the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries.

Grounded theory follows in the path opened by the founder of sociology, Emile Durkheim, in espousing the idea that social facts exist and that the empirical study of these facts constitutes a true scientific endeavour (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 22). From the pragmatist tradition, we find in grounded theory the idea that our understanding is built on consequences and not antecedents (Star, 2007: 86). This means that knowledge is created retrospectively. This is in contrast to other philosophical orientations that emphasise the prospective creation of models, which subsequently await verification. Like pragmatism, grounded theory also assumes the existence of an objective reality, but one that is complex and consists of a number of overlapping, complementary as well as contradictory perspectives (Star, 2007: 87); grounded theory also draws our attention to action and interaction as meaningful units of analysis in their own right. Action is created through the relationships between people; it is treated as an ongoing, continuously unfolding social fact (Star, 2007: 90).

The way in which grounded theory understands action and interaction has its roots in the symbolic interactionist tradition that emerged out of the Chicago School of micro-sociology. According to symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1981; Prus, 1996; Rock, 2001; Sandstrom, Martin & Fine, 2003), social reality is intersubjective, it consists of communal life with shared linguistic or symbolic dimensions that is also reflective of those shared meanings. Reflexivity means that

people are able to attribute meaning to their being and in doing so develop lines of action. People are also able to take the perspective of the other (Mead, 1934).

Activities organise human group life. While we create meaning out of behaviour intersubjectively, it is activities that organise human life. In turn we tend to spend a good deal of time negotiating such activities and building relationships through these activities. We are able to both accept and resists others' influences and, as such, activities are multidimensional, implying cooperation, competition, conflict and compromise. At the same time, the relationships we form say something about the role and identities we create, as well as how our communities are organized. Symbolic interactionism deals with process by thinking about human lived experiences as 'emergent or ongoing social constructions or productions' (Prus, 1996: 17).

The emphasis in symbolic interactionism on action, interaction and activity has been inherited by grounded theory and has led to the approach being adopted as a preferred method for understanding practice in a number of disciplines and applied settings.

Epistemology

When thinking about the epistemology underlying grounded theory it is common to categorise the various historical periods of grounded theory as either positivist or constructivist. Certainly, as Bryant and Charmaz (2007: 50) point out, Glaser and Strauss's initial work (1967) espoused a number of positivist assumptions about the existence of an objective reality that is unmediated by the researcher's or others' interpretations of it. Later developments of grounded theory that have taken their inspiration from social constructionism are more amenable to a view of reality that is mediated through language and other forms of symbolic representation (Burr, 1995). However, categorising grounded theory approaches in this way, as either positivist or constructivist, is unhelpful because it risks missing what is most useful and enduring about these approaches (Clarke, 2005; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This section looks at key epistemological underpinnings of grounded theory to help to determine the usefulness of each for designing and carrying out grounded theory research.

The epistemology of grounded theory is essentially one of resistance to pre-existing knowledge, and of managing the tensions between the empirical phenomena and abstract concepts. Grounded theory's various legacies play a key role here. In symbolic interactionism, the distinction is made between knowing about a phenomenon and being acquainted with a phenomenon (Downes & Rock, 1982: 37, cited in Van Maanen, 1988: 18). The shift of emphasis from knowledge about something to acquaintance with a phenomenon has resulted in the creation of a small niche within the discipline of sociology, not so much concerned with building broad conceptual models but instead with creating understanding of 'the vigorous, dense, heterogeneous cultures located just beyond the university gates' (Van Maanen, 1988: 18–20). Grounded theory embodied this tradition when Glaser and Strauss encouraged their students to challenge the 'theoretical capitalism' involved

in the fine-tuning of existing theories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 17). The call to leave armchair theorising behind also has implications for how research is conducted, but we will return to this point in the next section, on method.

The tension between the empirical and the conceptual is managed through an iterative process of data collection and analysis. Knowledge in grounded theory is arrived at through this process. The approach relies on the analyst moving back and forth between their empirical data and their analysis of it (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 1). In this process there are three distinct analytical practices employed towards the creation of knowledge, as described below.

Constant comparison

Knowledge in grounded theory is derived through a process of constant comparison. Comparison in grounded theory is not used to verify existing theory (see above). Instead it is used to generate and discover new categories and theories by juxtaposing one instance from the data with another (Covan, 2007: 63). Comparing and contrasting instances in this way enables the analyst to look for similarities and differences across the data in order to elucidate the meanings and processes that shape the phenomenon being studied. Similarities can be grouped together into categories. Categories are more abstract than initial codes, and begin to group together codes with similar significance and meaning, as well as grouping common themes and patterns across codes into a single analytical concept (Charmaz, 2006: 186). Categories are then compared with each other to produce theory. Differences, on the other hand, far from presenting a problem to the analyst, are treated as opportunities to extend the analysis in order to account for the role that such differences play in the phenomena under investigation. In fact, Glaser and Strauss (1967) placed a good deal of emphasis on the value of analysing extreme cases that might challenge, and therefore enrich, an emerging theory (Covan, 2007: 63). The process of using extreme cases, or negative cases, to extend the analysis is called theoretical sampling (see page 28).

Abduction

Reichertz (2007) defines abduction as 'a cognitive logic of discovery'. It is a form of inference used especially for dealing with surprising findings in our data. It directs the analyst to make sense of their data and produce explanations that make surprising findings unsurprising (Reichertz, 2007: 222).

Abduction is different to deduction and induction. Deduction subordinates the single case into an already known rule or category, and induction generalises single cases into a rule or category by focusing either on quantitative or qualitative properties of a sample and extending them into a rule or category. Abduction, on the other hand, creates a new rule or category in order to account for a case present in the data that cannot be explained by existing rules or categories (Reichertz, 2007: 218–219).

There are two *strategies* involved in abduction, both of which require creating the conditions in order for abductive reasoning to take place (Reichertz, 2007: 221).

1 The first is a 'self-induced emergency situation' (Reichertz, 2007: 221). This means that in the face of not knowing what to make of a surprising finding, rather than dwelling on the infinite number of possibilities, the analyst puts pressure on themselves to act by committing to a single meaning.
2 The second strategy is completely antithetical to the first. It involves letting your mind wander without any specific goal in mind, or what Pierce (1931–1935), a key writer on abduction, called 'musement' (Reichertz, 2007: 221).

What these two quite antithetical strategies have in common is tricking the thinking patterns of the conscious mind in order to create 'an *attitude* of preparedness to abandon old convictions and to seek new ones' (Reichertz, 2007: 221).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is not often associated with Glaser and Strauss's original formulation of grounded theory. Yet the impetus behind *Awareness of Dying* was deeply personal, both men having experienced bereavement in the period preceding the study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 7; Star, 2007: 82). Lempert (2007: 247) notes that grounded theory in its original formulations presumed that the researcher as a research instrument was a 'neutral knower'. Mruck and Mey (2007: 518) suggest that Glaser's emphasis on allowing theory to emerge means that there is little room for reflexivity in Glaserean grounded theory, which would impose on that emergence. On the other hand, Strauss and Corbin's approach, rooted far more in symbolic interactionism, takes the view that the researcher's biography, and the sociocultural influences therein, influence the researcher's theories and interests (Mruck & Mey, 2007: 518).

Given developments in qualitative research methods in psychology and the central role that reflexivity has played in those (Willig, 2000) we would encourage a reflexive stance to grounded theory. The approach's emphasis on action, including that of the researcher(s), indicates that there is ample room for developing a reflexive stance in grounded theory. Indeed, like Mruck and Mey (2007), I have in my own teaching of research methods always put forward the view of research as a continuous process of decision making (Marshall & Rossman, 1989: 23). Accordingly, and at the very least, reflexivity is a way of making the research process less esoteric, and more transparent and accountable to one's colleagues and the public. It is also a way of developing theoretical sensitivity (another staple of grounded theory) of the context and processes one is researching. For instance, early experiences of action research and my reflection on the meaning and dynamics of those experiences led me to formulate my own research project that looked at the gaps between formal and informal **discourses** of action (Nolas, 2009; see Reflection

on Practice on page 37 of this chapter). In this regard, reflexivity plays an epistemological role in opening a space for the creation of new knowledge.

Methods

Grounded theory's focus is on action and interaction, and it is suitable for answering event-orientated questions such as 'What is happening?' (Glaser, 1978, cited in Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 21). The symbolic interactionist tradition lends itself to exploratory questions of *how*, while the emphasis on constant comparison provides the tools for the more explanatory questions of *why* to be answered.

In this process in grounded theory everything is considered to be data, though notably, and because of the emphasis on building theory, data is certainly not everything in a research project (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 14). This is because the parameters of research design are drawn up according to the action or activity that one is studying. Everything in relation to that action then becomes data. This is quite a different approach to what many psychologists might be used to. In psychology we tend to make strong demarcations between our theories, methods and data. These boundaries are much more blurred in grounded theory, which is often described as an iterative process of data collection, analysis and further data collection. We will deal with the practicalities of data collection and analysis in the next section. Here we will explore the methods themselves, starting with a discussion of theoretical sensitivity – a starting point, if there is such a thing, in grounded theory.

Theoretical sensitivity

Grounded theory begins with theoretical sensitivity, which is defined as 'the researcher's ability to understand subtleties and nuances in the data' (Singh, 2003: 310). For example, when Singh (2003; 2004) was researching attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) her historical analysis of the ADHD literature and her own immersion in the field through participant observation in a clinical setting and teaching at a primary school had sensitised her to a number of issues relating to the study of ADHD. For instance, she observed that in the clinic setting fathers tended to be less involved in issues relating to their child's (mainly sons) diagnosis and management of ADHD. She also found that articles that referred to 'parents' and 'children' in relation to ADHD very often meant mothers and sons. As such, she decided to sample and interview both mothers and fathers about their experiences of being the parent of a child diagnosed with ADHD.

Ethnographic fieldwork

Like grounded theory, ethnography is also a boundary-spanning (Tedlock, 2003: 165) activity. It is an approach widely used in sociology and anthropology. With some notable exceptions in social psychology (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel, 1972;

Thomas & Znaniecki, 1996; Bradbury, 1999), cultural psychology (Cole, 1996) and clinical psychology (Bloor, McKeganey & Fokert, 1988; Gubrium, 1992, both cited in McLeod, 2001), for the most part the ethnographic approach is not widely used in psychological research. Similarly, and as Timmermans and Tavory (2007) point out, while grounded theory has its roots in ethnographic research, over time the link between grounded theory as an approach to both data collection as well as analysis has weakened considerably, making grounded theory 'first and foremost a systematic qualitative data analysis approach' (2007: 494).

There are two reasons to focus on ethnography when conducting grounded theory research. On the one hand, it is the bedrock of the symbolic interactionist tradition from which one form of grounded theory emerged. It broadens the scope for collecting types of data that are not readily amenable to more common qualitative research methods, such as cultural practices that we engage in with others that do not always form part of our conscious or codified knowledge – knowledge that is communicated through language. These might include such things as the systems of classification that shape our work and everyday lives (Bowker & Star, 1999), how village life is organised around an open psychiatric community keeping the sane and the mad apart (Jodelet, 1991), or the ritual processes in the discourses that surround death in contemporary Britain (Bradbury, 1999). It also provides us with a useful framework of 'fieldwork' for organising a range of data (such as documents, letters, internet postings, news articles) that crop up in the process of and are related to the activities being investigated. As such, there are a number of useful lessons that can be drawn from thinking about data collection methods ethnographically.

Participant observation

Ethnographic fieldwork relies on the researcher spending a considerable amount of time in the context in which their research interests reside. This could be an organisation or community, a network of people or any other relevant grouping. The aim of the approach is to achieve an 'intimate familiarity' (Prus, 1996) with the subject matter. Ethnographic studies are 'naturalistic' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 3) meaning that the researcher seeks to observe people and their interactions as they occur, in situ. Observation here is in stark contrast to the usual meaning found in psychology; its meaning lies much closer to the everyday activities of noticing, paying attention to and taking note of particular situations or interactions of interest in a purposeful manner. It frequently crosses over into participation of various degrees as researchers apprentice themselves to the routines of others' lives. Such an approach is in contrast to experimental approaches to psychological research where people are removed from their context and daily activities and their behaviour is manipulated through experimental design. It is also different to interviewing and focus groups, which while allowing participants to use their own language and give meaning to discussion topics still brackets these moments of recounting experience from the rest of daily life. It is also different to clinical uses of observation, such as one-way mirrors, because its aim is not to compare actions

with, and the extent to which they deviate from, previously established norm. Instead, observation in ethnographic research is a way of collecting contextual information, inclusive of people's interactions. It is largely unstructured by the researcher and has to follow the rhythm of the situation or context. The researcher is, depending on their prior familiarity with the research context, largely unaware of the social norms but ends up learning about those by purposefully, but quite often inadvertently, disrupting them with their presence.

Informal interviews

In the ethnographic process, informal interviews abound. They are part and parcel of participant observation. The term 'informal interview' refers to unplanned research-relevant or related conversations that might take place and which the researcher records in their fieldnotes after the event. Such interviews are much closer to conversations and do not necessarily follow a structured or semi-structured format. The interviews are often prompted by the researchers' questions as they try to find out what is going on and why certain things are being carried out in the way they are. They might also be prompted by individuals in the field wanting to communicate information to the researcher that they think might be relevant to the study. Informal interviews can be individual interviews as well as group interviews.

Formal interviews and focus groups

Interviewing can be regarded as the formalised method of interpersonal communication used for research. It is 'essentially a technique or method for establishing or discovering that there are perspectives or viewpoints on events other than those of the person initiating the interview' (Farr, 1982, in Gaskell, 2000: 38). There are a number of excellent publications on the topic of interviewing (e.g. Kvale, 1996) and, for this reason, I will not go into it in a huge amount of detail here. In outline, interviews have been described as a 'purposive conversation' (Kvale, 1996). The structure and formality of interviews ranges from fully structured with standardised questions, to semi-structured that include a few guide questions but are generally informed by the interviewee, and completely unstructured in which the participant directs the interview in its entirety. Similarly, focus group discussions are often organised around topics but can equally involve structured activities, such as viewing videos or pictures, or sorting through issues relevant to the research, as a way of engaging participants, developing conversation and accessing views on and experiences of the topic under investigation (see Gaskell, 2000).

Documents, archives

In psychological research we tend not to include documents in our data other than perhaps as protocols for guiding our own action (e.g. research proposals, interview

topic guides). Yet if you think about psychology and its practices (experiments, surveys, interviews, clinical interventions) as a socio-cultural activity you will find that documents play a central role in that practice. In clinical psychology, for instance, manuals are a very important aspect of practice, especially if one is interested in empirically testing the efficacy of the therapeutic approach with which one practises. Consider change practices in different types of organisations. These are often launched with the production of a strategic document or a policy change, which spells out new expectations and behaviours (Prior, 2003). As such, documents often form an important part of more formalised activities. In my own research on evaluating a youth inclusion programme it was possible to trace the development of the programme and policy thinking by analysing the language used to talk about the programme in official documents and on government websites. As the monitoring and evaluation strategy got under way and its findings were fed back into programme development, the programme itself began to change – for instance, by becoming more inclusive of young women's interests and needs.

Other methods

There is a range of other methods that might be included in a grounded theory project. For instance, Dilks, Tasker and Wren (2010), in researching the links between therapy and recovery in psychosis, used audio recordings of therapy sessions. In my own research using participatory video (Nolas, 2009), the videos produced by our young participants were similarly included as part of the material to be analysed to extend understanding of what happens when we say that we are working in a participatory way. For further information on other methods see Denzin and Lincoln (2000), and Banks (2007).

Ethics

Research in the grounded theory tradition adheres to the same ethical guidelines as any other piece of qualitative research. Data are collected anonymously, including in instances of participant observation where the identity of those being observed is concealed in the subsequent analysis and writing-up of the study. What participants tell the researcher is kept confidential and the identity of participants is protected. Different ethical considerations do, however, come into play when thinking about the participant observation and informal interviewing aspects of a grounded theory project. Here access to the field is usually negotiated through a 'gatekeeper'. A gatekeeper is a key member of a group, community or organisation who becomes known to the researcher (either through the researcher's network or through a formal introduction and sometimes even a chance encounter) and through whom access to the rest of the group, community or organisation is discussed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 63–67). At this point researchers should be clear about the methods they are using (e.g. formal and informal interviews) and how the data will be used. However, researchers should not rely on gatekeepers communicating the

details of the research and the role of the researcher to other members of the gatekeeper's community. Researchers should always identify themselves as such, explain their research to other community members and ask permission from those they talk to for using the information provided in their research (e.g. in the context of informal interviews).

Research Example

Ilana Singh's work (2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004; 2005) on mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenting a child with ADHD is an example of a robust use of grounded theory analysis. In her approach she practised a number of the grounded theory principles. Her study began with a historical analysis of ADHD. Debates around ADHD have come to be dominated by biological and pharmacological discourses of the diagnosis. Singh's work sought to explore the relationship between the historical context that gave rise to ADHD and Ritalin, and mothers' acceptance of medical intervention for their sons with ADHD. Her historical analysis of the ADHD literature and her own immersion in the field through participant observation in a clinical setting and teaching at a primary school, sensitised her (theoretical sensitivity) to a number of issues relating to the study of ADHD (Singh, 2003). For instance, she observed that in the clinic setting fathers tended to be less involved in issues relating to their child's (mainly sons') diagnosis and management of ADHD. She also found that articles that referred to 'parents' and 'children' in relation to ADHD very often meant mothers and sons. As such, she decided to sample and interview both mothers and fathers about their experiences of being the parent of a child diagnosed with ADHD, and compared their experiences throughout her analysis (Singh, 2003; 2004). She sampled one group of parents from a clinical setting and another set of parents outside the clinic from relevant support networks, mailing lists and educational conferences. In initial interviews, Singh asked mothers and fathers to respond to an open-ended question: 'How do you think and feel about Ritalin (or other psychostimulant) treatment?' (2004: 1195). She used a 'picture-oriented interviewing' method where parents were asked to spend up to 30 minutes leafing through a series of magazines before the interview, selecting up to ten pictures they felt captured or could help them express how they thought and felt about psychostimulant treatment for ADHD. Parent interviews were then organised around the pictures, with parents leading the discussion and illustrating their views and experiences through the pictures. As Singh (2003) continued her interviewing and the simultaneous analysis of her interviews, she started to concentrate 'on exploring representative concepts and emerging hypotheses' (2003: 311). Her initial 'open coding' was conducted as a group activity with 'a small community of coders work[ing] together to explore key themes and categories in the data' (2003: 310). Early interviews with mothers suggested that they spoke about their experiences of parenting a child with ADHD through

what Singh (2003: 311) calls a 'transformation narrative' in three acts: before diagnosis, diagnosis and post-diagnosis. Singh began to use the three phases of the narrative as a way of exploring parents' experiences. In comparing mothers' and fathers' responses to the three phases it emerged that fathers' experiences of their sons' behaviour and diagnosis did not conform to the same narrative. This is an important, if preliminary, finding because fathers bring a different perspective to the construction and lived experience of ADHD, which has, by and large, been missing from our understanding of ADHD. Her analysis (Singh, 2004) also explored the meaning and function of mothers' narrative of transformation from the mothers' perspective. Singh argues that biological discourses of ADHD appear on the surface to offer mothers the opportunity to replace 'mother-blame' with 'brain-blame' for ADHD, and thus enable mothers to reposition themselves as 'good mothers'. At the same time, however, Singh shows that the consequences of this transformation narrative are far from simple or as liberating as they appear at first sight. This is especially the case when the medication associated with 'brain-blame' is taken into the picture and mothers can be blamed afresh for 'irresponsible uses of Ritalin' (Singh, 2004: 1203).

Practice

In this section we look at the analytical tools that grounded theory employs and we discuss how to use them.

Pragmatics

Recruitment and sampling

Recruitment in grounded theory is determined by the action or activity that is being researched. In this sense the sample is *purposive*. When sampling purposively, you seek to recruit people to the study who are relevant and involved in the phenomenon being investigated. Samples of *convenience* might also be common (Morse, 2007). When sampling in this way you seek to recruit participants or informants who are more accessible to you than others, or more available to do interviews. It provides a way in which at the beginning of a project, such as in a pilot, you might identify some of the characteristics and scope of the activity you want to research (Morse, 2007: 235). From here you may use a *snowball* sampling method where subsequent, relevant participants are identified for you by initial interviewees.

In grounded theory the sampling process is not demographically representative as it might be in a quantitative study or in some qualitative approaches that require working with homogeneous samples. Representation in grounded theory works in a different way along the lines of relevance and involvement in or knowledge of a

particular activity. This means that when you are recruiting participants to your study they have to have some relationship to the activity you are studying. For instance, if you were interested in researching the ways in which 'giving birth' takes place in contemporary society you might begin by sampling a group of mothers in the first instance as well as a group of relevant professionals (e.g. midwives). Both groups are directly involved with the birthing process. As your research developed it might become relevant to include other groups in the sample (e.g. fathers, or other professionals) in order to test your emerging theories about giving birth in a contemporary western society. Morse (2007: 231) goes further by saying that researchers need to seek out 'excellent' informants who have been through, or observed, the activity under investigation, and who are reflective and articulate enough to be able to recount that experience to you in detailed and nuanced terms. For instance, in the previous example this might involve talking to midwives with a number of years of experience and mothers who have had more than one baby. While this is sound advice that will save you considerable time in terms of creating a detailed and in-depth picture of the context and the actions you are studying, it is also an exclusionary sampling strategy that marginalises less articulate experiences and less expert experiences that nonetheless form part of the fabric of the field of action (e.g. first-time mothers or less experienced midwives). You might want to think about talking to more experienced informants as part of the pilot stages of your research, who have been through various permutations of the activity you are studying, before expanding your sample to include a broader range of relevant informants.

Example from using grounded theory to study psychotherapy and the experiences of being in therapy

Dilks, Tasker and Wren (2010) studied individuals' subjective experiences of psychosis and the role of therapy in that experience. They began their study using tape-recorded therapy sessions and interviews with clinical psychologists and their clients. Their analysis of this material suggested that the client's ability to 'function in the social world' was an important aspect of clinician–client encounters and constituted therapy goals for both clinicians and clients. The authors wanted to test this emerging theory and, as such, went on to collect published personal accounts of the experience of psychosis. The analysis of these accounts helped them to refine their initial theory. The published version of their theory suggests that functioning in the social world was achieved by clients through a range of strategies ('doing recovery', 'negotiating selfhood', 'making sense' and 'balancing act'), which in turn helped them to manage the impact of psychosis so that they could function in the social world.

Example

The sampling approach that is most associated with grounded theory is that of *theoretical sampling*. This means that sampling strategies are developed as analysis takes place. As categories emerge or are constructed through the analysis of your material and you begin to develop a grounded theory of the activity you are studying, you may find gaps or anomalies in the story emerging from your analysis. Theoretical sampling refers to further sampling of participants or events based on the categories that you are working with. It also refers to testing your theory with negative cases. Negative cases are participants or situations that present a challenge to the theory that you are developing. They are the cases that do not fit the theory. Such cases should be engaged with in terms of what they teach you about the theory that you are putting forward.

Eliciting and gathering data

Participant observation and fieldnotes

In the previous section, ethnography was presented as an approach to data collection derived from the symbolic interactionist legacy of grounded theory. Participant observation was discussed as the particular research strategy to be used. In this section we look at some of the practicalities of doing participant observation and practical advice about how participant observation can be documented by the researcher.

As noted previously, participant observation is the time the researcher spends in the field living alongside the people they are doing research with. It can take a number of forms, ranging from the more detached and observational to the more involved and participatory. The degree of your involvement in the field might depend on what you are interested in. For instance if you wanted to observe children's interactions during breaks at school you might decide that the best way to do this would be to sit at the edge of the playground and observe the children from a distance. You could, however, imagine a situation where, as part of your research, you work in a school as a teaching assistant for two days a week. In that case you might decide to organise games for the children and reflect on how they engage with the game and each other. In any piece of fieldwork, levels of participation and observation will often vary depending on what is happening in the context. Sometimes it is helpful and possible to acquire or create a role in the context of study (e.g. by becoming a volunteer teaching assistant). Performing some aspect of the activities that others do, or closely shadowing their activities, gives the researcher some first-hand experience (albeit perhaps superficial, depending on duration of involvement) of the processes they are studying. Sometimes, however, such a strategy is neither feasible nor desirable, especially if it places an undue burden on those in that context (by imposing additional training or supervision needs).

The written record of time spent in the field is compiled into a set of what are called fieldnotes. These are 'accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995: 5). There is no prescribed way of taking fieldnotes;

both formal and anecdotal advice varies. I have found Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's (1995) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* a very useful and accessible guide. These authors write about fieldwork from a symbolic interactionist perspective and their analytical strategies draw on grounded theory. In their book they outline two main strategies for taking fieldnotes. The first strategy 'values relating naturally to those encountered in the field' (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 17) and advises the researcher to immerse themselves fully in the experience of local activity and worry about writing down fieldnotes later. The second strategy requires the field worker to prioritise the writing activity by selecting events that they think should be recorded, and to simultaneously witness and record these events. It is often the case that field workers use a bit of each strategy (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 18), with some written notes being taken in the field alongside a number of 'mental notes' (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 19) – mental bullet points intended to help the researcher remember important conversations or sequences of events. In my own experience I have often made notes or bullet points about my day in the field (about people, conversations, events and activities) on trains and buses while returning home or to the office. My more extensive, and more narrative descriptions and reflections, based on these notes, are written and typed up the following day.

Formal and informal interviewing

Grounded theory uses open-ended questions that will allow someone to describe an experience, an action or a process. Formal interviewing tends to follow some process or degree of structuring. Semi-structured interviews will have a range of questions and prompts that you as the interviewer prepare before the interview. In formal interviewing a lot of the work takes place beforehand in terms of thinking exactly what you want to ask people and preparing your topic guide. During this time you might find it useful to test questions out on friends and colleagues to make sure that the questions you are considering asking are as unambiguous as possible and that they elicit the type of response you are looking for. For instance, this might be about making sure that questions are written in such a way as to enable your interviewee to talk about an action or a process instead of merely giving an opinion about it. I tend to think in terms of 'how' or 'what happens' to help me formulate appropriate questions. I also try to make my questions initially quite broad so as to allow my interviewee to respond to them in ways that are meaningful to them. For instance, if I am doing research on people's experiences of a particular public service I would not ask them what they thought about the service ('Can you tell me what you think about Service X?') but instead I might begin by asking what brought them to the service in the first place ('Can you tell me what were the circumstances that led you to make contact with Service X?' or 'Can you tell me a bit about your involvement with Service X?'). These are quite broad opening questions that are asking for a story or experience in response ('I first heard about Service X when …').

During the interview you need to concentrate on what people are telling you and especially how what they are telling you relates to (inter)actions, activities, events or processes. Interviewees will often repeatedly return to the main ideas of

what they want to convey to you. It is important to pick up on these ideas and explore them with the interviewee, and not just dismiss them as being 'off topic' because they are not covered in your initial topic guide. Remember, in this style of interviewing everything that the interviewee says (and sometimes what they choose not to say) is potentially relevant and important to informing your study. Charmaz (2001) also advises that researchers pay attention to pauses, 'ums' and 'you knows', as the struggle to find the words to express something can indicate a taken-for-granted meaning (Charmaz, 2001) or shared knowledge assumption. You also need to pay attention to the absence of talk about (inter)actions, activities, events or processes, and try to elicit such talk or at least find out why no reference is being made to such areas. Formal interviews are usually audio recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Sometimes interviewees are not happy to be recorded and the researcher might have to rely on their notes and/or memory with regard to key issues and themes from the interview.

Informal interviews can often occur spontaneously. For instance, while conducting participant observation, someone from the community or organisation might speak to you about your research and the exchange turns into an informal interview; it might be an exchange that starts off as more of a conversation but turns into an interview. These moments give you the opportunity to ask questions relating to your research and to find out more about people's experiences and the actions and interactions involved in a more natural way. A word of caution though: it also means that you may sometimes be caught off guard without the necessary preparation that you might have done. Or you will need to rely on your memory much more in terms of the sorts of questions that you want to ask. You should know your research topic well in terms of the research focus and what it is that that interests you. This interest should guide your questions. Once again your questions here should be invitations to explain, expand and above all recount actions, as opposed to opinions about actions.

Useful phrases for asking people to expand on meaning, and focus on actions and activities

'Tell me about …'
'How …'
'What happened …'
'Can you give me an example …'
'Could you describe that further …'
'What exactly do you mean when you say …'
'What does that look like in practice …'
'What would I need to know and do to participate …'
'How is that different to previous times …'
'How does that compare with …'

Useful Phrases

It is possible to record or take notes in informal interviews if you carry a recording device or notepad with you all the time during the research, and providing the person you are talking to gives their permission. However, you would need to consider what it might do to the quality of the interaction if you take out a notebook or recorder. Instead, and where for whatever reason recording devices are not available, you will need to follow the same advice given above for recording ethnographic fieldnotes.

Documents, archives

Document research covers a range of areas including archives and historical documents, government documents, internal documents in a service or organisation, and letters. One of the founding studies of attitude research (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927; 1996) was based on people's personal letters. More contemporary equivalents could include email correspondence and blogs as well as online documents. Relevant documents will need to be located. Many archival and historical documents require the researcher to physically visit an institution where the document is stored. If you are using such material as part of your grounded theory study then you will need to factor in the time that you will need in order to visit the institution, access and study the document, especially when copying is not permitted.

Analysis and interpretation

Constant comparison, abduction and reflexivity

As noted in the section on epistemology, the processes of constant comparison, abduction and reflexivity are the main ways in which knowledge is created in grounded theory. It is expected that while coding and categorising, as well as in the later stages of theoretical coding and sorting, you will be continuously comparing your codes, categories and memos in order to refine your selections and interpretations. Comparison involves looking at the similarities and differences in selection in order to make sure that the data instances coded and the codes categorised merit the labels that they are given, and that codes and categories are distinct enough from one another. It is also expected that you will be practising your abductive reasoning skills by cultivating 'an *attitude* of preparedness to abandon old convictions and to seek new ones' (Reichertz, 2007: 221). Finally, think about the role of reflexivity, a questioning stance to your own assumptions as well as openness to using the experiences of practice to shape your research, in guiding your analysis.

Coding and categorising

Coding is the first step of the analytic process in grounded theory. It involves labelling your research materials with smaller, meaningful units of text (a word, a phrase). The resulting labels are often referred to as codes. There are two types of coding in grounded theory: substantive coding and theoretical coding (Holton, 2007). We will return to theoretical coding after we discuss substantive coding in this section and memo writing in the next.

Substantive coding is bottom-up coding that follows the logic of the text and takes its labelling cues from the text. It is referred to as 'open coding', which can

either be a line-by-line examination of the text or a distillation of key ideas that emerge through the text (Stern, 2007: 118). In substantive coding it is helpful to keep codes in the language or meaning of the person speaking or the context being researched.

Example of coded text

T he following extract has been taken from the evaluation of a youth inclusion programme (Humphreys, Nolas & Olmos, 2006). This was a participatory evaluation where young people created audiovisual stories about their views and experiences of their areas and of the youth inclusion programme they were participating in. Young people were asked about their areas, positive and negative aspects of their areas, what they would change and what their hopes were for the future, and how they had found the youth inclusion programme.

Transcript	Codes
Young person: … the positive things about my area is that when you know lot of people that you can get on with everyone, a lot of people know … this is small area where every one knows every one, so it's a friendly place.	Knowing a lot of people Getting on with everyone Small area, everyone knows everyone 'A friendly place'
The negative things about my area is that there is different groups so say that someone new who was actually moving to the area they might find it hard to like fit in because they might not know a lot of people …	Different group, would be hard to fit in as a newcomer
One benefit of, about my area is the gym because gym is the place you can come, like young people will come on Saturdays and it's for cheap, it's not expensive so a lot of people can come and like just work out and get fit, like in a fun way because all your friends will come and join here, you just work out together.	Gym is a good thing You can be calm there Its cheap Everyone goes there Do things together
If I had power to change certain things about my area the things I would change would probably be like, like some centre, youth centre, like where every one knows about it, its not just certain people, where like it is well known where young people can come like at different times, and do different activities so that everyone feel welcome, like you would come and do different activities. Like it would bring people off the street like young people off the street so that they don't feel like they have to go and do crime so that you know, they can feel better about themselves …	A youth centre that everyone knows Where everyone feels welcome Bring young people off the streets Getting involved in crime to feel good about oneself

Example

For instance, imagine you were evaluating a youth inclusion programme and the young people taking part on the programme spoke about having 'nothing to do' and 'nowhere to go'.[1] In initial coding of their transcripts you might use both these phrases as codes to indicate each instance when those words are mentioned. Not all your young people will talk about those experiences in the same way, however. Imagining that they talk about 'the youth centre closing down' or 'we are not allowed to hang out in that park' you might create the following codes, respectively: 'youth centre closed down' and 'hanging out in park not allowed'. You have now coded all your transcripts and you realise that a number of these codes are very similar in expressing a similar experience. Borrowing the label from your code you might decide to create the category 'nothing to do' as a key category in the analysis. All your codes then begin to represent instances or examples of 'nothing to do'. By examining all your codes under the category of 'nothing to do' you can begin to explore the particular circumstances in which young people have nothing to do (e.g. after school, in public spaces). This is the first phase of your analysis. It is a process of creating initial codes and then moving from codes to categories. The latter part of this process is one of abstraction, going from more detailed, local and descriptive information, to more abstract, theoretical categorisation. What you will find is that while you are coding and then categorising, a number of ideas or theoretical concepts will come to mind. It is important that you do two things at this stage. First, do not impose these concepts on the data at this stage. Instead, and this is the second thing to do, write them down on a separate piece of paper, remembering to link the code to the note (so you can cross-reference later). This latter process is very important and is called memo writing. We turn to it next.

Memo writing

Writing memos is the fundamental process in which the researcher engages analytically with their data (or artefacts) (Lempert, 2007). Memo writing takes place throughout the research process. It is a way of capturing ideas, interpretations, hunches or analytical responses that you as a researcher have to your data. Memos are fragments of nascent theory, a bridge and footpath between the detail of the data and the abstractions of theory. Lempert (2007: 246) defines the research practice of 'memoing' as 'the dynamic, intellectually energizing process that captures ideas in synergistic engagement with one another and, through naming, explicating, and synthesizing them, ultimately renders them accessible to wider audiences'. Initial memoing might be quite tentative and uncertain without much coherence or connection between memos (Lempert, 2007: 247). Lempert suggests that memos can take many forms including jotted notes, diagrams, drawings or whatever form of expression the researcher has used in order to engage with their data.

An example of this from my own analysis was when I was analysing 'What happens when we say that we are doing participation?' My analysis was based on the next phase of evaluating the youth inclusion programme mentioned in the previous section. Young people in the programme I was involved in evaluating were predominantly boys, and the staff I was meeting appeared to have much expertise

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1 The example used throughout this section is based on the work of Humphreys, Nolas and Olmos (2006).

of working with boys. Their comments about girls' activities suggested that they were more comfortable working with boys because they knew how to engage the boys. I also experienced project workers in one project being much more judgemental and critical of the views and experiences expressed by the few young women participating in our evaluation activities, than the views and experiences of the young men in the group. I began to think about what this meant for a programme for *youth* that aimed to be *inclusive*. Who were the 'young people' the programme referred to? Who was being included? My memoing process involved jotting notes (single words and phrases) on to a piece of A4 paper, trying to literary draw the problem. I then started to think about, and created a new memo about, the relationship between girls and boys, inclusion and exclusion. The memoing process helped me to begin to think about these categories dialectically and I began to develop the theory that the 'youth' in youth inclusion tended to signify boys and that inclusion was then related to engaging boys. In mixed groups the inclusion of one group (boys) had, as I had experienced and the programme early monitoring figures suggested, the unintended consequence of sometimes excluding girls from the programme.

Example of memo writing

The following memos were generated while analysing the fieldnotes from a visit to a local youth inclusion project. The fieldnotes documented the discussion with those involved in managing and delivering the youth inclusion programme locally.

1. The 'problems' here are discussed from the perspective of the managers/youth workers — 'bouts of antisocial behaviour' and 'criminal families', ex-traveller families living there and the need to break cultural stereotypes around traveller families.
2. Within the discussion and discourse around the problems of the area, 'solutions' are weaved in – so, the discussion might start by saying what the issues are and then it will follow by saying what actions have been taken locally in order to deal with the problems. So, for example, the young mothers on the estate initiated a public meeting that generated some hostility and in particular anger towards the police because of lack of response on the police's side to neighbours' complaints of nuisance behaviour on the estate [this is interesting, I know from my own experience of noisy and disruptive neighbours that the police cannot really intervene and that it's the council that deals with this, e.g. a phone number that can be called for noise at antisocial hours, a diary that needs to be kept before action can be taken – collecting an evidence base that will justify action]; since the meeting, some of the 'notorious

Example

> families' have moved away and so the problem seems to have subsided …
>
> **3.** I need to think about what it means that the discourses of problem and solutions are intertwined – is this done to demonstrate to us outsiders that things are being dealt with locally? That we want to preserve our identity for outsiders? For example, one of the managers uses the metaphor of things bubbling under the surface [of the calm sea], he tells us that on the outside the area looks 'quaint' but that there is an undercurrent of problems (such as older people feeling vulnerable in their homes). Or, for example, when I was talking to Mary (pseudonym) and asked her about the demographics of the area she avoided answering my question both in terms of age and race. From the conversations of the day it seems like a family area; we were told that there is a large cohort of young people; family and young people seem to be categories that neutralise any potential racial tension that could be said to exist in the area given the fascist graffiti on the vandalised house.

Theoretical coding and sorting

You now have your codes, categories and memos. In the next phase of the analysis you are performing three overlapping analytical tasks. The first task is theoretical coding: 'theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory' (Holton, 2007: 283). The aim here is to look for latent integrative patterns in your research material and analysis that can in turn be used to propose theories of social behaviour (Glaser, 2005, cited in Holton, 2007: 283). In other words the relationships and associations in your research material will not be initially obvious but implied in the action and interactions being researched and your role, through the analysis, will be to make the tacit pattern explicit. Holton (2007: 283) suggests that reading widely can help to recognise patterns and make the researcher more open to 'serendipitous discovery of new theoretical codes' as you take inspiration from theoretical languages in other disciplines. The second task is sorting. Sorting is the 'physical display of [the analyst's] thought processes' (Stern, 2007: 120). It involves writing out all of your memos and displaying them on a large surface (a table or the floor) and sorting through them, grouping them, categorising them, telling a story with the memos, until 'the appearance of theory begins to take shape' (Stern, 2007: 120). It is a key process in developing your theory by helping to develop the initial scaffolding of that theory (Holton, 2007: 283).

In my own research (Nolas, 2007) I found that project workers told a number of different stories about the young people they worked with. In my substantive coding I analysed these stories for their content, what the stories were about. My theoretical

coding of the stories concentrated on the intended purpose of telling these stories. The theoretical coding suggested that the stories served a communicative function in which stories were used to open new spaces and preserve old spaces for youth inclusion to take place.

Using the literature

The role of existing literature in grounded theory is much contested (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 19). Strictly speaking, grounded theory calls for the researcher to enter the field without any preconceived ideas and allow theory to emerge. However, it has been argued (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) that this suggests a decontextualised view of research, almost as if the researcher emerges from a vacuum to collect their data and then returns to that vacuum in order to analyse it. Furthermore, and especially where it is necessary to write proposals, you will need to review some literature to situate your research topic. As Stern (2007: 123) says, 'in order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, I need to understand it'. Being familiar with the literature is also useful in order to avoid situations in which what you think is a finding turns out to be known already in the field. As such, an initial review of the literature on the topic that you are researching can usefully orientate your research strategy by indicating what is already known and has been extensively researched, versus areas where gaps exist.

   In my project (Nolas, 2007), in the initial stages of the research I carried out an extensive review of social psychological approaches to participation and working with communities. A lot of the literature in this area involves working with adults in the context of health. At the time, and within social psychology, there was comparatively much less written on the social psychology of participation with children and young people, and working with young people in community contexts, and especially in the more nebulous area of 'social exclusion' (for an exception see Bostock & Freeman, 2003). Having conducted my analysis I found that a key characteristic of the youth inclusion programme was its relationship to older notions within youth work. At that point I returned to the literature and began to look for research on youth work, social exclusion and youth inclusion, in order to compare my analysis to existing knowledge and refine my emergent theory.

Presenting the research

In a very early, and often forgotten, social psychological study of community resilience in which combined social action with the ethnographic (or 'sociographic' as the authors referred to it) study of that action, Marie Jahoda (Jahoda *et al.*, 1972: 98) wrote about the need to put 'before the reader a living picture of some of these people with whom we have had such close contact for a few months'. I have always found this metaphor very compelling. It also indicates that writing is an important part of the research and, in fact, analysis continues to take place through writing (Wuest, 2006, cited in Stern, 2007: 121). This also means that the researcher needs to be something of a storyteller (Stern, 2007: 122) in conveying the research journey

and its outcomes to a reader. But grounded theory is not about storytelling, it is about theory development. In this respect you might find Wuest's (2006, cited in Stern, 2007: 122) interpretation of Glaser (1978) helpful. Glaser (1978) argues that grounded theorists should write about theory and not people. Wuest (2006) achieves this by first writing about her concepts, then providing the supporting data and, finally, drawing on relevant literature (Stern, 2007: 122).

Susan Leigh Star (2007: 76) has argued that grounded theory provides a way of looking at the world that simultaneously incorporates formal and informal understandings of it. While not aware of Star's work at the time, my motivation for adopting a grounded theory approach to looking at change work was similar (Nolas, 2009). The specific change strategy that I was looking at was participation. Participation refers to a way of working that strives to include people in the decision-making processes that are relevant to them and to empower people to take decisions on issues that affect them. I wanted to explore the gap between formal and informal ways of talking about participation – in other words, the differences between professional/scientific ways of understanding participation and the everyday experience of participation. My own experience pointed me towards a gap between the formal and the informal, and the increased publication of reflective pieces that contemplated the messiness of participation suggested that others had had similar experiences. Participation looked at as a way of working with people, a strategy for change, presents us with a field of action and interaction. As such, I began to look for appropriate social psychological theories for studying action and interaction. This led me to the literature on symbolic interactionism and to a version of the ethnographic tradition heavily inspired by grounded theory (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Symbolic interactionism, ethnography and grounded theory were especially useful for studying 'what happens when we say we are working in a participatory way'. I was attracted to symbolic interactionism's 'theoretical self-silencing' (Rock, 2001: 27), which is also a prominent feature of grounded theory. The study of participation is theoretically laden and ideologically loaded (in many cases for very good reasons – see Freire, 1970; 1994) making it sometimes difficult to disentangle the possibilities and limitations, and to produce theoretically nuanced and practically sensitive conceptual articulations about the process itself. The grounded theory approach provided an opportunity to conduct a study that focused on action and interaction in the field, and on emergent categories, as opposed to imposing theoretical frameworks of participation onto the field. My case study of a youth inclusion programme presented me with two fields of action in

Reflection on Practice

which to explore these ideas. The first was that of the programme of youth inclusion, which drew on ideas of participation such as empowerment and the need to build relationships with young people in order to bring about change. The second field was that of programme evaluation, especially the evaluation of young people's views, which was explicitly designed using ideas of participatory action research and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). My theoretical sensitivity on the topic was developed through previous experience of action research and prior training in social psychological approaches to public health and community development. During the fieldwork I persistently looked for negative cases to challenge the dominant understanding of participation as necessarily empowering for targeted groups. It was through working with negative cases that I discovered the gendered dimensions of participation in this particular programme (see page 34 and the text on memoing). Looking for negative cases also meant that when young people spoke about and demonstrated change, or new awareness, these instances presented themselves as genuine moments of surprise as opposed to being expected. I also used comparisons in my interviewing, asking youth workers and other project workers how current experiences of working with young people compared to past experiences or other contexts they had worked in. I also compared the experiences of the different local youth inclusion groups, and compared their experiences with policy and media discussions of young people, in order to understand the meaning and practice of what was being called 'youth inclusion'.

Common uses and applications

Grounded theory, as a research design and analytical tool, has been used in a range of psychological research as well as in related disciplines. It is has proved particularly useful in applied settings such as nursing, social work, counselling and psychotherapy. Because the study of action and interaction is at its core, when grounded theory is used as an 'entire package', it is most often used as a way of understanding practice. Susan Leigh Star (2007: 76), for instance, whose work looked at classification systems and how they impact on professional and daily life, adopted a grounded theory approach to her work because she was 'looking for a way simultaneously to incorporate formal and informal understandings of the world'. In my own work the approach lent itself well to exploring the gap between formal and informal ways of talking about one particular change strategy used in community work, namely participation. The grounded theory approach allowed me to answer the question: 'What happens when we say we are working in a participatory way?'

Glaser and Strauss's (1965) work has become the inspiration behind the widespread adoption of grounded theory in clinical settings. Their study explored

how a social issue impacted on professional practice in a clinical setting. The social issue they identified was the lack of public discussion around death and the process of dying. They also observed that this lack of public discussion was present in the very context it was most relevant to: the medical context of palliative care. Professionals' behaviour in that context also exhibited the same moral attitude implied by the lack of public discourse on dying (that it is better to live than to die, unless someone is in extreme pain). Glaser and Strauss (1965: 7) reasoned that, as more and more Americans were beginning to die in hospital as opposed to dying at home, the problem of 'awareness of dying' would become increasingly salient for all those involved. As such, they set out to explore what happened around terminally ill patients in American hospitals. In looking at the kinds of interactions between dying patients and hospital staff, the sorts of tactics used by staff to engage with patients and the different conditions under which interaction took place, Glaser and Strauss found that 'awareness' was a pivotal explanatory concept that explained interactions and tactics under different conditions.

Grounded theory becomes useful for studying practice because, as Star (2007: 79) puts it, it makes invisible work visible. It helps to surface the tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of practical work by asking questions about what people are doing and trying to accomplish, how exactly they are going about the 'doing', and how

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An example of using the grounded theory to study chronic illness

Cathy Charmaz's seminal work looks at ways in which people with chronic illness manage their illness and construct their sense of self. In her own words, her study consists of studying 'the private face of a public problem – what illness and disability mean to people who have them' (Charmaz, 1991: 4). The study is based on 170 interviews with 90 participants over a period of 11 years. Charmaz's doctoral work developed from the experience of working as an occupational therapist. During this time she found that much of her work, rather than delivering on the rhetoric of rehabilitation about maximising human potential, focused instead on supporting patients to manage their disabilities on an everyday basis in a way that would enable them to stay at home and avoid being institutionalised (1991: vii). She became fascinated by the way in which people with a chronic illness managed their identity and time in light of their illness. Her study shows that people experience chronic illness in three different ways: as an interruption, an intrusion and/or an immersion. Each of these experiences has consequences for how people define themselves and manage living with their illness. Chronic illness also affects people's experience of time, as their illness often determines how they go about their daily activities.

Example

people understand what is going on (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). In this respect, grounded theory is also commonly used with action research approaches, a common participatory change practice with roots in the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin. It has been argued that theory *building* is one of the biggest challenges for action research (Huxman, 2003: 243, cited in Dick, 2007: 402). At the same time, both action research and grounded theory concentrate on the 'emergence' of theory from the bottom up. In this respect Dick suggests that action research can strengthen its theory-building potential by borrowing the language and analytical practices of grounded theory. This is an example of using grounded theory as an analytical tool that brings rigour to and systematises analysis. Similar uses of grounded theory can be found in qualitative research (see Dilks *et al.*, 2010) also for the purpose of organising the research.

An example of combining grounded theory and participatory action research to inform professional practice

Eli Teram and colleagues (Teram, Schachter & Stalker, 2005) used grounded theory and participatory action research to explore the experiences of female survivors of childhood sexual abuse and to create a handbook for physical therapists that would enable them to develop sensitive practice for working with this population. Their study developed in response to evidence about the health problems experienced by survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and their own experiences of working with survivors as physiotherapists and social workers. They faced the challenge of producing usable knowledge in an unexplored area. Grounded theory, as we have seen in this chapter, is an appropriate methodology for developing a conceptual under-standing of a phenomenon where little prior knowledge exists. The primary aim of action research, on the other hand, is to put such knowledge to use (Reason & Riley, 2008). The study involved inter-viewing 27 Canadian women survivors of childhood sexual abuse who had either received physiotherapy or were considering physiotherapy. The three authors analysed the data independently and then shared their analysis with the participants. The authors and the women then met on a monthly basis for a period of six months in order to turn their analysis into practical suggestions and guidelines for sensitive practice (Teram *et al.*, 2005: 1133–1134). The final output of the project was a handbook on sensitive practice for health professionals.

Example

Another use of grounded theory is in research on lived experience in domains that have come to be dominated by 'expert knowledge', such as science and technology, engineering, and medical and other clinical sciences. The orientation of grounded theory in privileging emergent theory, as opposed to existing theory, as well as its symbolic interactionist roots, makes the approach suitable for exploring the everyday lived experience and capturing both the construction of expert views as well as how expertise is experienced and the impact it has on ordinary people's everyday life. For example, Ilana Singh's work (2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004; 2005) on mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenting a child with ADHD, and now also including children's experiences of ADHD (http://www.adhdvoices.com/), took a grounded theory approach (see the Research Example box on page 25 for more details). Similarly, Dilks *et al.*'s (2010) work looks at how individuals with psychosis and therapists co-construct the role and purpose of therapy. They use grounded theory as a way of bringing rigour to their analysis as well as a way of capturing experiences of therapy from different perspectives.

CASE STUDY

The press in your country does not often carry very positive stories about young people. Most of the stories that appear in the press are about young people getting into trouble with the law, disrupting town centres on a Saturday night, and generalised 'bad' behaviour. You would like to find out how widespread this negative view of young people is. You decide to interview members of your local church congregation. You also interview your friends and fellow students from university. Finally, you also decide to interview Saturday shoppers, who you recruit at the local shopping centre. You recruit ten people from each group and conduct 60–90-minute interviews with each person, which you later transcribe. You analyse the material using the grounded theory method. You find that each group holds the following views of young people. Those in the church congregation speak well of young relatives but have an ambivalent view towards young people to whom they are not related. The student and peer group have favourable views of those in their networks, but suggest that not all young people are like them. Your Saturday shoppers have a broad range of views about young people and talk a lot about public spaces for young people.

1. How is grounded theory being used here?
2. Given the emerging findings from the church congregation group and the student peer group, what seems to be presenting itself as a key category and potential nascent theory?
3. What do you make of the findings from the Saturday shoppers group? How do they relate to the other two groups?

▶

  4. Given these initial findings, and following grounded theory principles of
  theoretical sampling, what would you do next?

  5. What are the similarities between the case study (in terms of impetus for
  the study/initial observations) and Glaser and Strauss's (1967) study
  (described on page 39)?

  6. Glaser and Strauss (1967) started with the observation of a social issue
  (absence of a public discussion about death and dying), and went on to
  understand how this social issue affected professional and patient
  interactions in a context where one might expect discussions of death and
  dying to be the norm. Taking the initial starting point of the above case
  study (negative stories of young people in the media) how might you design
  a grounded theory study that engages with the symbolic interactionist roots
  of grounded theory?

  7. Leaving the above case study as it is, what other methodological approaches
  might it be appropriate to use? (See other chapters in this book for ideas.)

Chapter summary

In this chapter we have focused on the grounded theory approach to qualitative
research in psychology.

  ■ The ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the approach were
    discussed. These were traced to early sociological thinking, the pragmatist
    and the symbolic interactionist tradition. The epistemology of grounded
    theory was described as being composed of three main practices: constant
    comparison, abduction and reflexivity. We saw that grounded theory poses a
    number of ontological and epistemological challenges to conventional
    psychological thinking, especially to those approaches that focus exclusively
    on individuals and ignore group life. Grounded theory's focus is not on
    individuals or psychological states or experiences. Its main unit of analysis is
    action and interaction, especially as that continuously unfolds in and is
    shaped by different social settings. It presents us with a deeply social
    psychological view of the world, and especially one informed by theories of
    society and culture.

  ■ The chapter then focused on the methodological tools used in a grounded
    theory approach. We saw that grounded theory relies on a number of
    research methods, such as fieldwork and participant observation, and their
    recording, as well as interviews, focus groups and archival documentation. It
    was noted that such approaches have much more in common with
    sociological and anthropological approaches to research that will perhaps be
    familiar to the psychological researcher (with the exception of those

researchers working in critical traditions). As such, doing grounded theory requires a fundamental shift in perspective from focusing on entities to looking at processes, and from what people say to what people do together. It also reintroduces context into psychological analysis, both in its ontological as well as epistemological orientation.

■ The chapter looked at a number of practical examples where grounded theory has been applied. It was noted that the approach has been used in a number of applied research settings. It offers a system for studying the formal and informal dimensions of an activity and so is often used in the study of professional practices. The tendency of the approach to privilege emergent theory has also led to its use in the domains where lived experience has come to be dominated by 'expert knowledge'. In these contexts grounded theory creates space for engaging with non-expert views and experiences.

Problem-based questions

1. Everything is data but data isn't everything. What does that mean exactly, with reference to the grounded theory approach?
2. Grounded theory emphasises the study of action and interaction. How might this be relevant to psychology?
3. What would you say is the difference between grounded theory and *a* grounded theory?
4. If one's research does not subscribe to all the historical legacy of the grounded theory approach, can one still be said to be doing grounded theory?

Further reading

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