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Recommended Citation

Babchuk, Wayne A. and Hitchcock, Robert K. (2013). "Grounded Theory Ethnography: Merging Methodologies for Advancing Naturalistic Inquiry," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2013/papers/5>

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Grounded Theory Ethnography: Merging Methodologies for Advancing Naturalistic Inquiry

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Abstract: This inquiry explores the history and potential of blending grounded theory and ethnography for conducting qualitative research in education and the social sciences. We argue that grounded theory ethnography can be an effective strategy for bridging the research-to-practice gap particularly in practitioner-based fields such as adult education.

Introduction

Standing at the forefront of the “qualitative revolution” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509), grounded theory has become one of the most utilized qualitative research methodologies over time and across disciplines. Although the use of comparative frameworks in research has a long history in the social sciences, it was Glaser and Strauss (1967) in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* who formalized their own brand of comparative methodology that juxtaposed elements of quantitative and qualitative designs to offer a new approach to social research designed to generate theory from data collected in the field. In *Discovery*, Glaser and Strauss also made explicit ties between constant comparison, grounded theory, and ethnographic research that would ultimately lead to a merging by some scholars of two time-honored and popular qualitative approaches—ethnography and grounded theory—thereby suggesting the possibility of a “happy marriage” between the two (Pettigrew, 2000, p. 256). This hybrid approach, labeled “grounded theory ethnography” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 22), or simply “grounded ethnography” (Battersby, 1981, p. 93), holds considerable potential to combine grounded theory with traditional ethnographic methods to facilitate a clearer understanding of process, explanation, and theory development. Although methodologists have recognized its potential for the past 45 years, only recently has grounded theory ethnography begun to build momentum and gain popularity among qualitative researchers.

Grounded Theory’s Nuclear and Extended Family of Methods

The origin and early development of qualitative inquiry began with the pioneering ethnographic research of field anthropologists and “Chicago School” sociologists who advanced the study of human cultures in naturalistic field settings. From these ethnographic beginnings, combined with the University of Chicago’s iconic focus on symbolic interactionism, Anselm Strauss became involved in groundbreaking research leading to the publication of *Boys in White* co-authored with Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1961), and later with Barney Glaser, a Columbia sociologist trained in the Lazarsfeld–Merton tradition of quantitatively-oriented “middle-range” theory. Strauss, hired at the University of California-San Francisco to develop a doctoral program

in nursing (and later in sociology) begin studying patients dying in hospitals and recruited Glaser to aid him in these efforts. Their work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), in which they formalized procedures designed to generate theory from data, quickly reached canonical status and is currently upheld by many to be among, if not the most influential, work in the storied history of the qualitative tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Not long after, Glaser and Strauss went their separate ways advocating their own versions of this popular method. Their approaches, referred to as Glaserian (“classic”) and Straussian (“systematic”) have been challenged by other epistemologically repositioned versions of the grounded theory’s “family of methods” including those by Kathy Charmaz (“constructivist”) and Adele Clarke (“postmodern/situational”), both students of the co-founders (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Babchuk, 2011). These scholars generally agree on several fundamental shared components that define this method as a unique qualitative design (Babchuk, 2011; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Hood, 2007), but also differ on key aspects. Shared components include adherence to the constant comparative method involving ongoing comparisons of data through all stages of analysis, simultaneous data collection and analysis, use of theoretical sampling for theory development, theoretical saturation of categories signaling the end of data collection, constructing codes and categories from data rather than from preconceived hypotheses, memoing to aid in the elaboration of categories and their relationships, delaying extensive use of the literature until after analysis has begun, and ongoing theory development (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001). Differences among scholars reflect contrasting paradigmatic, epistemological, and ontological worldviews that profoundly affect the operationalization of the method and ultimately the very nature of the findings themselves.

Comparative Analyses and Emergent Theorizing in Sociology and Anthropology

A widely held misconception within the field of anthropology is that researchers have always employed grounded theory but have just not called it that. Barrett (2009) states:

“... stripped of its high-tech jargon, there is little to grounded theory that is new. From the time of Malinowski onwards, anthropologists have proceeded in the same rough fashion: gathering data, getting hunches, checking them out, generating tentative hypotheses, rejecting them as contradictory data emerge, arranging their data into categories, searching for themes and patterns, and conducting comparative research. The difference is the absence of specialized vocabulary in anthropology, and the much greater emphasis on long-term fieldwork. It might be said that, like the individual who surprised to discover that he had always been writing ‘prose,’ anthropologists have always been doing grounded theory (or at least a sensible version of it); they just didn’t have a label for it” (p. 243).

This viewpoint is off target for a number of reasons, yet aspects of the grounded theory methodology (e.g., constant comparison, emergent theorizing, etc.) do have a long and rich history in the social sciences. Although the constant comparative method used in grounded theory refers to the iterative, ongoing comparisons of data throughout the research process and is one form of comparative analysis utilized in the social sciences (see Salzman's 2012 text, *Classic Comparative Anthropology*, which outlines the history and types of comparative analyses in anthropology), there are parallels that can be drawn across disciplines and approaches. Interestingly, these parallels are explicitly outlined in Chapter 6 of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Here, Glaser and Strauss focus on applications of the comparative method by sociologists and anthropologists and present an "accounting scheme" for "assessing comparative analysis used in any publication, and for making clear distinctions between it and our general mode of analysis" (p. 117). Their "Comparative Analysis Accounting Checklist" enables assignment of comparative research studies into one of three categories: (1) Verification of Theory, (2) Assumed Verification plus Limited Generation, and (3) Comparisons for Generation. Among the work that falls into the "Comparisons for Generation" category include such classics as Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self*, Etzioni's (1961) *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, and Geertz's (1963) *Peddlers and Princes*. Glaser and Strauss accord special status to Evans-Pritchard's (1937) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, which they view as research closely analogous to the grounded theory method.

More recently, Jaccard and Jacoby (2010) compare the use of grounded and emergent theory in the social sciences along a number of dimensions with the ultimate goal of both forms using data to generate theory rather than using data to test theory. They note that grounded theory has its roots in symbolic interactionism and that the discipline of anthropology has a longstanding tradition of emergent theorizing that is clearly distinct from the grounded theory approach. Jaccard and Jacoby point out that there is, however, much overlap between emergent and grounded approaches; both emphasize description, understanding, explanation, and use of qualitative methods, and are both useful and productive approaches for building theory.

The History and Development of Grounded Theory Ethnography

Since *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), scholars have advocated for the use of grounded theory for ethnographic and cross-cultural research including some who have specifically championed grounded theory ethnography as new and fruitful way of exploring traditional ethnographic research questions. Continuing with grounded theory's co-founders, Glaser (1978), in his section of *Theoretical Sensitivity* titled, "New Directions in Grounded Theory," cites Eleanor Maxwell's soon to be published research, "Search and Research in Ethnography: Continuous Comparative Analysis" (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1980). Maxwell argues that "continuous comparative analysis is a suitable method for cross-cultural research because it enables us to continue the comparative process basic to our discipline throughout the research

task” (p. 219) congruent with the basic research process of anthropology. Corbin and Strauss (2007) extend Glaser’s (1978) notion of “theoretical sensitivity” viewed by them as a key aspect of the grounded theory procedure and underscore this technique’s usefulness for cross-cultural research. Battersby (1981) advocates blending grounded theory and ethnographic methods in the form of “grounded ethnography”, a strategy allowing the ethnographer to “generate a thesis or picture of certain social processes” (p. 93) through systematic data sampling (theoretical sampling) and data comparison (constant comparison) procedures. Babchuk (1996; 1997) presents a coding scheme designed to enable analysts to conceptualize data using both an emic and etic perspective. Building off Spradley (1980), who argued that “ethnography offers an excellent strategy for discovering grounded theory” (1997, p. 15), he underscores the value of constant comparison for reducing ethnocentrism by allowing for the emergence of culture-specific concepts independent of etically derived predetermined frameworks. In her landmark article outlining the potential of grounded theory for cross-cultural research, Barnes (1996) recommends “special attention to methodological issues” that can arise from cultural differences between researchers and participants, and provides suggestions to circumvent these issues to “create sufficiently rich inductively derived grounded theory” (p. 429). Pettigrew (2000) forcefully argues that blending ethnography and grounded theory “may produce a level of detail and interpretation that is unavailable from other methodologies” (p. 260). Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) delineate the potential of blending grounded theory methods with traditional ethnography, a discussion extended in more detail by Charmaz (2006). Goulding (2002) also discusses the use of grounded theory for cross-cultural research, Gales (2003) concludes that “grounded theory appears to be a natural fit for cross-cultural research” (p. 138), and Bernard (2006) states that grounded theory “is widely used to analyze ethnographic data” (p. 492). In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, Timmermans and Tavory (2007) evaluate the potential of grounded theory for ethnographic research and explore the symbolic interactionist underpinnings of this approach. Sheridan and Storch (2009) uphold that grounded theory approaches have the potential to “contribute significantly to intercultural research” (p. 2), Phelps and Horman (2010) focus on data collection in ethnographic studies and the analysis of that data through grounded theory techniques, and Aldiabat and Le Navenec (2011) provide a detailed overview of differences and similarities between grounded theory and ethnography and provide suggestions for how students can make informed choices to ensure their research design best matches their research questions.

Why Grounded Theory Ethnography?

Contemporary proponents of grounded theory and ethnography trace their origins to field anthropologists and Chicago School sociologists, the latter rooted in symbolic interactionism and pragmatist philosophical perspectives. As with most qualitative designs, grounded theory and ethnography share a number of features that distinguish them from more traditional quantitative approaches. These include research conducted in naturalistic settings, inductive data analysis, the

researcher as the primary data collection instrument, emergent sample selection, flexible research design, nonrandom, purposeful sample selection, a focus on rich description and understanding of the participants' emic points of view, a holistic understanding achieved through collection of multiple sources of data (triangulation), and the use of some form of memoing, journaling, or fieldnotes. In terms of differences between the approaches, ethnography practices long-term face-to-face immersion within a culture-sharing group to describe and interpret patterns of behaviors and beliefs, relies heavily on participant observation as a key form of data collection to yield thick and rich description of a culture or elements of a culture, and often extends or tests a priori theory that is in place before the research begins. Conversely, grounded theory refers to both the process and product of research and attempts to move beyond description to generate, co-construct, or discover a (substantive) theory of a social or social-psychological process, action, or interaction. Grounded theory relies on the juxtaposition of several key methodological components—constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation of categories (called the “Troublesome Trinity” by Hood, 2007)—iterative, simultaneous data collection and analysis, memoing, and the study of a process or phenomenon rather than a description of the setting itself (Charmaz, 2006). Although, as in ethnography, multiple forms of data collection and analysis can and should be used, grounded theory has historically employed interviews and ethnography participant observation as their primary modus operandi.

There are several important advantages of merging methodologies in the form of grounded ethnography or grounded theory ethnography. Battersby (1981) underscores the value of an emergent conceptual framework in the study of teacher socialization processes, whereas Pettigrew (2000) upholds that grounded theory in the service of ethnography can “formalize and extend the limited theoretical component of ethnography” (p. 259). Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) and Charmaz (2006) argue that the constant comparative method and systematic guidelines offered by grounded theory can aid ethnographers in key ways. These include comparing data throughout the research process rather than after data collection, comparing data with emerging categories, making explicit relationships between concepts and categories, enabling greater involvement by ethnographers' in the research, helping focus and organize the inquiry, and facilitating a shift from description to higher levels of abstraction and theoretical elaboration. They argue grounded theory can aid ethnographic analyses by avoiding the use of pre-existing disciplinary categories, minimizing unsystematic and random data collection, approaching the data in novel ways to enhance the building of categories, concepts, theory, and eliminating the artificial separation between data collection and analysis. Echoing these advantages, Timmermans and Tavory (2007) posit that grounded theory can help focus ethnographic research through the study of social processes, increase the ethnographer's connection to the data, and better facilitate links between field research and the broader sociological literature.

Conclusion

Comparative methods and emergent theorizing have a long history in sociology and anthropology. We have argued that a hybrid approach to qualitative research embracing these time-honored techniques called grounded theory ethnography—that combines unique attributes of grounded theory’s theory-methods package with traditional ethnographic procedures—holds great potential for advancing social and behavioral research. Grounded theory ethnography can extend the often more limited theoretical component of ethnography that has traditionally relied on description and analysis of a priori theory. This approach shifts this focus from description to explanation and from theory verification to theory generation. Grounded theory ethnography can be a powerful tool for linking research-to-practice across disciplines and can be particularly effective for practitioner-driven fields such as education, adult education, and health care to enrich the ethnographic study of culture-sharing groups both here and abroad.

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