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The development of theoretical sampling in practice

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 August 2017

Received in revised form 5 December 2017

Accepted 16 January 2018

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Data collection
Grounded theory
Sampling
Theoretical sampling

ABSTRACT

Problem: Theoretical sampling is a key research process within grounded theory. However, whilst methodological texts provide a definition, it is difficult to find examples of how theoretical sampling is undertaken as a study develops. The lack of clear exemplars has caused confusion amongst researchers, with many grounded theory studies providing no evidence of theoretical sampling.

Aim: This paper aims to demonstrate the theoretical sampling process as a grounded theory study progresses.

Methods: A constructivist grounded theory study of bereaved parents' experiences when their child dies in intensive care is used to illustrate the processes of theoretical sampling. Twenty-six bereaved parents participated in semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews. Data were analysed using constant comparative methods and theoretical memoing, with a theory developed that explained the changing nature of the parent-healthcare provider relationship when a child dies in intensive care.

Findings: In this study, theoretical sampling necessitated the use of three different data collection techniques: Seeking new data collection sites, adding new interview questions, and sampling for specific participant characteristics. Each technique is discussed in detail and linked to the category and theory development in the exemplar study.

Discussion: Though there are limitations to describing theoretical sampling processes on paper, clearly documented accounts can help novice researchers become familiar with the techniques involved and appreciate the benefits they bring to overall theory development.

Conclusion: By providing a clear example of theoretical sampling linked to category and theory development, this paper has demonstrated the real world application of theoretical sampling in practice.

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Problem

Despite it being fundamental to grounded theory, there are few clear examples of how to undertake theoretical sampling.

What is already known about this topic

Theoretical sampling is a key process in grounded theory studies, where developing categories and concepts guide future data collection.

What this paper adds

This paper provides a clear example of three approaches to data collection which were used during theoretical sampling in a single

grounded theory study, and links sampling decisions to category and theory development.

1. Introduction

Theoretical sampling is a core process of grounded theory. This method of sampling relies on the developing concepts in data collection and analysis to guide where, how, and from whom further data should be collected to develop a theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, whilst theoretical sampling is discussed in the methodological literature, it is almost exclusively described from a theoretical viewpoint. Real-world examples of how to undertake it within a research study are rarely provided; within research reports, the practical processes surrounding theoretical sampling are seldom explicated or are not well described (McCrae & Purssell, 2016; Morse, 2008). Often, studies that claim to follow grounded theory make no mention of theoretical sampling or, if it is mentioned, provide no evidence of how it was used (McCrae & Purssell, 2016). In some cases, sampling

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decisions appear to be based solely on purposive techniques, with the only sample information provided being demographic in nature (Draucker, Martsof, Ross, & Rusk, 2007; McCrae & Purssell, 2016; Morse, 2008). Other studies claiming to use theoretical sampling provide vague, ambiguous descriptions of what was done; authors often fail to link theoretical sampling to the stages of their theory development or do not explain *why* their participants or new questions were chosen (Draucker et al., 2007; Morse, 2008). There are only very limited examples of methodologically sound theoretical sampling in published literature, resulting in inconsistency and uncertainty around undertaking and applying the process in practice. The lack of exemplars in research reports can make it difficult for new grounded theorists to successfully comprehend and implement theoretical sampling processes into their own studies (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009), further compounding the problem.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the use of theoretical sampling in real-world research practice. We utilise an exemplar study to demonstrate an example of how theoretical sampling can be undertaken as a constructivist grounded theory study progresses, illuminating the process for novice researchers. Three different sampling decisions, including adding new data collection sites, asking new interview questions, and seeking new participant characteristics, will be explored and linked to category development across the progression of the study, to demonstrate multiple approaches to theoretical sampling.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introducing grounded theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to inductively develop a theory that is 'grounded' in the data itself (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory specifically focuses on exploring human behaviour and interaction within social contexts, with the overall aim of developing a theory to explain and predict what is occurring in the data (Engward, 2013; Meston & Ng, 2012). The theory is 'grounded' in the data itself; that is, it is developed directly from the participants' experiences, rather than from pre-established theoretical or social frameworks or preconceived ideas (Engward, 2013; Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009; Meston & Ng, 2012). Developed in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory has since undergone many epistemological changes and now exists as 3 main branches: Glaserian (often also called traditional grounded theory), which follows a largely positivist stance (Hall, Griffiths, & McKenna, 2013; Morse et al., 2016); Straussian, which is largely post-positivist and relativist (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009); and Constructivist, adopting a relativist and subjectivist viewpoint (Charmaz, 2014; Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Despite many differences between the various branches, all grounded theory studies share some common processes for data collection and analysis, including theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2017)

2.2. Theoretical sampling in constructivist grounded theory

The constructivist school of grounded theory, led by Charmaz (2014), defines theoretical sampling as "seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory" (p. 192). Similarly to Glaserian and Straussian grounded theory, theoretical sampling in constructivism is viewed as a process of collecting data to further explore concepts that have developed during prior analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2017). However, whilst both the

Glaserian and Straussian branches of grounded theory state that theoretical sampling "is controlled by the emerging theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 45), constructivism defines theoretical sampling by a focus on the categories themselves which are then sorted and integrated into a theory, rather than on the theory as a whole (Charmaz, 2014).

In constructivist grounded theory studies, data collection begins with purposeful sampling. Initial participants or sources of data are chosen based on their experiences of the area under study or ability to inform the early research questions (Charmaz, 2014; Currie, 2009). However, according to Charmaz (2014), this early sampling strategy offers only a starting point: somewhere to launch the data collection process rather than a definitive strategy to develop the overall theory. The criteria used in early purposeful sampling are not the same as those used during the theoretical sampling process. Instead, the criteria which guide theoretical sampling decisions change throughout a study, as ideas and insights into the data develop and change.

In constructivist grounded theory, theoretical sampling begins after some data have been collected and analysed, and some tentative categories and concepts have been developed (Charmaz, 2014; Hall, McKenna, & Griffiths, 2012). Though some grounded theorists believe that theoretical sampling can start after a single interview, suggesting that all that is required are beginning concepts that warrant further exploration (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), Charmaz (2014) asserts that theoretical sampling cannot begin until tentative categories have developed, which is unlikely to occur after a single interview. This is because, from a constructivist standpoint, the purpose of theoretical sampling is to narrow the researcher's focus towards the developing categories in order to refine them, explore their boundaries, identify their properties, and discover relationships between them (Charmaz, 2014).

The process of theoretical sampling helps researchers to centre their data collection around the emerging categories, guided only by what is relevant for theoretical development (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009; Coyne, 1997; Draucker et al., 2007). It facilitates the collection of data that further enable the development of emerging concepts and categories. In reality, this means that the sampling strategy employed will be unique to each study, shaped by the ideas and questions that arise from the data. In general, theoretical sampling decisions are based on following up on leads that are identified, and on questions and ideas that arise, during the process of writing memos. Memos enable analytic reflection so the researcher can explore and develop their concepts and categories (Charmaz, 2014). The process of memoing helps researchers to identify gaps in their categories, and deduce how and where to collect data next in order to fill them (Charmaz, 2014). In order to address these gaps, theoretical sampling may then lead to the addition of new interview questions or foci, new participants or participant characteristics, new sites or settings for data collection, or including an entirely new form of data altogether (Charmaz, 2014; Coyne, 1997; Currie, 2009; Draucker et al., 2007). Theoretical sampling continues until data saturation occurs. It is often difficult to determine exactly when this occurs, but for most grounded theorists, saturation marks the point at which no new properties of the categories are gleaned when new data is added, and the categories are robust enough to encompass the variations present in the study (Charmaz, 2014; Maz, 2013).

3. Methods: the bereaved PICU parent study

The Bereaved PICU Parent study was the first multi-site Australian study to explore the parental experiences of the death of their child in a paediatric intensive care unit (PICU) setting and their subsequent bereavement follow-up care. A constructivist grounded

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