

Using Iterative Cycles of Discovery Within a Glaserian Grounded Theory of Socialization in Compassion

Dr Katherine Curtis

Abstract

In 2007, I embarked on an exploratory study to understand the professional socialization experiences of student nurses within 21st-century nursing in the United Kingdom. The study enabled me to develop postgraduate research expertise and gain a PhD, as well as add to the body of knowledge on nursing education that could enable development of an improved student experience and improved professional preparation for clinical practice. During the early phases of the study, it became clear that grounded theory was the best “fit” for my epistemological position on the knowledge of social reality and for the focus on student nurse socialization. However, the journey of discovery using grounded theory was not without its challenges. This case study illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities when using grounded theory. It demonstrates the iterative processes that enable emergence of new understanding grounded in participants’ experiences. It also demonstrates the challenges of discovering a plethora of approaches described as grounded theory alongside my decision to adopt a traditional Glaserian approach within my study. My PhD study found that student nurses experienced challenges within their socialization in compassionate practice. Their socialization created dissonance between the professional ideals of compassionate practice and the practice reality. The findings from my study preceded a significant refocus on compassion during 2012 within UK nursing as well as all National Health Service practice and professions.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand the importance of iterative cycles in the grounded theory process
- Articulate the requirements of Glaserian grounded theory
- Have awareness of how to overcome some of the challenges during the process of analysis
- Understand the value of grounded theory to health-related research

Case Study

I became a postgraduate researcher while working within a nurse education role. I wanted to explore the socialization of compassion among nursing students—an important area of health care practice. This case study focuses on my postgraduate research journey toward completion of a PhD. I outline the experience of iterative cycles within grounded theory when using this methodology for the first time and the challenges of trusting in the emergence of a core category that explains the data during the process of analysis. I hope that the learning I gained will be of benefit to you on your research journey.

Background

My postgraduate research focused on exploring the socialization student nurses experienced that enabled them to enter practice as qualified nurses who were well-equipped to thrive. At the time of my study, there was little evidence to explain students' perspectives on their socialization within 21st-century nursing in England. The best means to generate knowledge on this topic was to build understanding grounded in the students' own explanations of their experiences and the

social interactions that enabled socialization. The theoretical basis of grounded theory is symbolic interactionism (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Social interactionism explains that human behavior is more than reactive and behaviorist; it is based on deriving meaning from shared experiences and through communication with others who co-exist in the same environment (Marcellus, 2005).

Ontology and Epistemology

My first exposure to postgraduate research methods was a discussion of ontology and epistemology. I don't think I was alone in feeling a frustration with having to understand a new and complex language, and so it took some effort to overcome that emotional reaction and engage with a reflective self-analysis on my ontological and epistemological positions. I soon realized that my personal ontological assumptions about the nature of reality are that human behavior is highly complex and influenced by a multitude of factors that are fluid and can be interpreted through exploring circumstances, interactions, and experiences. My epistemological beliefs about seeking truth also accepted that human behavior is difficult to break down and control within experiments, particularly within an exploration of the social interactions that comprise student nurse socialization, and so best suited to a constructivist rather than a deductive approach.

I therefore acknowledged that an inductive methodology would have more relevance to such complexity and thereby enable more meaning to emerge (Galvin et al., 2008; Potter, 2006). So I started to read about inductive methodologies that had "fit" with an exploration of professional socialization, such as ethnography, discourse analysis, phenomenology, and grounded theory. Although it is beyond the scope of this case study to provide a detailed

explanation of the comparative merits of each, all of these approaches are inductive and interpretative and can be employed to explore meaning and understanding within human experiences (Mason, 2002).

However, my interest in grounded theory arose from these explorations as it became clear it was a tried and tested methodology within nursing research (Artinian, Giske, & Cone, 2009; Charmaz, 2006). As the topic of my research was student nurses' socialization experiences, grounded theory had good fit because social interaction processes are the philosophical underpinning of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaserian grounded theory is known as the "traditional" approach, following developments on the original processes by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998) and many others over subsequent years (Charmaz, 2006).

As a novice grounded theorist, it was important for me to understand the original methodology devised by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s. Glaser had examined and critiqued the subsequent iterations of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992), and I concluded from my readings that following Glaserian grounded theory would be a robust and defensible methodology for a PhD.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory acknowledges the unique and complex nature of human experiences. It also recognizes individuals' ability to shape their experiences. Grounded theory developed in the 1960s from Glaser and Strauss' sociological studies on the experiences of people who were dying in hospital. It enables a ground-up approach of constantly collecting and coding data, comparing findings with what is already within the data and seeking further data to help clarify

the findings. Grounded theory enables the emergence of new understanding within participants' experiences (Glaser, 1992).

The grounded theory process requires an iterative cycle of constantly comparing new data with emerging theory, theoretically sampling to build further understanding, and continuing to compare new data with the concepts emerging until the analysis demonstrates conceptual density and saturation is reached (Artinian et al., 2009). However, according to traditional grounded theory, literature is data and a formal literature review is not a requirement prior to data collection. The expectations of registering for a PhD program within the university were that students undertake a literature review to demonstrate that the focus for their study had merit for postgraduate research. A literature review was therefore a requirement prior to being accepted on the program, and I overcame this challenge by conducting a literature review of the minimum detail required to satisfy the university while acknowledging that Glaserian grounded theory did not require this.

To Do a Literature Review or Not?

Glaser and Strauss define the process of doing grounded theory to include a literature review *only after* the independent analysis of data. However, for many postgraduate researchers, a literature review may be required within their academic supervision or program to define terms and develop an argument for the new focus of study and the rationale warranting the investment of resources for further exploration. Literature reviews also act as a point of referral with emerging concepts (Charmaz, 2006).

Using the experiences of other researchers who had utilized grounded theory, I made a decision to undertake a limited literature review that could inform my choice of topic and

provide definitions of terms and also enable me to meet the institutional expectations of the submission required for gaining ethical approval for my study. I ensured that over the course of the research, the literature review was iterative to capture new areas of interest emerging from within the data. This iterative literature review approach did not influence the direction of the data collection or analysis, and so enabled me to retain the rigor of grounded theory (Artinian et al., 2009). I was also very careful to complete detailed memos when reviewing literature before, during, or after data collection and analysis. In this way, I could demonstrate how I had not pre-empted or directed the focus of the study or the emergence of new grounded theory, as Glaser (1992) warns that literature reviews can create temptation for forcing findings into a preconceived pattern.

“Best Fit”

Following the original development of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss, the methodology evolved in several directions, using different ways of analyzing data and generating grounded theory—the Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and the Glaser (1992) models. Both models retained the fundamental processes of data collection, coding, comparing, categorizing, theoretical sampling, and developing a core category from which arose the theory (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Their differences lay within the coding process and with the use of verification.

Glaser’s coding process retained most of that within the original Glaser and Strauss approach and comprised substantive (open and selective) coding and theoretical coding. The substantive codes were brought together into an emerging theory without preconceived categories. Strauss and Corbin’s coding process, however, evolved to consist of open, axial, and selective coding happening concurrently and with researcher interventions within each phase,

such as using structural grids in axial coding. Glaser argued that defining the dimensions of a category resulted in “forced coding,” and this could limit the grounded theory and that the dimensions should be a part of the theoretical coding, not the open coding phase. Axial coding according to Strauss and Corbin (1998) was the process of connecting open codes to understand categories, through a process of identifying the phenomena in which the data sit. These phenomena can be made up of the conditions in which the phenomena exist, the actions and interactions of the participants, and the consequences of action or interaction.

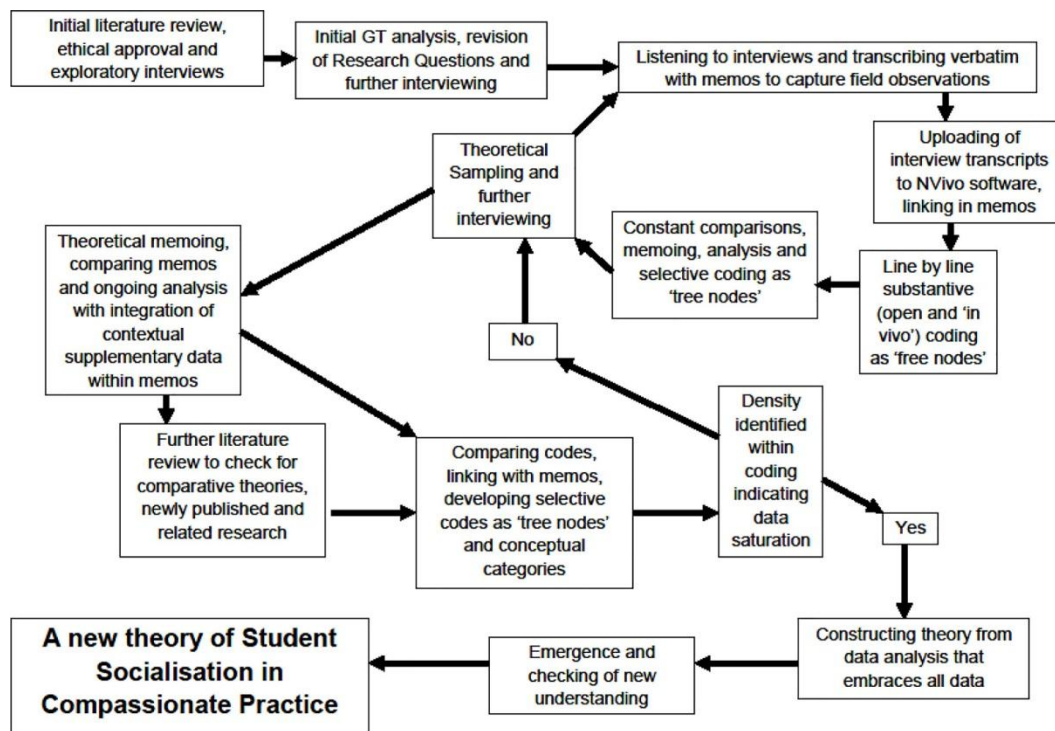
Glaser, however, did not recognize axial coding as compatible with grounded theory and argued that selectively coding around a core category, allowing the theoretical concepts to emerge from the data, was the process required for “true” grounded theory. It is important to note that many researchers have utilized grounded theory from a blend of these analytical approaches. An example of this is the use of axial coding to frame the process of analysis so that this frame may extend but also limit the analysis, depending on the subject of the research and the ability of the researcher to cope with ambiguity (Charmaz, 2006).

At this point, it is important for me to share with you that the arguments for conducting one form of grounded theory research over another are a matter of both personal choice and comfort with trusting in emergence of a conceptual code from within the process of analysis. My experience was one of comfort with trusting in emergence. Through my use of a Glaserian grounded theory process of analysis, I saw theoretical concepts such as “empathy’s centrality to compassion” and “emotional labour” arising from my data, and my trust in emergence grew stronger. I felt increasingly able to use open and selective coding, constant comparisons, and my memos to understand, explore further, and underpin my analysis.

The Iterative Cycle of Theoretical Sampling, Data Collection, and Analysis

Iteration means “repeated effort”; within research, it requires going back to initial stages of the research processes again and reviewing and repeating stages to ensure the research remains grounded within the data. Within my grounded theory exploration of student nurse socialization in compassionate practice, I found myself following an iterative approach on several fronts: data collection with constant comparisons and analysis, theoretical sampling, and literature reviewing (Figure 1).

Figure 1.



The iterative cycle of Glaserian Grounded Theory.

The iterations of interviewing students and analyzing their data enabled me to see connections and gaps in my understanding that led to theoretical sampling, where more data could be sought to illuminate the gaps, followed by further analysis. This construction of understanding, grounded in student's interview data, gave me a new and exciting insight into their reality. The research process was so grounded in the students' experiences that I had increasing confidence that my data and the emerging theory to explain their socialization in compassionate practice reflected the truth within their reality.

Trusting in Emergence

Glaser and Strauss proposed that rigor within grounded theory came from the credibility, trustworthiness, and plausibility of the research process and theory generation. Glaser added that the credibility of grounded theory lay with four criteria: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. The categories must not be forced or selected, but generated through fitting and re-fitting them to the data. Grounded theory needs to explain what is happening within the data and how the theory accounts for the way participants resolve their concerns.

For my study exploring professional socialization experience of student nurses, the data identified a significant concern regarding the dissonance between the professional expectations and ideals of compassionate practice and the practice reality full of challenges to compassionate practice. Grounded theory must move from describing what is happening to an understanding of why it is happening. For my study, the reasons for the dissonance were evident in several components of the students' socialization, the diversity in the enactment of the role of a nurse, the diversity in values of the people who are nurses, the contradictions in expectations on students in terms of their emotional connectedness with nursing and role boundaries, and the

external pressures that conflict with individualized nursing care. Through this understanding, a new theory of student nurse socialization in compassionate practice emerged.

This theory coincided with a report into care failings within Mid-Staffordshire, resulting in a national enquiry by Robert Francis (Department of Health [DH], 2010) and a new era of compassion awareness within the UK health services and National Health Service (NHS, 2012) practice. The research was published in national and international peer-reviewed professional journals and further disseminated through conference presentations locally, nationally, and internationally. The resulting impact of the research findings on nursing education and practice was due to its credibility, and that in turn was because understanding had emerged firmly grounded in student experiences through the process of Glaserian grounded theory.

Conclusion

The rewards of completing research that has genuine impact are great. Impact in nursing research comes from findings that have meaning and can develop or improve practice. From my research study, the new grounded theory for socialization in compassionate practice enabled insight into the disharmony between professional expectations of compassion and the reality of practice that was not always conducive to compassion. This new theory enabled better understanding of student experiences so that ways to support students for registered nurse practice, such as managing the emotional labor expectations within nursing, could be identified and implemented. Through a robust process of research and through overcoming some of the challenges of using grounded theory as described herein, the research had rigor and invoked a sense of confidence in the generated theory.

Completing a rigorous grounded theory study not only opens up new avenues for the researcher in terms of career progression and further research funding but also enables the researcher to gain expertise that can be shared and disseminated. I hope that by sharing some of the research challenges I experienced as I learned about grounded theory and selected a Glaserian approach, you will be better able to identify solutions to the challenges you experience on your research journey.

Lessons Learned

1. Be open to new research language and methodologies and read, read, read—so that the language and approaches become familiar.
2. Where methodological challenges present themselves, such as whether to undertake a literature review or not, explore what others have done before you and then own and justify your decisions.
3. When there are differing opinions on how to undertake a specific method of analysis, explore the options through the studies of others, going back to original manifestations of the analytic processes where available, and if possible, test them with your data to identify the best “fit.”
4. Share your experiences with peers and support each other to overcome obstacles, as very few novice researchers complete a research journey devoid of challenges.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What do you understand about ontology and epistemology and how this relates to your research?

2. Reflect on your own epistemological beliefs and how these shape your choice of methodology.
3. What are the differences between traditional Glaserian grounded theory and Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory?
4. Explore how a novice researcher could justify not following expected processes such as preliminary literature reviews where these conflict with accepted processes within a methodology such as grounded theory.
5. What do you understand about iterative cycles in grounded theory?
6. Explain the purpose of iterative cycles in grounded theory and how can these be used effectively?

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