The place of the literature review in grounded theory research

Ciarán Dunne*

School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

For those employing grounded theory as a research methodology, the issue of how and when to engage with existing literature is often problematic, especially for PhD students. With this in mind, the current article seeks to offer some clarity on the topic and provide novice grounded theory researchers in particular with advice on how to approach the issue of the literature review in grounded theory. This is done by reviewing the origins of grounded theory, exploring the original stance taken by the founders of the methodology with regard to the literature review, tracking how this position has changed over time, outlining the rationale associated with specific positions and discussing ideas for reconciling opposing perspectives. Coupled with this, the author draws on his own experience of using grounded theory for his PhD research to explain how extant literature may be used and discusses how the nature of engagement with existing literature may impact upon the overall written presentation of a grounded theory study.

Keywords: grounded theory; literature review; qualitative research; research methodology

Introduction

Grounded theory, a research methodology primarily associated with qualitative research, was first proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967. According to its founders, grounded theory constitutes an innovative methodology, facilitating 'the discovery of theory from data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). This implies that in grounded theory the researcher is *not* focused on testing hypotheses taken from existing theoretical frameworks, but rather develops a new 'theory' grounded in empirical data collected in the field. As such, these data are deliberately privileged above extant theoretical concepts.

Grounded theory comprises several unique methodological elements – such as constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling – which differentiate it from other research methodologies. Unlike most strategies of inquiry, grounded theory demands that data collection and analysis occur concurrently, rather than in a linear sequence. Indeed, Payne (2007, p. 68) remarks that 'one of the unique features of grounded theory analysis is the dynamic interplay of data collection and analysis'. Given its unique approach, grounded theory can be difficult to use. Indeed, one of the most problematic issues relates to *how* and *when* existing literature should be used during a grounded theory study. This issue represents the central concern of the

*Email: ciaran.dunne@dcu.ie

current article. However, prior to exploring this in detail, it is first useful to reflect on the origins of grounded theory and recognise the context within which the methodology was developed.

A cause for its time – the origins of grounded theory

According to Suddaby (2006, p. 633), 'like most difficult subjects, grounded theory is best understood historically.' That is, the historic context from which it emerged is central to appreciating its ethos and maxims. Specifically, grounded theory was developed as a response to two principal factors. Firstly, it represented a revolt against the dominance of a quantitative ideology pervading social science research during the 1960s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Seale, 2004). This 'winter of positivism', as McCracken (1988, p. 14) terms it, meant that qualitative research was often derided as 'impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic and biased' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5), therefore occupying a subordinate status within social science research. The development of grounded theory was a response to this criticism; an attempt 'to make "scientific" that which had commonly been accused of being "mere journalism" or even "fiction"' (Johnson, Long, & White, 2001, p. 245). As McGhee, Marland and Atkinson (2007, pp. 334–335) explain, grounded theory offered a way of 'challenging the status quo in social research, as contemporary studies were dominated by the testing of "grand theory" and were deductive in nature'. As such, grounded theory can be seen as a reaction to external forces, in this case the hegemony of quantitative research methods during that particular period.

Secondly, researchers who in principle espoused qualitative inquiry nonetheless recognised a lack of systematic guidelines, which would improve the quality of research and also counter the criticisms of quantitative thinkers. Glaser and Strauss' frustration with the generation of theories from *a priori* assumptions constituted a catalyst for the development of a method that could instead generate theory from data obtained in the 'real' world. By combining 'the depth and richness of qualitative interpretive traditions with the logic, rigor and systematic analysis inherent in quantitative survey research', grounded theory constituted a pioneering research approach (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 548). It was an attempt to 'liberate theory from the seductive comforts of the armchair and empirical research from the uninspiring and restrictive confines of analysing variables or verifying hypotheses' (Dey, 2004, p. 82). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. vii), it represented an attempt to bridge 'the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research' by providing practical guidelines that would enable the rigorous construction of theories relating to social processes from raw data. In this sense, its introduction was a response to internal pressures within the field of qualitative research.

While the espousal of grounded theory as a preferred research methodology was initially quite slow, over the last two decades grounded theory has become extremely popular in qualitative research (Payne, 2007). It is used in many fields, ranging from the study of software development processes (Coleman & O'Connor, 2007), to research on relational identity in intercultural friendships (Lee, 2006), to studies on beer consumption (Pettigrew, 2002). It is widely used in healthcare research and is particularly popular in the field of nursing (e.g. Artinian, Giske, & Cove, 2009; Coyne & Cowley, 2006; McCann & Clark, 2003a).

Grounded theory as an evolving methodology

Since it was first presented, grounded theory has been the subject of multiple definitions and interpretations. Although at its nascent stage Glaser and Strauss 'invited their readers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9), since the 1990s Glaser in particular has become uneasy with diverse interpretations of the methodology, a fact which resulted in an ideological split between himself and Strauss during the 1990s.[1] This rift in turn prompted confusion and uncertainty among many researchers using or studying the methodology. More recently, Glaser and Holton (2004) outlined the differences between grounded theory and qualitative data analysis from their perspective, arguing that those who do not recognise these differences are compromising grounded theory as it was originally developed.

Morse (2006), however, argues that the introduction of any research methodology into the public domain leaves it open to being adapted and employed differently to how the originator(s) envisaged. Strauss and Corbin (1994, p. 283) themselves make this point, remarking that 'a child once launched is very much subject to a combination of its origins and the evolving contingencies of life. Can it be otherwise with a methodology?'[2] Indeed, Johnson et al. (2001) posit that merging distinct approaches, including grounded theory, does not necessarily compromise methodological 'purity', but can actually enhance rigour. As a result of this ongoing jousting and the increasing use of grounded theory across diverse disciplines, Dey (2004, p. 80) posits 'there is no such thing as "grounded theory" if we mean by that a single, unified methodology, tightly defined and clearly specified.' Therefore, it is imperative that researchers who employ this methodology be well-versed on the topic in order to take their own informed and defensible position on how to apply it.

The chicken or the egg? – the literature review in grounded theory

Within the field of grounded theory research, the use of existing literature represents a polemical and divisive issue, which continues to spark debate. As Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p. 19) comment: 'Ever since the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, concerns have arisen regarding how students and researchers should approach and use the existing literature relevant to their research topic.' While engagement with existing literature *prior* to primary data collection is characteristic of most strategies of inquiry, Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally argued explicitly against this. However, as grounded theory has become increasingly popular, this idea has been the subject of vigorous debate. Specifically, the crux of the matter is not whether a literature review *should* be conducted – there is consensus that it should – but rather *when* it should be conducted and how extensive is should be (Cutcliffe, 2000; McGhee et al., 2007). In order to understand this issue in greater depth, however, it is necessary to firstly examine the initial rationale articulated by Glaser and Strauss.

In their original publication, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) explicitly advised *against* conducting a literature review in the substantive area of research at an early stage of the research process: 'An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study' (1967, p. 37). This stance directly contradicts most methodologies, which view a detailed literature review as an essential foundation upon which to

build a study. The reasoning behind this call for abstinence from existing literature, which is explored in greater detail below, essentially related to the desire to allow categories to emerge naturally from the empirical data during analysis, uninhibited by extant theoretical frameworks and associated hypotheses. According to Dey (2007, p. 176), the target of this contentious maxim 'was undoubtedly the researcher inclined to plough ahead along an established theoretical furrow regardless of the diversity and richness of the data, thereby diminishing its potential for a wider repertoire of theoretical innovation'. In practical terms, an early literature review in the specific area of study was seen as potentially stifling the process of developing a grounded theory and thus something that could detract from the quality and originality of the research.

In the ensuing decades, the position of Strauss in particular changed significantly. Indeed, Wiener (2007, pp. 298–299) refers to an initial uneasiness by many regarding the postponement of a literature review and acknowledges Strauss' willingness to deviate from this position. Together with Juliet Corbin, Strauss came to advocate an early review of relevant literature and this shift was one of the factors underpinning the aforementioned split with Glaser. Glaser (1998), for his part, although at times acknowledging the practical difficulties of strict adherence to this maxim, has remained staunch in his position, as evidenced in the following comments:

> Grounded theory's very strong dicta are a) do not do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is to be done, and b) when the grounded theory is nearly completed during the sorting and writing up, then the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison. (p. 67)

Glaser is not alone in this stance. Nathaniel (2006) echoes this argument, while Holton (2007, p. 269) is also resolutely purist in her view, arguing that 'grounded theory requires the researcher to enter the research field with no preconceived problem statement, interview protocols, or extensive review of literature'.

So, what precisely is the rationale behind this purist position? In what ways might an initial literature review in the substantive research area be detrimental to the overall research process? For Glaser, it appears that the fundamental concern is based on the premise that a detailed literature review conducted at the outset may 'contaminate' the data collection, analysis and theory development by leading the researcher to impose existing frameworks, hypotheses or other theoretical ideas upon the data, which would in turn undermine the focus, authenticity and quality of the grounded theory research. This concern is not exclusive to grounded theory. As Heath (2006, p. 519) points out, the desire 'to avoid imposing predetermined understanding and existing frameworks on the investigation' is a principle associated with most qualitative approaches. However, because the methodology privileges empirical data, Glaser (1992) argues that grounded theorists must 'learn not to know', which includes avoiding engagement with existing literature prior to entering the field. As McCallin (2003, p. 63) puts it, the fundamental concern is that 'the researcher may be sidetracked by received knowledge and interpretations that support taken-for-granted assumptions, which are not relevant in the new area of study'. Furthermore, Glaser (1998, p. 68) argues that a literature review may result in external 'rhetorical jargon' impinging upon the research. Indeed, Charmaz (2006, p. 165) suggests that delaying the literature review can help 'to avoid importing preconceived ideas and imposing them on your work. Delaying the review encourages you to articulate *your* ideas'.

Coupled with this, Glaser (1998, p. 68) also suggests that exposure to established theoretical ideas could leave the researcher 'awed out' by the work of others, thus undermining their sense of self-worth and competence in the realm of theory development. Although they view literature as an instrument in sensitising the researcher and a vehicle for directing theoretical sampling, thereby adopting a less extreme stance than Glaser, Strauss and Corbin (1998) echo this particular concern:

> It is not unusual for students to become enamoured with a previous study (or studies) either before or during their own investigations, so much so that they are nearly paralyzed in an analytical sense. It is not until they are able to let go and put trust in their abilities to generate knowledge that they finally are able to make discoveries of their own. (p. 49)

Lastly, on a more pragmatic level, Glaser (1998) also argues that given the unpredictable nature of grounded theory research, the literature most relevant to the research may not actually be known at the outset, and so conducting a time-consuming, extensive review of publications in a specific substantive area may be wasteful and inefficient, a point which is also articulated by Dick (2007) and Locke (2001).

In sum, we can say that these arguments *against* conducting a prior literature review are both ideological – in the sense that adhere to a postpositivist ontology (McGhee et al., 2007) – and pragmatic – in the sense that they seek to save time and energy by shepherding the researcher away from theoretical avenues which may ultimately be of little relevance to their research.

Prior to discussing the logic of this stance, it is worth clarifying at this point that Glaser and other purists are not calling for a blanket ban on engagement with existing literature. As stated above, the fundamental issue relates to *when*, and not *if*, engagement with extant knowledge should occur. From the purists' perspective, their concerns relate specifically to conducting a literature review in the substantive area of study at an early stage of the research process, while openly acknowledging the important role of extant literature in later stages of a grounded theory study. Specifically, their stance advocates that 'researchers integrate existing literature on the substantive topic into their thinking as the theoretical categories and framework stabilize' (Locke, 2001, p. 122). In this respect, grounded theorists adopt a respectful yet critical stance towards extant theories, and require 'extant concepts to earn their way into your narrative' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). Indeed, as Stern (2007) explains, a literature review which ensues from the emergent grounded theory is essential not only for academic honesty, but in order to demonstrate how the study builds on and contributes to extant knowledge within the field.

Literature, abstinence and 'theoretical virgins'

Having expounded the principle arguments *against* conducting an early literature review in the substantive area of research, it is useful to discuss the merits of these arguments in more detail and also introduce some alternative perspectives. Firstly, from a purely pragmatic viewpoint, the idea of postponing a literature review until data collection and analysis is well underway is simply unworkable for many researchers. This is particularly true for PhD students, whose research funding, ethical approval and progression through the doctoral process may all be heavily dependent upon producing a detailed literature review prior to commencing primary data collection

and analysis. This issue is acknowledged by several authors, including McGhee et al. (2007), Nathaniel (2006) and Glaser (1998) himself.

In addition to this, is it commonly argued that grounded theory is an effective research strategy for topics which have been subject to relatively little research and about which there is a paucity of knowledge (McCann & Clark, 2003a; Payne, 2007). However, this leads to a practical conundrum articulated by McGhee et al. (2007, pp. 339–340), who ask, 'but how can this paucity of knowledge be ascertained unless an initial review of literature is undertaken?' This links to a similar conundrum relating to the notion of the 'substantive' area of research. As outlined above, Glaser warns against early reading in the substantive area relating to the research, yet simultaneously encourages the researcher to be 'constantly reading vociferously in other substantive areas during his/her research' (Glaser, 1998, p. 68). However, without prior knowledge of the field, it is possible that the boundaries of the substantive area are not clearly identifiable, and furthermore, given that a researcher may not actually know what precisely constitutes the substantive area, how can they then know what does *not* constitute the substantive area? In which case, how should the researcher appropriately engage with extant literature? Still on this point, one of the reasons proffered by Glaser for not conducting an early literature review is that it may transpire that that particular area of literature is unrelated to the emergent grounded theory, which would constitute a waste of time for the researcher. However, surely it can be equally argued that the vociferous reading in apparently unrelated areas could constitute a similarly inefficient use of time and energy, yet this is precisely what is advised. Lastly, Glaser (1998, p. 71) refers to grounded theorists as 'empowered and free', yet the purist stance essentially curtails researchers' freedom to engage with extant literature at a time of their choosing.

Rather than simply critique the workability of the purist position, however, it is important to articulate the benefits of undertaking an early literature review when using grounded theory. In the first instance, it can provide a cogent rationale for a study, including a justification for a specific research approach (McGhee et al., 2007; Coyne & Cowley, 2006). Secondly, it can ensure the study has not already been done (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003) while simultaneously highlighting pertinent lacunae in existing knowledge (Creswell, 1998; Hutchinson, 1993). Thirdly, it can help contextualise the study (McCann & Clark, 2003a), orient the researcher (Urquhart, 2007) and reveal how the phenomenon has been studied to date (Denzin, 2002; McMenamin, 2006). Fourthly, it can help the researcher develop 'sensitising concepts' (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; McCann & Clark, 2003a), gain theoretical sensitivity (McCann & Clark, 2003b; McGhee et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), avoid conceptual and methodological pitfalls (McGhee et al., 2007) and actually become aware of, rather than numb to, possible unhelpful preconceptions (Maijala, Paavilainen, & Astedt-Kurki, 2003). Fifthly, it may promote 'clarity in thinking about concepts and possible theory development' (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006, p. 350). Lastly, not informing oneself about relevant literature at an early stage can leave the researcher open to criticism. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) remark:

> The open-mindedness of the researcher should not be mistaken for the empty mindedness of the researcher who is not adequately steeped in the research traditions of a discipline. It is after all, not very clever to rediscover the wheel, and the student or researcher who is ignorant of the relevant literature is always in danger of doing the equivalent. (p. 157)

Collectively, these arguments in favour of undertaking a literature review in the substantive area *before* commencing data collection and analysis are compelling.

Furthermore, in terms of the argument that engaging with literature may contaminate the research by imposing assumptions and preconceptions, the idea that any researcher undertakes a study without some level of prior knowledge or ideas is simply unrealistic. Cutcliffe (2000, p. 1480) posits that 'no potential researcher is an empty vessel, a person with no history or background', while Eisenhardt (2002, p. 12) remarks, 'it is impossible to achieve this idea of a clean theoretical slate.' Indeed, Kools, McCarthy, Durham and Robrecht (1996, p. 315) argue that 'rarely do researchers totally abandon prior substantive or methodological knowledge in the pursuit of understanding a complex social phenomenon'. Charmaz (2006) points out that both Dey (1999) and Layder (1998) suggest it is naïve to view any researcher as a 'tabula rusa', while Clarke (2005, p. 13; paraphrasing Elkins, 2003) argues: 'There is actually "something ludicrous about pretending to be a theoretical virgin".' Indeed, for researchers who are experienced in a certain field, the idea that they could somehow jettison all their prior knowledge of the field is unfeasible. Highlighting the controversy associated with this issue, Urquhart (2007, p. 351) states that 'the injunction that no literature that relates to the phenomena should be studied before coding the data is one of the most widespread reasons for the lack of use of grounded theory'. It should be noted, however, that the argument in favour of an early literature review does not refute the point that a researcher should try to approach each new project with a mind that is sufficiently open so as to allow new, perhaps contradictory, findings to emerge from the raw data. As Strübing (2007, p. 587) remarks, the fundamental point is 'not whether previous knowledge should be used in actual data analysis; the important insight lies rather in how to make proper use of previous knowledge'.

With regards to the idea that researchers may be unduly influenced by theoretical ideas and assumptions gleaned from extant literature, this argument appears to give little credit to the ability of researchers to be mindful of how extant ideas may be informing their research. Urquhart (2007, p. 351), for example, argues that, 'There is no reason why a researcher cannot be self aware and be able to appreciate other theories without imposing them on the data.' Indeed, if the fundamental concern of Glaser is the threat of external ideas impinging upon the research and distracting focus away from the raw data, then perhaps there is a way to monitor and counteract this threat which is less extreme than the initial abstinence from literature which he prescribes. After all, it would be both unfortunate and unconstructive to sacrifice the numerous advantages derived from conducting an early literature review based on a concern about what impact extant ideas *might* have on the researcher. In this respect, the purist stance represents a disproportionate response to an uncertain and unsubstantiated risk. Indeed, within the literature on grounded theory methodology, there now appears to be a growing consensus that some middle ground must be reached – a position which acknowledges the original ethos of grounded theory and the genuine concerns about the imposition of external frameworks, yet simultaneously recognises the often practical need for, and potential advantages of, engaging with existing literature in the substantive area at an early stage. In fact, Suddaby (2006, p. 635) reminds us that grounded theory itself was introduced as an attempt 'to achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism'. As such, the phenomenon of practitioners gravitating towards a middle ground on this particular issue is perhaps not surprising. One such example is Lempert (2007), who argues in favour of:

> on-going researcher familiarity with the literature of the substantive area of study and its applicable theories. Engaging the literature provides the researcher with knowledge of

the substantive area in sufficient depth to understand the parameters of the discourse and to enter into the current theoretical conversation. (p. 261)

Reflecting on the middle ground

One mechanism to counteract the possible negative impact of early engagement with extant literature on the grounded theory research process is the idea of reflexivity, defined by Robson (2002, p. 22; quoted in McGhee et al., 2007, p. 335) as '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'. This is of course not a new concept, particularly for qualitative researchers, and is based on the thesis that because the researcher influences both the gathering and interpretation of data, primary or secondary, the need for reflexivity forms a crucial part of the research process (Heath, 2006).

Importantly, it should be noted that several mechanisms which apply to reflexivity are already incorporated into the guidelines underpinning grounded theory. The process of 'memoing', for example, which is a central element of grounded theory, is fundamentally based on reflective thinking. As McCann and Clark (2003a, p. 15) explain, memos 'reflect the researcher's internal dialogue with the data at a point in time'. There is no reason, therefore, why memoing could not form an integral component of an early literature review, whereby the researcher could reflect on the ideas to which s/he has been exposed while engaging with existing literature. Specifically, regular memos resulting from an early literature review could record and outline the new ideas to which the researcher has been exposed, the propositions, values and context linked with a given theory, the possible shortcomings of the theory, and could also chronicle the manner in which the researcher's thinking might have changed as a result of accessing that knowledge.[3] This kind of reflective thinking, or what Suddaby (2006, p. 635) describes as being 'continuously aware of the possibility that you are being influenced by pre-existing conceptualizations of your subject', may be a simple yet effective mechanism for reducing the likelihood of hypotheses from extant theories subtly infiltrating, or more obviously hijacking, the grounded theory development. Furthermore, the constant comparative method, which is another key aspect of grounded theory, is another example of how reflective and analytical thinking can further the research process, as during this process the researcher is required to reflect on how extant knowledge and collected data can be integrated into the emerging grounded theory.

Learning from practical experience – a personal account of PhD research

As has been outlined, the debate around the role and place of extant knowledge in a grounded theory is complex, and given the contrasting perspectives, each researcher must make an informed and justifiable decision regarding how and when extant literature will be employed in a grounded theory study. This is best achieved by thorough reading in the field of grounded theory methodology, including a review of how other researchers have practically sought to address the issue.

In my own doctoral research, which was a grounded theory study of intercultural relations between students in higher education, having read in depth on grounded theory, taken workshops by experts in the field and discussed concerns with researchers experienced with the methodology, two discrete approaches to engaging with

existing empirical research and existing theoretical concepts were ultimately adopted. Prior to commencing data collection – in this case qualitative interviews – I engaged extensively with existing empirical studies relating to intercultural relations and student diversity in higher education, as well as literature on the internationalisation of higher education, in order to identify what work had been done, which issues were central to these fields, and what knowledge gaps existed. This review of existing research facilitated a familiarity with what McMenamin (2006, p. 134) terms the 'geography of a subject', and was central to the formulation and justification of the research questions and, importantly, enabled me to identify an area of focus which previously had been largely overlooked. Furthermore, this review was crucial insofar as it highlighted an important issue with many extant studies in the particular field, namely the strategy used to operationalise the concept of 'culture'. Typically, this slippery concept is somewhat crudely operationalised simply by using 'nationality' as a proxy for 'culture', yet in the context of increasing levels of intra-national diversity I argued that this approach was becoming less appropriate and therefore adopted my own approach, which sought both to highlight and address this issue to a certain extent. Furthermore, for many PhD students the research process can be fraught with concerns that they are not fully aware of the context within which their study resides, and this early literature review went some way to addressing these anxieties. As such, the motives for conducting an early literature review mirrored many of the arguments outlined above and in practical terms this early review constituted an important and necessary element of the doctoral progression process.

In terms of engaging with existing theoretical concepts, the fact that I came to the research environment having completed a postgraduate degree in the field of intercultural studies meant that I already had some existing theoretical knowledge. However, in keeping with the core ethos of grounded theory, I deliberately avoided imposing a specific theoretical framework on the study at the outset. This approach to extant theories is what Henwood and Pidgeon (2006, p. 350) term 'theoretical agnosticism', which they argue 'is a better watchword than theoretical ignorance to sum up the ways of using the literature at the early stages of the flow of work in grounded theory'. This approach does not advocate that the researcher ignore existing theories, but rather avoid the imposition of specific theoretical frameworks, as this may cause the researcher to analyse the data through a specific theoretical lens.

In practice, this meant that as the data collection and analysis progressed, and ideas and tentative hypotheses began to emerge, I began to consider how theories with which I was already familiar could perhaps be used to progress the analysis. Simultaneously, I also sought to identify new theories which could help explain or even contradict the multiple and diverse ideas emerging from the data analysis, in order to improve the quality, rigour and profundity of the analysis. For example, prior to commencing the study, I was already familiar – albeit to varying degrees – with theoretical constructs such as the 'culture distance hypothesis', 'social identity theory', 'uncertainty anxiety management', 'speech accommodation theory' and 'the contact hypothesis', each of which I ultimately drew on when analysing the data and discussing the findings in relation to extant concepts. However, during the course of data analysis and the application of the constant comparative method, which involved seeking out theoretical ideas from diverse fields to help further explain and explicate emerging ideas, I also drew on numerous theories with which I had been previously unfamiliar.

In exploring students' reported behaviours and attitudes towards intercultural contact on campus, for example, a powerful emergent category was that of 'utility',

whereby students' motives for engaging with intercultural contact were often under-pinned by a perceived value or benefit associated with such contact.[4] In an effort to further develop this category, I explored ideas from diverse fields and became familiar with 'social exchange theory', which proved extremely useful in discussing and developing the grounded theory findings, as it provided a theoretical reference point against which to compare the data. Furthermore, given that 'social exchange theory' is not commonly discussed in the field of intercultural studies, one of the concluding recommendations from the study was that this theory could represent a useful lens through which to explore such intercultural relations in the future.

Similarly, additional theoretical constructs such as 'homophily', the 'similarity attraction hypothesis' – both of which provide theoretical explanations for why individuals gravitate towards those whom they perceive to be similar to themselves – 'social penetration theory', and the concept of 'institutional completeness' – theories about which I had been largely ignorant prior to data collection – all proved extremely valuable in progressing the theoretical development and acted as useful reference points in the discussion of findings, which ranged from perceptions of cultural difference to experiences of intercultural contact. Indeed, the concept of 'institutional completeness' was particularly constructive in challenging the common assumption that greater levels of student diversity would correlate with increasing frequency of intercultural contact and intercultural friendships on campus. In this sense, the relationship with extant literature during the research process was a pragmatic one, whereby empirical findings and theoretical ideas from different fields were identified and accessed as and when it was deemed necessary in order to progress the study. This, however, was done in the context of constantly reflecting on how such ideas might be impacting upon the research, and I would regularly force myself to justify my decisions for drawing certain conclusions and propounding specific arguments.

The challenge of structuring grounded theory reports

This brings the discussion onto a final, yet important point relating to the use of extant literature in grounded theory studies. Given that I am drawing on personal experience, this point is perhaps most pertinent to PhD students. In a very practical manner, the relationship with extant literature and the manner, including the timing, in which it is accessed, has very significant implications for the actual *structure* of the final written output, in this case a doctoral thesis. Specifically, having undertaken a grounded theory study, the researcher may be unsure, in the write-up phase, as to how and when to incorporate a literature review within the overall structure of the written thesis. PhD supervisors may recommend the traditional 'literature review → findings → discussion' structure, yet this may not fit with how the actual research developed, and may even seem inimical to the logical presentation of the study. Indeed, given that the grounded theory research process is non-linear, it is understandable that attempts to present it in a linear format should prove problematic.

Conversely, the decision to wait until after the findings have been presented to engage with extant literature might be met with confusion by examiners or reviewers who may be experts in the substantive field, but not necessarily experts in grounded theory, thereby leaving the researcher open to criticism and significant re-workings. Equally, weaving the introduction and discussion of theoretical concepts into the presentation of research findings may lead to excessively long chapters peppered with tangential explanations of diverse theories, and again detract from the flow and thrust

of the study. As such, the decision on how to structure the written thesis in a manner which best reflects the focus and natural development of the study is often problematic. Indeed, this can represent a formidable, yet unanticipated challenge at a point when time pressures are particularly acute, so the researcher should plan for this at an early stage.

Whatever decision is taken, it is imperative that the researcher clearly articulate this issue from the outset and cogently outline and defend the preferred option in order to minimise the potential for misunderstanding between the author and the reader. Once again, in the case of my doctoral study, an in-depth literature review relating to existing empirical studies in the field, which culminated in the articulation of the key research questions and justification for the study, was included at an early stage of the written thesis. This essentially constituted a 'contextualisation' of the study, rather than a traditional literature review. However, detailed engagement with extant theoretical concepts was not included until after the data analysis chapters had been presented, although it should be noted that during the data analysis chapters it was clearly signalled that specific theories relevant to particular findings would be explored in detail at a later point, thereby leading the reader through the process and (hopefully) appeasing any concerns they might have had about the relative absence of in-depth engagement with extant theories to that point.

I am certainly not proposing this structure as a template for all grounded theory studies. As has been stated, each researcher must present their research in a manner which is most appropriate to their particular study and best communicates their findings. However, this point may make novice grounded theorists aware at an early stage that the debate around the use of existing literature in grounded theory research is not simply an ideological one, but one which will ultimately culminates in how the researcher actually presents their study to a broader audience.

Conclusion

The central concern of this article has been to discuss in detail the role of extant literature in grounded theory research. In doing, the objective has been to inform readers of the ongoing debate around this topic and to examine the rationales informing both sides of the debate. The intent has also been to present ideas which might help reconcile polarised positions and also to highlight the practical issues associated with structuring the presentation of a written grounded theory study.

Just as reflexivity has been proffered as an instrument which may help bridge the gap between both sides, I myself must recognise my own stance on the matter. While the concerns articulated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 continue to be valid, I believe that the call for abstinence from reading in the substantive area prior to data collection is a measure which is not only disproportionate but one which can detract from the overall quality of the research. Ironically, this in turn may undermine one of the original reasons for the introduction of grounded theory, namely to enhance the competence and quality of outputs of qualitative researchers.

Notes

1. Glaser argued that the version of grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), specifically the analytical stage referred to as 'axial coding', forced the data into preconceived categories, which went against the fundamental idea of the methodology (Charmaz,

2006; Walker & Myrick, 2006). As a result, he refused to recognise it as grounded theory, but instead termed it 'full conceptual description' (Glaser, 1992, p. 122). For a detailed analysis of the differences between Glaser's perspective on grounded theory and that of Strauss, see Walker and Myrick (2006).

2. Melia (1996, p. 369) raises a similar question: 'When does a method change its name? (When the jet was developed, was it still a plane?)'

3. Hesse-Biber (2007, p. 326) offers an example of an exercise in reflective thinking.

4. For example, many Irish students reported engaging with German students in order to get help with their German language projects.

Notes on contributor

Dr Ciarán Dunne is based at the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies at Dublin City University, Ireland. He holds a BA in international marketing and languages and an MA in intercultural studies. His PhD dissertation, which was awarded an 'honourable mention' by the International Association of Intercultural Research in 2009, was a grounded theory exploration of intercultural relations among university students, with a particular focus on the perspectives of host culture students. Ciarán currently lectures in intercultural communication and Spanish language.

References

Artinian, B., Giske, T., & Cone, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Glaserian grounded theory in nursing research: Trusting emergence.* New York: Springer.

Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (2007). Introduction. grounded theory research: Methods and practices. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 1–28). London: Sage.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* London: Sage.

Chiovitti, R.F., & Piran, N. (2003). Rigour and grounded theory research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 44*(4), 427–435.

Clarke, A.E. (2005). *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Coffey, A., & Aktinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Coleman, G., & O'Connor, R. (2007). Using grounded theory to understand software process improvement: A study of Irish software product companies. *Information and Software Technology, 49*(6), 654–667.

Coyne, I., & Cowley, S. (2006). Using grounded theory to research parent participation. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 11*(6), 501–515.

Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cutcliffe, J.R. (2000). Methodological issues in grounded theory. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 31*(6), 1474–1484.

Denzin, N.K. (2002). The interpretive process. In M. Huberman & M.B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 340–368). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln Y.S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dey, I. (1999). *Grounding grounded theory.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Dey, I. (2004). Grounded theory. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 80–93). London: Sage.

Dey, I. (2007). Grounding categories. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 167–190). London: Sage.

Dick, B. (2007). What can grounded theorists and action researchers learn from each other? In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 398–416). London: Sage.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (2002). Building theories from case. In M. Huberman & M.B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 5–36). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Elkins, J. (2003). *Visual Studies: A skeptical introduction.* New York: Routledge.

Glaser, B.G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B.G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussions.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B.G., & Holton, J. (2004). Remodeling grounded theory. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 5*(2), Article 4. Retrieved October 12, 2006, from http://www.qualitative-research. net/fqs-texte/2-04/2-04glaser-e.htm.

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Heath, H. (2006). Exploring the influences and use of the literature during a grounded theory study. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 11*(6), 519–528.

Henwood, K., & Pidgeon, N. (2006). Grounded theory. In G.M. Breakwell, S. Hammond, C. Fife-Shaw, & Smith, J.A. (Eds.), *Research methods in psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 342–365). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hesse-Biber, S.N. (2007). Teaching grounded theory. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 311–338). London: Sage.

Holton, J. (2007). The coding process and its challenges. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 265–289). London: Sage.

Hutchinson, S.A. (1993). Grounded theory: The method. In P.L. Munhall & C.A. Boyd (Eds.), *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective* (2nd ed., pp. 180–212). New York: National League for Nursing Press.

Johnson, M., Long, T., & White, A. (2001). Arguments for 'British Pluralism' in qualitative health research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 33*(2), 243–249.

Kools, S. McCarthy, M., Durham, R., & Robrecht, R. (1996). Dimensional analysis: Broadening the conception of grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research, 6*(3), pp. 312–330.

Layder, D. (1998). *Sociological practice: Linking theory and social research.* London: Sage.

Lee, P.-W. (2006). Bridging cultures: Understanding the construction of relational identity in intercultural friendship. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 35*(1), 3–22.

Lempert, L.B. (2007). Asking questions of the data: memo writing in the grounded theory tradition. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 245–264). London: Sage.

Locke, K. (2001). *Grounded theory in management research.* London: Sage.

Maijala, H., Paavilainen, E., & Astedt-Kurki, P. (2003). The use of grounded theory to study interaction. *Nurse Researcher, 11*(2), 40–57.

McCallin, A.M. (2003). Grappling with the literature in a grounded theory study. *Contemporary Nurse, 15*(1–2), 61–69.

McCann, T., & Clark, E. (2003a). Grounded theory in nursing research: Part 1 – Methodology. *Nurse Researcher, 11*(2), 7–18.

McCann, T., & Clark, E. (2003b). Grounded theory in nursing research: Part 3 – Application. *Nurse Researcher, 11*(2), 29–39.

McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview. Qualitative research methods series 13.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

McGhee, G., Marland, G.R., & Atkinson, J. (2007). Grounded theory research: Literature reviewing and reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 60*(3), 334–342.

McMenamin, I. (2006). Process and text: Teaching students to review the literature. *PS: Political Science and Politics, 39*(1), 133–135.

Melia, K.M. (1996). Rediscovering Glaser. *Qualitative health research, 6*(3), 368–378.

Morse, J.M. (2006). The politics of developing research methods. *Qualitative Health Research, 16*(1), 3–4.

Nathaniel, A.K. (2006). Thoughts on the literature review and GT. *Grounded Theory Review, 5*(2/3), 35–41.

Payne, S. (2007). Grounded theory. In E. Lyons & A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data in psychology* (pp. 65–86). London: Sage.

Pettigrew, S. (2002). A grounded theory of beer consumption in Australia. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 5*(2), 112–122.

Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research* (2nd ed.). Blackwell: Oxford.

Seale, C. (2004). Quality in qualitative research. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 409–419). London: Sage.

Stern, P.N. (2007). On solid ground: Essential properties for growing grounded theory. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 114–126). London: Sage.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273–285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strübing, J. (2007). Research as pragmatic problem-solving: The Pragmatist roots of emprically-grounded theorizing. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 580–601). London: Sage.

Suddaby, R. (2006). From the editors: What grounded theory is not. *Academy of Management Journal, 49*(4), 633–642.

Urquhart, C. (2007). The evolving nature of grounded theory method: The Case of the information systems discipline. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 339–360). London: Sage.

Walker, D., & Myrick, F. (2006). Grounded theory: An Exploration of process and procedure. *Qualitative Health Research, 16*(4), 547–559.

Wiener, C. (2007). Making teams work in conducting grounded theory. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 293–310). London: Sage.