Using Grounded Theory to Investigate Evidence Use by Course Leaders in Small-Specialist

UK HEIs

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Abstract

The study of evidence-based course leadership in higher education focusses on two different areas of practice: higher education course leadership, and evidence-based practice. Course leadership is an understudied area of research, with few publications discussing the role of the course leader in higher education. Although evidence-based practice is an area of ever evolving research in many disciplines, there is a distinct lack of research on whether course leaders in higher education apply evidence-based practice methods in their professional practice. This lack of a pre-existing theory points the researcher towards classic grounded theory to investigate and generate a new theory on course leaders' experiences. Since leadership, and therefore course leadership, is an inherent complex social process, selection of classic grounded theory as a research methodology seems a logical choice. Classic grounded theory has been successfully used to investigate phenomena in education and in evidence-based practice. Grounded theory therefore is an appropriate selection for research in education and higher education settings for areas of research where no theory currently exists. Moreover, grounded theories regarding experiences and perceptions of evidence-based practice have been published in various contexts demonstrating that it is an appropriate method for investigating course leaders' experiences with evidence-based practice.

Key words

Grounded Theory; Glaser; Course Leadership; Evidence-based Practice; Higher Education

Introduction

This paper explores the use of classic grounded theory to investigate the experiences of course leaders in small-specialist higher education institutions with evidence-based practice. It does this by first touching on the history of classic grounded theory, followed by a critical appraisal of classic grounded theory and its assumptions and practices. It then moves on to discuss measures of establishing and enhancing quality in classic grounded theory and subsequently presents a justification for the selection of classic grounded theory as an appropriate methodology to investigate the experiences of course leaders in small-specialist higher education institutions with evidence-based practice. Finally, the paper discusses some potential shortcomings of using classic grounded theory, and offers solutions to these shortcomings.

Grounded theory. What's in a name?

Grounded theory is a methodology for inductive theory generation first proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the early 1960s. Against a prevailing positivist research culture where qualitative research was deemed of lesser value (Kenny and Fourie 2014), Glaser and Strauss criticised the emphasis on verifying theories, rather than generating them (Glaser and Strauss 1967). They argued that theory which arises from qualitative research without existing preconceptions would be “more successful

than theories logically deduced from a priori assumptions” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6).

As grounded theory further developed, Glaser and Straus’ paths diverged both professionally and methodologically. Strauss engaged in a partnership with Juliet Corbin and together these authors altered the original grounded theory method. With the publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Strauss and Corbin 1990) this methodological divergence was formalised. Glaser heavily criticised the modifications made by Strauss and Corbin (Glaser 1992, 2) and considered himself the defender of the original, correct, grounded theory methodology. This methodological split led to the development of new terminology for the different grounded theory methods: Glaser’s original method became known as *classic or Glaserian grounded theory*, whereas Strauss and Corbin’s method became known as *Straussian grounded theory*. Over time, various other forms of grounded theory have been developed, particularly constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (2006), but also feminist grounded theory and various others (Engward 2013; Levers 2013). For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on classic grounded theory as developed by Glaser.

Classic grounded theory

Classic grounded theory (cGT) relies on theory emerging from data which explains a social process. It is an inductive approach to research where rather than starting research with a theory or from a theoretical perspective, the researcher starts without preconceptions in order to generate a theory that explains a social process (Engward 2013). Grounded theory research therefore generates hypotheses and theories about peoples experiences, rather than testing and validating existing theories (Evans 2013). As a result, it is a useful methodology to employ in areas of research where very little is known (Engward 2013; Evans 2013; Chong and Yeo 2015). Classic grounded theory is a systematic, rigorous means of gathering and analysing data. Its central tenet is that the research should explore social situations through people's experiences. In grounded theory the researcher is considered a neutral observer who discovers data in an objective way, with an open and impartial mind (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 2005).

Philosophically, classic grounded theory is a slightly odd beast. One of the main criticisms of the methods is that it suffers from internal misalignment because it stems from a positivist and objectivist approach whilst using interpretivist and constructionist tools (Bryant 2002; Jones and Alony 2011; Kenny and Fourie 2014). These interpretations are similar to Charmaz (2000) who, based on Glaser's arguments for data emerging without the researcher doing anything (Glaser 2002), argues that classic grounded theory is positivist by nature because it assumes an objective reality and a

neutral observer. By contrast, not all researchers agree with the previously mentioned critiques: Urquhart (2002), Hallberg (2006), Moore (2009) and Levers (2013) all attribute a critical realist ontology to classic grounded theory whilst retaining the objectivist epistemology, thereby placing classic grounded theory in the post-positivist paradigm. However, it is important to note that Glaser considers grounded theory a research method separate from philosophical constraints (Urquhart 2002; Hallberg 2006) and that it is intended as an alternative to all paradigms (Glaser 2005). He describes grounded theory as a “general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area” (Glaser 1992, 16). Glaser’s arguments for classic grounded theory to be epistemologically and ontologically neutral have been described as naïve, non-committal and an “epistemological fairy tale” (Bryant 2009), but Holton (2009) deflected this criticism by arguing that classic grounded theory as a general methodology can adopt whichever philosophical perspective is appropriate to the research and the researcher.

On a more practical level, one of the main features that sets classic grounded theory apart from other qualitative methodologies and methods of inquiry is the use of constant comparison of data. Constant comparison means that data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously: Data is collected and coded, after which new data is collected and coded, and these codes are compared to the previous codes to find patterns. Codes are

then compared to emerging categories (which are groups of codes), and categories to categories. Finally, the emerging theory is compared to the literature (Glaser and Holton 2004; Holton 2010). Throughout the research process the researcher produces memos, which become an integral part of the research in the latter stages (Engward 2013). They allow the researcher to reflect on their decision-making and on findings, and help develop ideas and codes (Kenny and Fourie 2015). Eventually, a substantive theory will emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Substantive theories, as opposed to formal theories, are local, narrow and limited in nature and seek to explain only the situation under investigation. Formal theories are all-inclusive broader applications consisting of multiple substantive theories (Kenny and Fourie 2015). The end-product of doctoral research as a single study will therefore most likely be a substantive theory rather than a formal theory (Gasson 2004). However, this substantive theory will undoubtedly lay the foundations for further research.

Coding in grounded theory has multiple stages. One of the distinctive features between the various forms of grounded theory is the differentiation of the coding stages. A critical and comprehensive comparison of the coding stages in the various forms of grounded theory is outside of the scope of this paper, but can be found in Kenny and Fourie (2015). Although there are some minor discrepancies in the literature as to the exact division of the number of coding stages in classic grounded theory (see figure 1), the majority of literature describes three stages: open coding, selective coding and

theoretical coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 2005; Holton 2010; Jones and Alony 2011; Engward 2013; Kenny and Fourie 2015; Chametzky 2016). During the open coding stage, data is analysed line-by-line, and a key word is attributed to each incident. Through constant comparison, these codes are then grouped into conceptual categories after which constant comparison will result in the emergence of a core category. The emergence of the core category will allow the researcher to progress to the selective coding stage. The researcher now reduces their focus to the core category and refines the interview questions to reflect this focus. This process, called theoretical sampling, will facilitate the integration of categories into higher-level substantive concepts. At this point, the researcher engages in theoretical sampling, where the analysis of the substantive concepts will highlight relationships between them, allowing for a theory explaining the basic social process to emerge. Glaser (1992) points out that at this stage the literature should be consulted to facilitate emergence.

Measures of quality in classic Grounded Theory

As with all research, grounded theory research needs to be evaluated for its quality in order to establish its contribution to the wider area under review. It is inappropriate to judge qualitative research by quantitative standards. Rather, it should be judged by its degree of trustworthiness and rigour (Gasson 2004). Although trustworthiness and rigour are not identical (one could argue that the rigour of a study determines the trustworthiness of its findings), a distinct overlap between these concepts exists.

Trustworthiness is described by Bowen (2009) as the conceptual soundness which allows the evaluation of the value of qualitative research and is determined by four factors: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Brown et al. 2002). Credibility refers to how much the data collected accurately reflects the phenomenon (Beck 1993), how much confidence one can have in the truth of the findings (Bowen 2009) and whether participants recognise the outcome of a study (Guba and Lincoln 1989). However, as classic grounded theory does not aim to represent participants' experiences, but rather generates an abstract representation that explains them (Cooney 2011) credibility in grounded theory can also be shown when other researchers and practitioners can recognise the situation from reading the study and whether the theory explains the situation. Furthermore, changes that are made during the grounded theory study show that the methodology was applied correctly, which evidences credibility. After all, the constant comparative methods specifically asks for changes during the

study as and when new data becomes available (Hallberg 2006). Finally, Chiovitti and Piran (2003) argue that the researcher's assumptions, understandings and interpretations should be clearly described and their effect on the research recognised to enhance credibility. Credibility therefore can be enhanced through reflexive practice, which is also discussed by Hall and Callery (2001) who argue that sufficient detail of data collection and a reflexive discussion of the research process enable readers to judge the quality of the research. Similarly, Glaser (1992) highlights the emergent nature of grounded theory, and advises including reflexivity in the constant comparison process as a method of enhancing the quality of a grounded theory study. Transferability indicates to which degree a theory is applicable to another setting or context (Gasson 2004; Sikolia et al. 2013). Even though qualitative researchers cannot make the same claims to generalisability as positivist researchers due to the interpretive nature of qualitative research, transferability of a theory can be demonstrated by identifying similarities or differences in the situation onto which it is projected (Gasson 2004) or that findings have meaning to people in similar contexts (Cooney 2011). Brown et al. (2002) write that dependability is the confirmation that the data represents the changing conditions of the situation being researched. Morrow (Morrow 2005) adds to this that the data should be considered across time, researchers and analysis. Dependability can be established via an audit trail (Bowen 2009; Sikolia et al. 2013) Confirmability is

established when another researcher can confirm the research findings if they are presented with the same set of data (Sikolia et al. 2013).

The trustworthiness of qualitative research, and therefore grounded theory, also depends on the rigour applied by the researcher. Cooney (2011) proposes that rigour can be conceptualised in three broad ways: methodological rigour, interpretive rigour or a combined focus. Although methodological rigour is concerned with best research practice, and interpretive rigour focuses on the trustworthiness of the interpretations made, it is hard to argue one is more important than the other. Therefore, the combined focus proposed by Cooney (2011) seems most appropriate. Various authors suggest criteria for determining rigour in grounded theory research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasised two criteria for determining the quality of an emerging theory: that it fits the situation and that it works. Glaser (1978; 1992) suggests fit, work, relevance, modifiability, parsimony and scope, whereas Gasson (2004) presents four interpretive criteria for rigour in grounded theory research: confirmability, dependability/auditability, authenticity and transferability. Cooney (2011), using Beck (1993) as a foundation, argues that rigour in grounded theory is demonstrated through three criteria: credibility, auditability and fittingness. Gasson (2004) further argues that the concepts of credibility and authenticity may be used to demonstrate internal consistency. Furthermore, Cooney (2011) argues that fittingness, which is concerned with demonstrating that outcomes have meaning to others in similar situations, could

also be termed transferability. In addition, Glaser and Strauss (1967) pose that grounded theory must be applicable in daily situations and link fit with generality so that a theory is relevant to various situations. This argument brings fittingness, transferability and fit on the same level. Therefore, following this argument, amalgamating the various proposed criteria into one framework of questions (see Table 1) to determine rigour for grounded theory seems appropriate. In order to enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of a grounded theory study, Bowen (2009) suggested the use of an audit trial. Audit trials involve the systematic documentation of data gathered and decisions made. Audit trials allow for a grounded theory to be verified independently to the researcher so that the rigour of the process can be evaluated. Although the creation of an audit trial sounds like an additional task to the grounded theory process, in practice most if not all of the requirements for an audit trial are met by the memos which are an integral part of the method. Additionally, by making sure memos contain rich description, an extra dimension to rigour can be established.

Table 1: Questions about rigour that can be used to establish trustworthiness of a grounded theory through trustworthiness criteria.

Criterion	Question
Fit/transferability/modifiability	Does the theory explain the situation, can it be used elsewhere and can it be adapted for future use?
Work/relevance	Does the theory help explain the situation to the people involved?
Credibility/authenticity	Does the data accurately reflect the situation?
Auditability	Can another researcher confirm the findings when presented with the same data?
Parsimony	Is the theory unnecessarily complicated?
Scope	Does the theory account for as much variation in the data as possible?

Classic Grounded Theory to investigate evidence-based course leadership

The study of evidence-based course leadership in higher education focusses on two different areas of practice: higher education course leadership, and evidence-based

practice. Course leadership is an understudied area of research, with few publications discussing the role of the course leader in higher education (van Veggel and Howlett 2018). Although evidence-based practice is an area of ever evolving research in many disciplines, there is a distinct lack of research on whether course leaders in higher education apply evidence-based practice methods in their professional practice. This lack of a pre-existing theory points the researcher towards classic grounded theory to investigate and generate a new theory on course leaders' experiences (Jones and Alony 2011; Engward 2013; Ahmed and Haag 2016).

Since leadership, and therefore course leadership, is an inherent complex social process (Parry 1998), selection of cGT as a research methodology seems a logical choice. Indeed, Parry (1998), Toor and Ofori (2008) and (Evans 2013) argue that grounded theory is appropriate for leadership research, and Levers (2013) poses that social processes are the main topics of interest for grounded theory research. As course leaders are cogs in the organisational machine that is the higher education curriculum, the selection of grounded theory to investigate organisational leadership aligns with Lakshman (2007), who utilised grounded theory to investigate organisational leadership.

Similarly, classic grounded theory has been successfully used to investigate phenomena in education. Various authors (e.g. Chong and Yeo (2015), Kolb (2012) and Kennedy and Lingard (2006)) discuss the use of grounded theory for educational research,

whereas Malik, McKenna and Griffiths (2017) investigated the integration of evidence-based practice into higher education teaching and learning practice, and Miller et al. (2017) discussed the experiences of academic librarians with evidence-based practice. Grounded theory therefore is an appropriate selection for research in education and higher education settings for areas of research where no theory currently exists. Moreover, grounded theories regarding experiences and perceptions of evidence-based practice have been published in various contexts (see e.g. Masso, McCarthy and Kitson (2014), Gordon, Cooper and Dumbleton (2009), Aarons and Palinkas (2007), Bhandari et al. (2003) and Dubouloz et al. (1999)), demonstrating that it is an appropriate methods for investigating course leaders' experiences with evidence-based practice. Finally, Walsham (2006) and (Evans 2013) recognise the importance of the research method and methodology fitting the researcher. The rigour, precision, logical reasoning and attention to detail demanded by grounded theory's critical realist ontology, fit comfortably with my personal evidence-based practice philosophy, whereas the objectivist nature of grounded theory recognises my need for removing biases as much as possible to enable discovery of evidence-based knowledge to help explain the world around me.

Potential shortcomings in using GT

Jones and Alony (2011) argue that grounded theory presents several risks when selected for doctorate research: firstly, there is the risk that no substantial or significant theory may be uncovered. Secondly, the nature of grounded theory may be misunderstood by other researchers and practitioners. However, from a more practical perspective, the primary limitation is the researcher's inexperience with the classic grounded theory method. The terminology used is different from all other qualitative methodologies, which can be a hurdle for novice researchers (Deady 2011). Moreover, the general consensus appears to be that the best way to understand "doing classic GT" is by doing it, rather than reading about it (Glaser 1998; Gasson 2004; Giske and Artinian 2007; Deady 2011; Breckenridge 2013; Chametzky 2016). Although in theory this sounds relatively straightforward, from the perspective of a doctoral researcher new to grounded theory the idea of only having a partial understanding is daunting. This becomes especially prevalent when trying to "fit" classic grounded theory into a doctoral programme where institutional processes require certain information in advance, such as a comprehensive literature review, a complete research design and a thorough ethical consideration (Xie 2009; Ahmed and Haag 2016). However, Glaser argued for the development of a "compromised research proposal" to meet the requirements of a standardised qualitative research proposal without disregarding the GT principles. This proposal was subsequently adapted by Xie (2009) to meet

institutional requirements for doctoral programmes. Finally, Glaser (1999) describes grounded theory as a total package that fits in the scheduled time of postgraduate research study. Therefore, classic grounded theory should be considered an appropriate approach for doctoral research.

Conclusion

Grounded theory has been used in various areas strongly related to the current research area. It is the only methodology that aims to generate a theory instead of using a pre-existing one. As there currently is no theory that explains evidence-use by course leaders in small-specialist higher education, grounded theory is the only methodology appropriate. The selection of classic grounded theory as originally developed by Glaser and Strauss fits with the researcher's philosophical stance, and with the area under research. Potential shortcomings have been highlighted, and solutions to those shortcomings have been presented. This paper therefore demonstrates that classic grounded theory is a methodology that fits with the research area under consideration and is an appropriate choice.

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Biographical note

Nieky van Veggel is a senior lecturer and course manager in bioveterinary science at Writtle University College. He is undertaking a Doctorate in Education (EdD) at Anglia Ruskin University researching evidence-use by course leaders in small specialist higher education institutions.

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