

Language of research (part 12) — research methodologies: grounded theory

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Substantive theory
- ▶ Grounded theory
- ▶ Interview
- ▶ Qualitative
- ▶ Sociology

In this series we have looked at research terms, such as validity and reliability; research methods, such as interviews; and research methodologies, such as phenomenology and cohort studies. This paper will introduce another qualitative research methodology, which is grounded theory. We will explore what sorts of questions grounded theory can answer and how it is undertaken, and, will look briefly at how the data generated are used to create a theory.

OVERVIEW

Readers may recall that we previously said that all qualitative research methodologies are inductive, where inductive means the research moves from a specific idea to something more general and theoretical (Ellis, 2014). In this sense, researchers set out without an idea about what the research might find and allow the data to lead them towards an understanding of the phenomenon they are researching. This is the main difference between qualitative and quantitative research which usually starts with some idea as to what the research will uncover.

In the practice of grounded theory, inductive reasoning leads researchers to a position where they generate a new, or expand on an existing theory for understanding the social phenomenon under investigation. This is why it is called grounded theory; the data are grounded in what the researcher finds and these findings are used to generate a theory — usually about some social interaction.

Once the theory is developed, its application to social interactions provides a potential understanding of the main social processes that have been derived (grounded) from the data collected.

Grounded theory research is used to generate theories about practice and understanding from many different areas of healthcare, including: how professionals make decisions about wound management (Gillepsie et al, 2014); understanding the experience of pain in people with leg ulcers (Taverner et al, 2014) and understanding how patients and professionals understand the process of post-discharge wound care information giving (Sanger et al, 2016).

Grounded theory as a methodology has its roots in sociology, more specifically symbolic interactionism (a theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between humans and society).

KEY FEATURES

Grounded theory is the most systematic of the qualitative research methodologies; which means that the methods used on grounded theory are more prescribed than in any other qualitative research methodology (Ellis, 2016a). Due to the prescriptive nature of grounded theory, it has proven to be one of the methodologies most widely used by nurse researchers.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, the originators of grounded theory, censured sociological researchers as they applied deductive methodologies (that is methodologies that seek to prove existing hypotheses) instead of using evidence to create new theory (being inductive).

Glaser and Strauss argued that if sociology was to accept a theory might be correct, then the data used to create the theory should come before the theory's generation and not vice versa. In grounded theory, as in social and natural sciences, a theory means something that has more substance than a hunch or speculation.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain a grounded theory as: *“One that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge.”*

The aim of grounded theory is, therefore, the discovery of theoretical explanations for, and about, a particular phenomenon. In grounded theory, meaning comes out from the phenomena being studied, rather than from proving a hypothesis or theory.

SAMPLING IN GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory uses participants who are alike in that they have experience of the social phenomenon that is being studied. In research terminology, the sample is known as homogeneous (all the same) and purposive (people are chosen on purpose because they have experienced the phenomenon under investigation).

That said, the sample needs to be large enough and contain enough slightly different experiences and understandings of the experience for the researcher to be able to draw conclusions about the commonalities of the experience.

As well as being homogenous and purposive, commonly the sample used for a grounded theory study is also a convenience sample. A convenience sample is one that consists of people who are included as they attend a wound care clinic, were operated on in a particular hospital, or are cared for by an individual nurse or doctor.

Once the initial sample has been interviewed, the researcher will analyse the data and the ideas that start to emerge to generate an initial theory, or theories, about the phenomenon under investigation. Using what they find during the initial and subsequent data analyses, the researchers will develop more questions about the phenomenon of interest, which often leads to them recruiting further subjects to the study in order to answer the emerging questions and/or further consolidate the emergent theory. The process of adding to the sample in order to help answer emerging questions is called theoretical (or sometimes handy) sampling and is more or less confined to grounded theory studies.

GROUNDED THEORY METHODS

Interviews are the most common method of data collection in grounded theory because, as we have seen in previous papers (Ellis, 2016b), it is only by employing interview techniques that the researcher can get to the core of the participant’s interpretation of a phenomenon.

Grounded theory interviews are usually in-depth and unstructured or semi-structured. The loose structures, allow the interviewer to probe and question the account of the participant instead

of taking the interviewee down a path of set or structured questioning that may ultimately be meaningless to the interviewee (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014).

As well as data collection via interviews, grounded theorists may also collect data in the form of case studies, documentary evidence and via participant observation. These additional methods are used to help verify any emerging theory.

Grounded theory research methods are quite structured and, unlike most qualitative methods, fairly prescribed. With grounded theory methods being as they are, it is hard to see any separation between the process of data collection and that of data analysis; as you will recall, this is because it is what the researcher starts to find that determines how many more interviews are conducted and, therefore, how long the data collection phase of the study continues.

While generating the new theory, it is important, as in all qualitative research, that the researcher remains reflexive at all times (Engward and Davis, 2015). Reflexivity requires researchers to be clear and honest about any preconceptions, thoughts and ideas they may have come into the study with. This allows the reader to understand how the researcher might have arrived at a certain hypothesis.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the nature of grounded theory research and established it to be the most structured approach to undertaking qualitative research. We have seen that grounded theory is used to develop an understanding about a social phenomenon, a theory, from the bottom up, in a grounded way, as opposed to trying to prove an idea already in existence. One of the strengths of grounded theory research is that the theory that emerges is open to testing by quantitative methods (hypothesis testing) and so often forms the starting point for a more wide-ranging suite of research investigations.

Later in the series, we will examine some of the ways in which qualitative research data is analysed, including the specific approaches used in grounded theory studies.

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