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Grounded theory research: literature reviewing and reflexivity

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Abstract

Title. Grounded theory research: literature reviewing and reflexivity

Aim. This paper is a report of a discussion of the arguments surrounding the role of the initial literature review in grounded theory.

Background. Researchers new to grounded theory may find themselves confused about the literature review, something we ourselves experienced, pointing to the need for clarity about use of the literature in grounded theory to help guide others about to embark on similar research journeys.

Discussion. The arguments for and against the use of a substantial topic-related initial literature review in a grounded theory study are discussed, giving examples from our own studies. The use of theoretically sampled literature and the necessity for reflexivity are also discussed. Reflexivity is viewed as the explicit quest to limit researcher effects on the data by awareness of self, something seen as integral both to the process of data collection and the constant comparison method essential to grounded theory.

Conclusion. A researcher who is close to the field may already be theoretically sensitized and familiar with the literature on the study topic. Use of literature or any other preknowledge should not prevent a grounded theory arising from the inductive–deductive interplay which is at the heart of this method. Reflexivity is needed to prevent prior knowledge distorting the researcher’s perceptions of the data.

Introduction

The place of the literature review in a grounded theory study is an issue of considerable debate in the research community. For novice researchers this controversy can be both a source of confusion and anxiety as they contemplate their methodological options.

In this paper we explore the various arguments surrounding the timing of the literature review when adopting a grounded theory approach. With reference to two recently completed grounded theory studies, we debate the arguments surrounding this issue in an attempt to bring a greater degree

of clarity about when and why to conduct the review. We highlight some of the potential pitfalls that can result from whatever decision is made but point out that, despite these varied viewpoints, a much greater requirement is to remain inductive throughout the study by carefully adhering to the process of reflexivity.

Background

When Glaser and Strauss (1967) originated grounded theory, it was seen as an approach challenging the status quo in social research, as contemporary studies were dominated by the

testing of 'grand theory' and were deductive in nature. Grounded theory is a way of generating new theory grounded in the field but also set in the context of existing theory. Therefore it does not set out to test an existing hypothesis (Kennedy & Lingard 2006), but rather seeks to generate theory from the research situation in the field as it is. Grounded theory is accepted as a method of research throughout the social sciences and nursing (Melia 1982, Lincoln & Guba 1985, Johnson 1990, Morse 1991, Annells 1996, Charmaz 2000, Cutcliffe 2000, Eaves 2001). Although often labelled as a qualitative approach, it can incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods (Duhscher & Morgan 2004). The need to maintain objective distance and limit the researcher effect on the data stems from grounded theory's postpositivist ontology (Kennedy & Lingard 2006). More recent constructivist applications of grounded theory have challenged this stance (Mills *et al.* 2006), promoting instead a position of mutuality between researcher and participant that acknowledges the voice of the author in the final product (Charmaz & Mitchell 1996).

The essence of grounded theory is the inductive–deductive interplay, beginning not with a hypothesis but with a research situation. Researchers start with a topic of interest, collect data and allow relevant ideas to develop. This requires open mindedness to ensure that data are not ignored because they do not fit in with a preconceived notion. Data are gathered usually through field observation and/or interviews, but numerical data may also be included. Initially, the approach taken is inductive and consequently hypotheses and tentative theories emerge from the data set. In this way, an inductive–deductive interplay is established. Ideas inductively derived from the data form mini-theories, which are then either confirmed or refuted by subsequent theoretically sampled data.

The grounded theory approach is not linear but concurrent, iterative and integrative, with data collection, analysis and conceptual theorizing occurring in parallel and from the outset of the research process (Duhscher & Morgan 2004). This process continues until the theory generated explains every variation in the data (Benton 2000). The resulting theory is a robust theoretical explanation of the social phenomenon under investigation (Strauss & Corbin 1998). This analysis process is known as the 'constant comparison method' (Glaser & Strauss 1967) in which the core category subsumes the major categories and explains much of the variation in the data. The constant comparison method necessitates that these themes are grounded in the data rather than being derived from a preconceived conceptual framework. This implicitly requires awareness of self and a consciously reflective process called reflexivity.

Reflexivity

Robson (2002, p. 22) states simply that reflexivity is:

...an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process.

Neil (2006) argues that the potential impact of the researcher on the data needs to become part of the research record in order to be explored through constant comparative analysis. Reflexivity suggests a turning back on the original action similar to the knee jerk reflex, where nerve impulses from a blow to the knee reach the spinal cord before turning back to the knee to produce the 'jerk' response (Freshwater & Rolfe 2001). Researchers should be aware of the impact of their previous life experience, including previous reading, and 'turn back' on these to appraise their effect. Sometimes this requires bringing one's initial reaction to conscious awareness by turning back, before it is possible to acknowledge a perspective gained not from the data themselves, but from previous learning. However, as Cutcliffe (2003) points, out reflexivity rests on awareness of self and this can only be partial. It is important, nevertheless, that this awareness is, to some extent, shared with readers.

Researchers should openly acknowledge the influence of prior work or experience on their perspective (Charmaz 2000). Memo-writing helps make researchers aware of their own potential effects on the data. Data analysis can be likened to a discussion between the data, the created theory, the memos and the researcher (Backman & Kyngas 1999). Whilst the researcher's own creativity is an integral part in the emergence of categories, these categories must be inductively derived from the data in the field and not forced into the shape of preconceived notions held by the researcher. This is the tension between emergence and forcing (Glaser 1992) which is at the heart of the debate between the need for reflexivity and the positioning of the literature review. Deriving ideas inductively and then testing them deductively is 'going with the data' (Glaser 2001 p. 47).

It is vital, therefore, that the researcher does not become so reflexive as to stifle creativity and fail to produce a theoretical account which is worthy of being called 'grounded theory', instead producing a description only. Although Glaser (2001, p. 47) warns against this process of 'reflexivity paralysis', it is clear that he does not reject the need for the researcher to be reflexive in the sense of being self aware, but rather rejects the self-destructive introspective compulsion to locate their work within a particular theoretical context.

Literature reviewing

One of the fundamental issues in grounded theory work is always when the literature should be consulted. The place of the literature review in grounded theory studies is controversial. Some researchers believe that the initial review of the literature has some importance because it enables readers to identify the researcher's perspective as the project begins and provides justification for launching the grounded theory study (Antle May 1986). The researcher must then move to a second review of the literature that links existing research and theory with the concepts, constructs and properties of the new theory (Hutchison 1993). As in other aspects of the grounded theory approach, its originators, Glaser and Strauss, fundamentally disagreed over the use of literature and the need to conduct an initial review. Strauss, in his later writing with Corbin (Strauss & Corbin 1990), advocated reviewing the literature early in the study for several reasons:

- It stimulates theoretical sensitivity.
- It provides a secondary source of data.
- It stimulates questions.
- It directs theoretical sampling.
- It provides supplementary validity.

Glaser (1992) strongly disagreed with this stand and discussed what he described as several levels of literature required within grounded theory. These included professional literature related to the area under study, which he considered must not be examined until the researcher was in the field and codes and categories had begun to emerge. The lead authors of this article are both mental health nurses and recently have completed grounded theory studies at PhD level but with differing approaches regarding a review of literature. By highlighting the ongoing debate associated with the use of literature within a grounded theory studies and describing our differing approaches to the place of the initial

literature review when undertaking a study of this kind, we hope to assist those who are new to grounded theory to consider the fundamental arguments associated with either strategy (Table 1).

Marland's study

Marland (2003) explored the medicine-taking decisions of people with schizophrenia in comparison with those with asthma and those with epilepsy. The study had two stages: stage 1 data arose from patient interviews and in stage 2 mental health workers involved in the care of people with schizophrenia were interviewed, as well as one asthma specialist and one epilepsy specialist. Their views on the factors underlying medicine-taking behaviour were compared with perspectives arising from the patient interviews and were included in the data. From these interviews, an explanatory three-part typology emerged.

McGhee's study

McGhee's (2005) study focused on the relationship that develops between professional key-workers (health/social care workers with direct care involvement with the service user and who were selected by each carer as being the person with liaison responsibility within a multi-disciplinary team) and dementia carers operating within the home environment. The aim of this study was to examine this relationship in detail and generate a theoretical explanation that allowed understanding of the influential factors associated with its creation and enhancement.

Grounded theory was considered the approach best suited to meeting such an aim as it allowed theory to be generated rather than simply testing theory; it also gave the degree of flexibility essential for such an exploratory study (Hardiman

Arguments for a literature review before developing research categories

To provide justification for the study

To meet the requirements of Local Research Ethics Committees

To avoid conceptual and methodological pitfalls

To discover the extent of previous knowledge and therefore assess whether grounded theory is an appropriate method

To be 'open minded' but not 'empty headed'

Arguments against a literature review before developing research categories

To be strictly in keeping with a postpositivist ontology

To prevent the researcher being constrained, contaminated or inhibited

To prevent recognized or unrecognized assumptions

To prevent generating a focus from the literature rather than from the emerging data

To promote 'telling it as it is' rather than 'telling it as they see it'

Table 1 A Summary of the fundamental argument

1993, Smith & Biley 1997). From a sample of 18 carer/key-worker dyads (pairings), a theory was derived that explained their interaction and how this relationship impacted on care for the person with dementia.

Marland's position

The strategy adopted by Marland (Marland & Cash 2005) was to undertake an initial review of the literature before entering the field, primarily because the methodology had not been chosen before perusing the literature. The research supervisors' advice was to become familiar with the literature and gain a critical understanding of the central concepts.

The general area of interest was the use of neuroleptic medicines by people with schizophrenia. As Marland was an educator in mental health nursing, he was familiar with the evidence base because neuroleptic medicines are a key element in the treatment of schizophrenia and their withdrawal is associated with relapse (British Medical Association/Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain 2003). The initial review included literature on issues seminal to medicine-taking behaviour, with a particular focus on neuroleptics. Although the term 'compliance' is increasingly inappropriate, it is still the most productive keyword in literature searching. Three main forms of interventions emerged from the review, labelled as Imposed Compliance, Chosen Compliance and Active Compliance (Marland 1999); these were used to structure the initial review. Historically, the literature has shown a gradual trend towards the realization by healthcare workers that increased patient autonomy and involvement are related to improved compliance. These themes reflected this development in thinking.

Although this was not known to Marland at the time, this approach to initial literature reviewing is what Glaser (2001) came to describe as 'bundling' and is a way to meet the requirements of ethics committees to carry out background reading, but it does not undermine the need to derive theory from the field. Guiding hypotheses can then illustrate for the ethics committee some possible directions the researcher may follow, whilst not restricting the freedom to discover other patterns (Glaser 2001).

Marland's initial review identified that relevant studies were usually called 'compliance research' and tended to be within the worldview of psychiatry, resting on traditional concepts of compliance and insight. These studies also examined schizophrenia in isolation from other illnesses and took a snap-shot view of medicine-taking decision making, thus de-emphasizing its process. Although criticisms of the concepts of compliance and insight were increasingly being voiced within the literature, few researchers

approached medicine-taking issues whilst addressing these criticisms.

The grounded theory study was subsequently inspired by the need to develop a theory free of the methodological and conceptual pitfalls of previous studies whilst also bridging the perceived gaps in existing knowledge. The initial review was essential in showing that this approach had not been taken before and therefore that the results would constitute a unique addition to knowledge. Grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss 1967) were chosen following the initial review of literature because it enabled a fresh and open-minded approach to an old problem and seemed able to capture the processes of change in medicine taking decision-making.

Ironically then, for Marland, the theoretical sensitivity engendered by the initial review served to emphasize the need not to be guided by an existing conceptual framework. Concepts should not be viewed as predetermined variables, but should emerge from observation and discussion with the research participants (McCallin 2003). The initial literature review was needed to demonstrate that the research question would be likely to lead to findings congruent with the criteria for a doctoral thesis, namely that it should generate new knowledge. The searching questions posed by the ethics committee about the rationale supporting the study would also have been difficult to answer without knowledge of the key literature (McCallin 2003).

Grounded theory researchers should generate theories from the data and not merely confirm existing ideas with examples from the data, by which we mean starting with an idea and then seeking evidence from the data. The data consistently drove the theory emerging from Marland's study, preventing 'exemplification' and this, on reflection, is demonstrated in the conceptual leaps between the initial literature review and the analysis of the fieldwork data. The process of transcribing interviews, although not usually associated with reflexivity, can also reveal how one's own initial reactions may have prematurely shut down an avenue of exploration and can be a salutary lesson on one's effect on the data.

Self-awareness expressed through honest memo writing is integral to the process of reflexivity, enabling a turning back on your own initial reactions. Marland was soon confronted, for example, by the enthusiasm sometimes expressed by people with schizophrenia for depot, as opposed to oral, forms of medicine. This recognition of surprise was recorded by him in the following memo:

I find myself being surprised at how many people with schizophrenia prefer depot injections to oral medicines. This maybe discloses a prejudice on my behalf.

The researcher should develop a self-aware, self-questioning approach and be prepared to allow prejudices to be eliminated by data that oppose them. The grounded theory method brings this process about because it is inductive and thus existing ideas should be shaped, or even rejected, if not confirmed by the data. It is necessary to be open to alternative explanations when negative cases challenge an emerging theory. Cutcliffe (2000, p. 7) discusses this process and the role of reflexivity in ensuring trustworthiness of the findings at some depth:

If the hunch belongs solely to the researcher and is not part of the world being investigated, this will have no meaning for the interviewees and can be discarded in due course.

A tracing of the theoretical sampling decisions acknowledges this process of theory refinement.

In turning back on his initial reaction of surprise, Marland realized the impact of his previous life experience. Part of his interest in mental health, particularly the mental illness called schizophrenia, is related to the fact that his paternal grandfather was given this diagnosis. As he grew older, his grandfather began to show strange movements of his mouth and tongue, which Marland now knows to be tardive dyskinesia (TD). It is through becoming a mental health nurse that Marland has been able to make sense of his grandfather's experiences and, following learning about schizophrenia and neuroleptic medicines, felt a personal significance and empathy. Often the side effects of neuroleptic medicines were the most vivid signs in these patients, although many people mistook these movements for a symptom of the illness.

At about the time when Marland became a nurse educator, it became standard practice, in the quest to reduce the incidence of pressure sores, that older patients admitted to hospital were assessed for pressure area risk within 2 hours of admission using standardized assessment scales. In contrast, although many rating scales are available to assess the severity of TD (Breggin 1993), they were not always used as standard practice within mental health circles. Marland felt this to be unfair and this inspired his first publication related to a clinical topic (Marland & McSherry 1998). He had to be careful in his study, therefore, that a possible bias against the use of neuroleptic medicines, particularly in depot form, did not contaminate the data arising from the field. The commitment of several participants towards depots surprised him. Although the possibility that some people may prefer this route of administration had been outlined in the 'imposed compliance' section of the initial literature review, it was only when this factor emerged also from the data that Marland really internalized it.

McGhee's position

Having worked in the professional area associated with this study, McGhee had read fairly widely in terms of what Glaser (1992) considered to be the professional literature, both related and unrelated to the subject area. McGhee's concern was to avoid any possibility of 'forcing the data' through existing conceptual understanding arising out of prior reading and, most importantly, previous professional experiences brought from the field. This approach to literature reviewing is preferred by Glaser:

In 'Theoretical Sensitivity' and in 'Doing GT' I wrote extensively about waiting for the problem to emerge and NOT reviewing the relevant literature until the later stages of sorting and during writing up. (Glaser 2001, p. 133)

In grounded theory, the literature is a source of data and should be theoretically sampled along with other emergent data. McGhee therefore delayed the first real move into the professional literature related to the topic until categories grounded in the data had been identified (Glaser 1992). Reference to the literature was made wherever possible in an effort to identify comparisons or contradictions within the categories and codes, but only after these codes and categories had emerged.

McGhee (2005) clearly acknowledged his prior role as a community psychiatric nurse with his study population and current position as a mental health educator, and thus he had existing knowledge of the topic. Reed and Procter (1995) have highlighted the debate over the researcher's relationship with the research area, with its potential influence on the study participants and data, as an important factor in the inductive research process. They consider that the researcher occupies one of three positions: 'outsider', 'hybrid' or 'insider'. The 'outsider' is a researcher with no professional experience and a visitor to the area of study. The 'hybrid' is a researcher who undertakes research into the practice of other practitioners and is familiar with that research area. The 'insider' is the actual practitioner-as-researcher looking into their own and known colleagues' practice. Reed and Procter (1995) considered these positions as a continuum, with the researcher moving backwards and forwards along it as they engaged with the research process.

McGhee (2005) considered that he was placed between the 'hybrid' and 'insider' positions in his study (Figure 1). The 'insider' position was relevant in that he had existing knowledge of the participants from working directly in this field and, indeed, knew some key-workers through his role as a mental health educator. As he had exposure to the associated literature, as well as having pre-existing

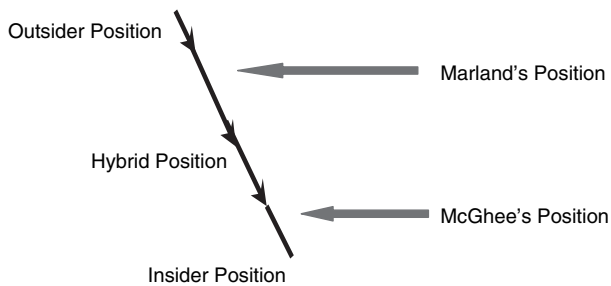


Figure 1 Researcher's relationship with the research area.

knowledge of the study subject area but no direct involvement for some years, he was also drawn towards the hybrid position. He therefore considered that his existing conceptual framework could impinge upon the inductive nature of the study. This knowledge was a principal factor in his decision not to enter the literature directly associated with the topic (Glaser 1992, Hickey 1997). The risk of being led by the literature and not allowing the theory to emerge fully from the data seemed highly possible – a viewpoint, however, is that not universally accepted (Procter 1995, McCallin 2003).

In considering these positions, McGhee argued that the researcher has no control over what they already know when entering the research field, but can exercise control over what is added to that knowledge base. He believed that, as he occupied the hybrid/insider position on Reed and Procter's (1995) continuum, he was already theoretically sensitized to the research area and had broad knowledge of the associated literature. He believed, therefore, that additional specific reading in this area would influence how he approached, interpreted and reported on the emergent data (Glaser 1992, Dey 1993, Reed 1995, Hickey 1997). McGhee's supervisor supported him in this decision, believing that this was a vitally important theoretical decision and that he should follow the line of argument by which he was most persuaded.

Dey (1999) highlighted that ignoring the literature at the beginning of a study does not necessarily mean that it is discounted altogether. There is recognition that prior knowledge, far from necessarily being a hindering factor, could in fact enhance the inductive research process. McGhee recognized that he held a pre-existing attitude towards carers of people with dementia through having childhood memories of his mother's struggle when his grandmother was going through the process of dementia, an experience that must have helped shape his early impressions of people with dementia and their carers. Also, when he entered the research field he recognized that he was part of the culture under study, and this was useful in a number of respects. He, as stated above, was more theoretically sensitized to the

emergent data and his professional background helped him communicate more effectively with the participants, particularly the key-workers, as he shared a similar background knowledge and vocabulary (Reed 1995). This helped in terms of the focus of questions and the speed of analysis (Reed 1995). He also recognized, however, that this also could be viewed negatively in that it could be construed that he was forcing the data through the use of his pre-existing conceptual framework (Glaser 1992). This is indeed a real danger that had to be negated, as much as possible, by being open and honest in telling readers of his background and reasons for any decisions taken (Reed & Procter 1995, Cutcliffe 2000).

This requirement highlights the need for the researcher to be reflexive in their approach to data collection and analysis. McGhee's use of tape-recorded field notes helped in this reflexive process and, along with the written memos, these were transcribed and coded along with the interview data. He therefore commented upon his own background experiences and related decisions, derived from these memos and field notes, within the analysis and reporting of findings wherever appropriate. This helped to ensure that he did not unduly bias any incoming data or, at least, acknowledged this aspect openly and honestly in the collection, analysis and reporting of developing categories (Reed & Procter 1995, Cutcliffe 2000).

In acknowledging his pre-existing knowledge and experiences, McGhee carried out his study in a manner that was in keeping with the inductive requirement inherent within the grounded theory methodology and fully respected the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the grounded theory approach.

Arguments in favour of an initial review of literature before data collection

The identification of a credible research area before entry to the field is needed to satisfy the ethics committees, a point noted by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and now emphasized in the era of evidenced-based health care (McCallin 2003, Cutcliffe 2005). It is therefore necessary to approach the area of study with more than 'general wonderment' (Glaser & Strauss 1967) An exploratory review of the literature can usefully be undertaken prior to the final decision on the general focus and specific method of the study. The purpose of this initial review is to increase awareness of the existing knowledge base, and also to identify gaps (Hutchison 1993) and avoid conceptual and methodological pitfalls. Grounded theory is an appropriate approach when there is little extant knowledge of the issue, but how can this paucity of

What is already known about this topic

- It was originally advocated that a literature review should not be carried out until categories had emerged from the data in the field.
- In developing the methodology, others have seen advantages in reviewing the literature before categories have emerged from the data in the field.
- Reflexivity should enable and not paralyse the research process.

What this paper adds

- A researcher who is close to the field may already be theoretically sensitized and familiar with the literature on the study topic.
- Use of literature or any other preknowledge should not prevent a grounded theory arising from the inductive–deductive interplay which is at the heart of this method.
- Reflexivity is needed to prevent prior knowledge distorting the researcher’s perceptions of the data.

knowledge be ascertained unless an initial review of literature is undertaken? May (1994) asserts that it is unlikely and, indeed, undesirable that a researcher enters the field in an ‘atheoretical’ state and rather should be aware of extant knowledge, but should use this objectively as if it were provided by another research informant. Cutcliffe (2005) points out that following an identified research theme throughout one’s research career, as preferred by grant-awarding bodies, would any way pre-empt paucity of prior knowledge. As grounded theory studies often take a new perspective on an old issue, it is important to be familiar with previous knowledge so as to outline the research phenomenon (Backman & Kyngas 1999). Arguments arising from the literature can form the justification put forward for the study.

An *a priori* conceptual framework, however, should not be formed for the study and its focus should therefore be related to, but not grounded in, the initial literature review. The justification for the study, however, continues to be demonstrated by the initial review. Procter (1995) considered that the researcher was not any more likely to influence adversely the inductive research process by prior reading of the literature than from any knowledge gained from other less overt sources, such as from prior professional experience.

It is not inconceivable, of course, that a researcher could enter the field with a rigid *a priori* conceptual framework but

not have conducted a review of literature. It is arguable that it is difficult to be knowledgeable about anything whilst holding rigid views, as increasing knowledge leads to increasing uncertainty. Nevertheless a rigid *a priori* conceptual framework or hypothesis should not necessarily result in the grounded theory being preconceived and framed by concepts imported from the literature (Wilson & Hutchinson 1996). Strauss and Corbin (1998) gave a balanced view, seeing both the advantages and disadvantages of an initial literature review: ‘Familiarity with relevant literature can enhance sensitivity to subtle nuances in data, just as it can block creativity (p. 49)’.

It was these arguments, particularly the need to justify the study from the initial review as well as to enhance the researcher’s sensitivity prior to the collection of any data, that persuaded Marland to approach the topic-related literature before starting his study.

Arguments against an initial review of literature before data collection

There is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study. (Glaser 1992, p. 31)

This dictum in grounded theory, Glaser stated, is very different from other research approaches. The reason is to prevent the researcher from being ‘constrained’ or ‘contaminated’, or otherwise inhibited from effectively generating categories, their properties and theoretical coding through prior reading of related literature. Glaser considered that such reading leads to a ‘derailment’ in the form of recognized or unconscious assumptions about what the data are presenting. Avoiding a literature review at the beginning of the study means that the emerging theory is more likely to be ‘grounded’ in the data (Hickey 1997, Cutcliffe 2000). Hickey (1997) argued that if there is a clear lack of research in the area of interest, the literature review may not only yield insufficient information, but risks leading the researcher into inaccurate assumptions about what is or is not important to the study being contemplated. He pointed out the risk that, following an initial review, the researcher may focus the research problem on areas that the literature has highlighted rather than the emerging data. In Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) terms, therefore, rather than the researcher remaining inductive and ‘telling it as it is’, they may instead import concepts from the literature. Thus, use of the literature may potentially undermine the construction of a grounded theory.

It was for these reasons, along with his prior experience of dementia and knowledge of the study group, that McGhee (2005) was influenced more towards Glaser’s position than

that of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and did not conduct a detailed initial review of the topic literature prior to starting data collection.

Conclusion

Although the grounded theory approach will undoubtedly evolve, its methodological boundaries should not be transgressed. Without the inductive and deductive interplay centred on the data offered by participants, the analysis may be inappropriate and not grounded. The defining feature is that the grounded theory must arise inductively. Within this spirit it is acknowledged that, as educators in mental health nursing, we had some prior knowledge of the relevant literature and a developing theoretical sensitivity was inevitable whether or not an initial review had been conducted.

Despite adopting a differing approach to the initial review of the literature, we succeeded in developing mid-ranging grounded theories that merited both being awarded a PhD. What appears to be a common and shared element in both approaches was the emphasis placed on remaining true to the inductive–deductive interplay throughout the research process. It is important to recognize, despite the controversy surrounding the place of the literature review, that the debate really concerns the need to stay open-minded and that the staging of the literature review is a means to this end and not an end in itself. Given the recognition of our background knowledge and experience of our respective study areas, we have both addressed the potential for this adversely to influence the inductive requirement by the process of reflexivity, which we perceive as integral to the constant comparison method. Researchers should stay true to the constant comparison method, having faith that this will eliminate any bias stemming from preknowledge.

The grounded theory approach is evolving and therefore does not provide a single or static reference point. As it appears to be moving towards constructivist designs from its original postpositivist ontology, the choice of whether or not to conduct an initial review of the literature is complex and one that can be influenced by such considerations as:

- The researcher's ontological perspective.
- Previous background and knowledge of the topic area.
- The researcher's existing level of research experience.
- The need to meet ethics committee requirements.

The first consideration may strongly influence the researcher's actions and interpretations throughout the research process, while the second may be important in influencing their confidence in successfully 'acknowledging' and 'bracketing' this prior experience, or any knowledge gained from the initial review of the literature.

For us, the decision we made about whether or not to conduct an initial literature review was based on the timing of the decision to use grounded theory: McGhee had decided this before embarking on his study, while Marland decided after conducting an initial review of literature. Ultimately, knowledge of the research area is needed to feel confident when presenting the study to the ethics committee and this consideration may override methodological arguments. Budding grounded theorists must carefully examine and wrestle with these arguments and make their own decision based on their own personal circumstances and the study topic.

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Author contributions

GMG and GM were responsible for the study conception and design and GMG, GM and JA were responsible for the drafting of the manuscript. GMG and GM performed the data collection and data analysis. GMG, GM and JA made critical revisions to the paper. JA supervised the study.

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