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Grounded Theory

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One of the basic tenets of community psychology is that researchers strive to capture participants' voices. Consistent with this are grounded theory approaches, which emphasize developing theoretical frameworks that arise from close examinations of participants' narratives and behavior (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Such bottom-up qualitative approaches, in which findings are emergent from data (Glaser, 1992), have found receptive audiences in community-based research (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Stewart, 2000). In this chapter we provide an introduction to key methods in grounded theory and an example from a program of research with West African immigrant families.

INTRODUCTION TO GROUNDED THEORY

The several grounded theory approaches that exist in the literature all stem from the groundbreaking work by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory.* Glaser and Strauss (1967) were primarily concerned with (a) introducing the idea that theory can arise from data and (b) distinguishing the type of theory generated by grounded theory—"substantive," as opposed to "formal" (pp. 32–34). Consistent with the same 1960s ethos that brought community psychologists together at Swampscott, Massachusetts, the emphasis on substantive theory placed grounded theory at a more grassroots level than most of sociological theory to that point. Grounded theory has grown in the almost half century of its existence, but at the most basic level it remains an approach in which researchers use data to develop theory from the bottom up.

Maintaining Groundedness and Reflexivity

In order to build theory that is grounded, data must drive analytic processes. But of course, data are not agentic in any meaningful sense. Researchers set agendas for what kind of data they collect and use procedures to collect data that inevitably bias the content and form of their data. However, researchers can minimize these biases, and grounded theory researchers use a number of concepts and methods to stay as grounded as possible within the conceptual parameters in which they work.

For some, staying grounded means ignoring a priori knowledge of the topic of their research. They avoid literature reviews or discussion with like-minded researchers on topics relevant to the data prior to data collection or analysis. This becomes more difficult as they do more research in an area, as research projects usually build on one another. The role of *sensitizing concepts* (Blumer, 1969) is helpful here. Sensitizing concepts is a broad term referring to those interests, thoughts, and hunches that researchers have before they get started doing research. They spark researchers' thinking about a topic (van den Hoonaard, 1997), although they do not guide it per se. Charmaz (2014) clarified that sensitizing concepts "provide a place to *start* inquiry, not to *end* it" (p. 31, emphasis in original). The point with sensitizing concepts is that they are not formal theories, while at the same time they acknowledge that researchers are not without ideas and interests prior to examining data.

Another tool often used in grounded theory to minimize the effect of prior knowledge on theory building is reflexivity. Reflexivity has become a basic tenet of contemporary thinking throughout qualitative research. Reflexivity stems from the

idea that researchers are the primary data collection tools—researchers design studies, ask questions, and even influence data collection in the way they present themselves and appear to participants during data collection. Reflexivity involves active self-reflection upon researchers' own subjectivity in an attempt to make biases explicit and examine how these biases might influence findings. Being reflexive might include journaling, documenting discussions with research collaborators, and noting personal preferences and biases prior to and during data collection and analysis. Reflexivity has been written about extensively (e.g., Watt, 2007), and any researcher serious about qualitative methodology should spend time with this literature.

Although not a method per se, working with research collaborators can also be important in keeping theory grounded. Collaborators may provide critical points of view that facilitate meaningful reflexivity and, if well trained, may even provide good models for becoming more reflexive. Collaborators become almost essential in identifying emergent codes and are, of course, indispensible in work that relies upon interrater reliability.

Qualitative researchers in general should pay close attention in the design stage to strategies designed to increase the rigor of their work. There is no qualitative analogy to the statistical summaries of data presented in Results sections of quantitative research articles. Qualitative researchers must therefore rely solely on rigorous research designs and well-crafted presentations of methods to convince readers that findings are reliable and valid. There are a number of techniques for strategies for rigor (for a review, see Padgett, 2008), but primary are triangulation, verification, and auditability. Triangulation refers to using multiple perspectives (e.g., of collaborators on a research team or of different sets of participants), data collection formats (e.g., interviews and observations), or more conventional uses of multiple points of view, like interrater reliability. Verification often involves reviewing findings and analyses with participants; the technique of member checking is a common form of verification. Auditability refers to the idea that others might follow the same research processes and come to similar conclusions, much like replicability in quantitative research. Keeping an "audit trail," a document with dates of meetings, decisions taken, notes, and even copies of correspondence between researchers, is an effective technique to ensure auditability.

Sampling

One of the hallmarks of grounded theory is theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a purposive sampling process in which researchers select participants and groups for comparison in order to generate categories of meaning in their data. It is an iterative process based on researchers gauging what they know about these categories of meaning currently and sampling new participants who they think will be able to provide relevant information about what more they would like to know. This means that data analysis must begin as soon as data collection does. Theoretical sampling is "inductive and contingent" (Hood, 2007, p. 161) in that it is based on using initial analyses of data to direct further selection of participants. Participants are recruited until conceptual categories of data reach a point of "theoretical saturation," or a point where "no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category" (Hood, 2007, p. 161). Until theoretical saturation is reached, sampling proceeds.

Theoretical sampling implies that (a) the size and exact makeup of samples are unknown at the beginning of research and (b) analysis begins at the start of data collection. Not knowing the size and composition of samples can produce practical headaches that are, perhaps, unfamiliar to nongrounded theory researchers. For instance, not having a good sense of the number of participants in a research study *by design* presents a quandary when applying for research funding or submitting a research proposal to an institutional review board. In practice most grounded theory researchers estimate a number as if sample size were able to be determined beforehand.

Analysis

The primary analytical tool proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was the constant comparative method (CCM). CCM is the driver of theoretical sampling and saturation, the basis of coding and memoing in grounded theory, and the process for building theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 105) described four stages: "(a) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (b) integrating categories and their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory."

Coding

The first step of CCM begins by coding each incident or event in data with "as many categories of analysis as possible" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). To aid researchers in this task, Glaser and Strauss provided a "rule for constant comparative methods: *while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category*" (p. 106, emphasis in original). Coding is the process of applying a label for a category of meaning to a section of text (i.e., indicator). In grounded theory, coding is (a) bottom up, that is, not based on a priori categories, and (b) an iterative process proceeding from substantive to theoretical coding. Grounded theorists proceed from the relationships between indicators in the data, to the relation of these indicators to larger categories, and then to the properties of these larger categories (for an informative discussion, see Kelle, 2007). The distinction between substantive and theoretical codes is the difference between the content observed in the data and what researchers theorize about that content.

Substantive coding starts with open coding and ends with axial coding. Open coding begins line by line, with researchers reading their textual data (e.g., transcriptions, field notes) and summarizing each line of text with a few words (usually in the margins). It is here that the idea that theory actually can emerge from data is most credible. Line-by-line coding "forces the researcher to verify and saturate categories, minimizes missing an important category, and ensures relevance by generating codes with emergent fit to the substantive area under study" (Holton, 2007, p. 275). Early ideas generated by the close inspection of data are the fodder for theoretical codes and the basis of emergent theory. Time and effort spent using CCM at this point will pay off later.

Open coding of data should be performed on a reasonably diverse set of initial data and then discussed with research collaborators. Open codes can be listed and collapsed to account for different phrasing of categories (e.g., in a study of family roles, "childcare" and "taking care of children") and, following discussion, to account for some agreed-upon conceptual distance (e.g., "family caretaking" versus "childcare" and "eldercare"). At the end of open coding, researchers should have a list of codes that the research team agrees are relevant to the data and sensitizing concepts. These become axial codes.

Axial codes, sometimes referred to as thematic codes, are those codes that researchers apply to all of the data. They should be sufficiently broad enough to capture a range of indicators but specific enough not to cover overly large sections, or "chunks," of text. This means that time should be spent writing clear definitions. Clear definitions will aid in applying axial codes to data sources that follow those with which open coding was undertaken. Another practical aspect of axial codes is their number. Assigning codes to text chunks is a cognitive process requiring substantial sustained attention to the data, code definitions, and comparison of codes. Researchers must read content while at the same time remembering what categories to track. They must therefore consider carefully the number of codes that they can reasonably track at the same time.

An issue that invariably arises is the issue of how much text to code surrounding specific indicators. In qualitative lore, coders generally fall into two types: "chunkers," who code large pieces of text with material before and after the specific indicators of a category, and "splicers," who choose to code minimal material surrounding indicators. As qualitative research in general emphasizes context, it is generally better to err on the side of the chunkers. This is especially important when examining overlapping codes, which is a powerful technique for identifying interrelated categories in the service of developing theoretical codes. However, too large coded chunks of text can be unwieldy and lead to confusion surrounding which indicators indicate which categories.

Qualitative coding may be subject to interrater reliability analyses. One approach to interrater reliability in qualitative methods is to convert coded chunks of text into binomial variables and compare these across coders using statistics such as kappa. The primary challenge to this quantitative approach is the problem of different coding styles. A chunker may code a long passage of textual data with a specific code, whereas his or her collaborator, a splicer, will have two or three instances of that code in the same passage. Coders might decide that any overlap (regardless of number of instances agreed upon) is an indicator of agreement, or

perhaps that only one of the splicer's coded text passages counts as overlapping with the chunker's. An alternative form of interrater reliability is to code text independently and then meet and come to consensus between coders. This should always be done for early data sources in order to develop open codes and train coders, but it can also be done throughout the study to ensure that indicators are coded consistently. Although this sort of consensus coding does not allow for retrospective judgment of whether two reasonable researchers would or would not agree, it does provide trustworthiness (see Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004) that the research team involved was consistent in its coding. Several qualitative software packages (e.g., Dedoose) allow for researchers to choose approaches to interrater reliability.

Memoing

Memoing has been described as "essential" (Hood, 2007, p. 156) and "*the* fundamental process of research/data engagement in grounded theory" (Lempert, 2007, p. 245, emphasis in the original). Memo writing is a critical step in the process through which substantive codes become theoretical codes and move on to theory. As such, memos are "the narrated records of a theorist's analytical conversations with him/herself about the research data" (Lempert, 2007, p. 247). Glaser and Strauss's (1967) description of memoing is refreshingly straightforward:

> After coding the category perhaps three or four times, the analyst will find conflicts in the emphases of his thinking. He will be musing over theoretical notions and, at the same time, trying to concentrate on his study of the next incident, to determine the alternate ways by which it should be coded and compared. At this point . . . *stop coding and record a memo on your ideas*. (p. 107, emphasis in original)

The researcher muses and stops to write down his or her thoughts. It is impossible to escape the sense that the authors meant "memo" in the simplest, most banal way—a brief note meant to capture someone's ideas.

Memos may appear in coded transcripts (e.g., on the margins), in audit trails, or in any other document the researcher may have access to during the analytical process. Memos should not be hampered by coherence, linear thinking, or the perceived gravity of generating theory. They are by nature somewhat creative, though in as much as they are written while reflecting on data they are based in empiricism.

Theoretical Coding to Grounded Theory

Arranging and rearranging substantive codes and memos results in theoretical codes. Unlike substantive codes' ground-level categories, the categories represented by theoretical codes are usually propositions that can be elaborated on and tested. Theoretical coding begins with examining overlap among substantive codes and sorting memos into categories. This process is facilitated by whatever techniques researchers find useful to concretize it. The first author prefers sorting techniques that are tactile and make use of spatial relationships, such as sorting exercises where slips of paper with substantive codes and memos are placed in piles on a large table and these piles are arranged in terms of conceptual proximity. Others might use lists on a whiteboard, post-it notes on a wall, or mapping features in qualitative software (e.g., ATLAS.ti). Any techniques that allow researchers to conceptualize relations between intersecting codes and memos will result in theoretical coding. Note that theoretical coding is a few levels "above" the data, "grounded" only in so much as the processes that preceded it were grounded.

At this point researchers integrate their theoretical codes into a theory. Theory resulting from grounded theory is a conceptually abstract narrative about how the elements of categories and concepts relate to one another. In order to have relevance, theory should speak to processes that go beyond the data, perhaps to similar populations or settings. Researchers should be explicit in the connections of their theory to existing theory and previous findings so as to situate their theory within the existing literature.

One particular practical implication of developing theory should be mentioned. Because the primary task of grounded theory is to elucidate broader relationships between indicators and categories of interest, grounded theory researchers are not as invested in describing every nook and cranny of their data in such a way as to draw strong conclusions. Glaser and Strauss (1967): "relationships among categories and properties . . . are suggested as hypotheses pertinent to the direction

of relationship, not tested as descriptions of both direction and magnitude" (p. 63). Grounded theory is thus exploratory and generative, not confirmatory—or even particularly precise, for that matter. This puts grounded theorists at odds with other more general inductive qualitative researchers, who are usually more interested in obtaining a thick description of content in order to draw conclusions (Hood, 2007). Grounded theory is at its core about answering questions concerning processes, not describing phenomena or interpreting data in some more specific manner.

CASE STUDY

Overview

The present illustration of grounded theory in community-based research comes from a research study done under the auspices of the West African Families Project (WAFP). WAFP is a project with West African immigrant parents and children that uses stakeholder feedback to (a) develop theoretical perspectives on West African families in New York City and (b) present community members' voices to social service providers. WAFP has resulted in several publications; our (Rasmussen, Chu, Akinsulure-Smith, & Keatley, 2013) examination of the social ecology of West African families' problem solving is described here. In order to maximize opportunities for participants to share information about problem solving within families, we chose focus group interviews as our primary data collection mode. Group discussion is the preferred mode of discourse in many African cultures (Akinsulure-Smith, 2012). Because we also knew that there were topics that were often avoided in groups, we supplemented focus groups with individual interviews.

Maintaining Groundedness and Strategies for Rigor

We were conscientious about our particular social positions and histories in approaching the topics of family in West African communities in New York. In the spirit of reflexivity we were explicit in examining our interests, recognizing that they grew from two members' clinical work with asylum seekers, one of our experiences as an immigrant from Sierra Leone, and another's history as a second-generation immigrant from China. We kept these factors front and center while designing our research project and in analyses in order to check our assumptions about the communities we were entering. Another technique used to maintain groundedness concerned using multiple research team members. Team members triangulated disciplinary perspectives (psychology and sociology) throughout the process in order to help each other maintain close proximity to the data.

Other strategies for rigor not directly related to maintaining groundedness in the current study included triangulating data, verification, and auditability. Triangulating data included having (a) two interview formats (focus groups and individual interviews), (b) purposeful composition of groups across gender and parent/child roles, and (c) two coders per transcript. Verification involved conducting follow-up interviews with several participants and reviewing themes and preliminary conclusions with social service stakeholders. Auditability was ensured by keeping an audit trail—a detailed document that included dates and content of team meetings, interview schedules, memos taken during research processes, and details of stakeholder meetings.

Generating Sensitizing Concepts

We first met with advocacy groups and community-based organizations serving West African immigrants—the stakeholders—in order to generate sensitizing concepts. Salient topics directly related to the WAFP's aims included arguments between parents and children concerning United States culture and intimate partner conflict. In addition, we sought out media outlets oriented to African immigrants. In general, these media resources were generally disdainful of permissive "American" disciplinary practices, which were portrayed as the causes of rampant crime, recreational drug use, and premarital sex. Solutions emphasized respect for elders and educational accomplishment (e.g., Ogiehor-Enoma, 2010), and extolled the use of community processes—bringing in elders and religious leaders. These initial sensitizing concepts—permissive host culture, strict and idealized traditional cultures, and conflict resolution involving community structures—were documented in our audit trail and revisited during theory building.

Recruitment

Recruitment of the sample was purposive and done in three stages to allow for theoretical sampling.

Because we wanted to know about challenges, we drew initially from clinical settings and legal advocacy organizations. Stakeholders were asked to refer parents and adolescents who would be vocal about challenges. We believed that clients of these organizations would provide us with a good sense of the more difficult end of the problem spectrum from which we might reach out to other, perhaps less severe, cases.

Data collection took place at nine locations throughout New York City and northern New Jersey. In addition to clinical settings and legal advocacy organizations (Stage 1), we recruited from ethnically based community organizations and immigrant mutual aid societies (Stage 2), and a summer camp organized by a mutual aid society (Stage 3). Sampling at Stage 2 was theoretical sampling oriented toward following up on issues raised during Stage 1. Stage 3 recruitment was taken largely because Stage 2 failed to result in the number of youths we needed to triangulate adult perspectives.

Participants

We conducted 18 focus groups (of 2 to 12 participants, $M = 3.50$) and 8 individual interviews; 11 were follow-up sessions, and thus in total we interviewed 13 focus group cohorts and 5 individuals—59 different individuals. Ages of the 32 adults ranged from 22 to 83 ($M = 37.33$) and of the 27 children from 12 to 25 ($M = 16.22$). Arrival in the United States ranged from 3 months to 19 years ($M = 7.86$ years) prior to the interviews. The sample was majority Muslim ($n = 34$, 58%) and ethnically diverse (17 different groups). Eleven countries of origin were represented.

Interview Guide, Data Collection, and Data Transcription

Upon arrival, participants were asked for informed consent for themselves and their children; children were asked for assent. All those referred consented/assented. The focus group and individual interviews ran 75 to 90 minutes in duration. We began with a request to describe challenges in participants' families in the previous 2 weeks. Following these descriptions, moderators steered the conversation using probes based on sensitizing concepts. After about 20 minutes, moderators asked participants where they sought help for these challenges. After rephrasing the initial query without the

2-week time horizon and discussing potential solutions, the interviews concluded. Families received $40 for transportation following interviews

We took several measures to ensure that raw data were captured as reliably as possible. All interviews were audiorecorded using two digital audiorecorders (Olympus WS-400 S) with external table microphones. In addition to moderators, focus group interviews were attended by note-takers, who recorded the order of speakers and notable behaviors. Transcription of audiorecorded data was done by note-takers for focus group interviews and by either interviewers or research assistants for individual interviews. Moderators reviewed transcriptions while listening to audiorecordings and met with transcribers to finalize transcriptions.

Data Analysis

We began analyses immediately following the first focus groups, with researchers reviewing audiorecordings and identifying salient themes while they were being transcribed. Once transcribed, investigators returned to the first three focus groups to begin open coding. We open coded the first transcript by hand and then met to examine overlap in open codes. Open codes included events and objects (e.g., pregnancy, cell phone), conceptual categories (surveillance, stranger danger), and in vivo codes (codes indicated by the use of spoken phrases that indicated categories; e.g., "wrong place at wrong time," "racism").

Following agreement on codes, the team coded the second and third transcripts and then met again to reduce the number of open codes through categorizing and elimination and then finalized axial codes. Our final list included 22 axial codes. Going forward, two investigators independently coded and memoed each transcript using ATLAS.ti software, merged coded documents, and discussed each selection of coded text in order to come to consensus. In practice, 22 codes turned out to be too many to track simultaneously, and much of consensus coding sessions was spent pointing out missed sections of text that should have been coded with particular codes but were not. Following consensus coding, documents were merged into a single file that included transcriptions, coded text, and memos (a "hermeneutic unit," in ATLAS.ti terminology) for analysis.

Because we were particularly interested in problem-solving processes, we examined the

intersection of codes signifying conflict and those signifying particular actors to come up with our theoretical codes. Initial codes for parent–child conflict included "parent/child," "disciplining and monitoring," and "interpersonal conflict," and, for intimate partner conflict, "spouses," "gender roles," and "interpersonal conflict" (for code definitions, see Rasmussen et al., 2013). Examining overlap between codes and relevant memos produced the theoretical codes that were then built into our theoretical model.

Results

The findings here illustrate how grounded theory data might be presented in publication. Within the WAFP data were four levels of problem-solving resources: individual/dyadic, extended family (i.e., microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), community leadership (mesosystem), and state-sanctioned authorities (exosystem). We organized our presentation of data by these levels, presenting data from parents and children (for parent–child conflict) and adult women and men (for intimate partner conflict). In the following excerpts, participants are identified by gender and age, and researchers by initials. (For a more complete illustration of our findings, see Rasmussen et al., 2013.)

A clear message from examining the overlap between relevant codes was that new economic and political realities of living in the United States affected more conservative, traditional ways of doing things. For instance, conflict between spouses was often presented as the result of traditional gender roles, in which men are primary providers and women did not earn money, being transposed across the Atlantic Ocean to a city where both spouses needed to be bread winners to survive and meet financial obligations to family in home countries. A 33-year-old woman from Sierra Leone described this dyadic-level conflict:

> F33: Back home, the women don't work. The women stay home. From the market to the kitchen. Not all of them are allowed to work.
>
> AR: M-hm.
>
> F33: And, so you don't complain, because over there, you don't pay house bill . . . . But over here, when the bill is too much and you come from the poor family—like me, I lost my father, I don't have nobody to take

care of my mother. So I will not sit here and watch my mother dying with hunger, while I have the opportunity to do a job.

More extreme examples of traditional ways of problem solving clashing with new realities concerned responses to intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence (IPV) was often addressed theoretically within extended family (the microsystem) or community (mesosystem) spheres, but these intersected with new host-country exosystem forces (i.e., state-sanctioned authorities). A 40-year-old Mauritanian man described how community leadership was supposed to operate in response to IPV:

> M40: In African community we have elders, we have people who come talk to the guy. Yeah, we can say, first step, go to them, tell them what's happen . . . . I know, these uh Guinean people, Sierra Leone people, they got a lot of people, the Imam or the people of . . . community organization they have, they can say to the guy, "You *wrong*."

Unfortunately, these interactions were not often resolved this way and instead were typically resolved by women choosing between acceptance by families and their own safety. The same 33-year-old woman from Sierra Leone explained that after she had sought police help following IPV, her extended family intervened to coerce her into apologizing to him and returning home: "So my uncle from the Bronx took me, go up to the shelter and pick me up. I stay with him for some month. They [raises voice:] get together, family talk, they give me, they say I'm [laughs] wrong, because why I do it."

In discussions of parent–child conflict we found similar thematic codes surrounding traditional modes of doing things paired with thematic codes concerning the challenges of living in the United States. Adult participants almost universally lamented the loss of collective responsibility for monitoring children (i.e., mesosytemic phenomena). Two women, a 70-year-old from Sierra Leone and a 47-year-old from Mali, noted this:

> F70: //I see with young families in this, in this country. Whereas, back home in Africa, you don't have that problem.

F47: [nods] Uh huh.

F70: Because, you have your neighbors//

F47: //Yeah. You have your neighbor//

F70: //You have your in-laws, you have your old parents.//

F47: //taking care your kids//

F70: //Even if your parents aren't there, your neighbors are there.

In contrast, children reported that their parents still monitored them through other adults. A 15-year-old Sierra Leonean girl reported that a friend of her father's called her father in Sierra Leone to tell him that she was out in the evening with a boy in New York:

F15: Oh my God, hold on, let me tell you a funny one first [laughs]. One day my mom, she wanted some—some food from outside, so she told me—it was like around 11:00—she told me to go get it for her, and my friend that came sleep over, so, she came with me//

TC: //M-hm.//

F15: //and then this guy, I don't know which one of his friends, call my dad all the way in Africa, telling him he saw me with a boy at night [laughs]. I was laughing, my dad called us the next morning, talking about how my mom letting me now have a boyfriend, and how [laughs], I couldn't help myself, it was funny. Like how did that happened? . . . . I mean, he's all the way in Africa!

Perceptions of the consequences of the results of interactions with public authorities was illustrated for parent–child conflict in discussions surrounding children's reactions to corporal punishment. An 18-year-old Liberian girl discussed the practice of sending children back to home countries in response to involving state authorities in disciplinary problems:

F18: If a person call the police on their parents [looks at TC]//

TC: //What did the parents do?

F18: Uh-m probably hit them, beat them, so . . . they call the police. If someone call the police on their parents//

TC: //Uh-uh//

F18: //If the parents don't go to jail, do you think that parent's gonna keep that child? No, they're going back [hand gesture].

During the process of interviewing and coding we wrote memos in our audit trail. The following memo, written by the first author following an interview with a woman living in a domestic violence shelter, is an example. Such reflections provided the fodder for developing our theoretical codes.

As I was riding home this afternoon (on a 2 express train that was running local) I kept thinking about the "solving problems" theme and how it's a major part of why we're doing what we're doing. Several people have told us (in every adult interview/group anyways) that they either don't go to anyone for help or that they keep things inside their family and that they don't like it when outside forces (e.g., letters from school explaining that their children need special services) "intrude" upon their lives. This preference for insularity is seen as a real strength in some cases . . . and seen as a real problem in other cases—like the woman today. There are different levels of insularity, probably dependent on the type of problem and the resources available . . . but it's always about solving problems internally. For some, this is an extension of an emphasis on traditional culture, or at least the version of it that they remember or maybe some version that they are able to re-create here.

Building a Grounded Theory

From overlapping codes combined with memos, we built a multilevel theoretical model, our grounded theory. This theory described how immigrants from West African countries drew on resources within their social ecologies when trying to solve social problems and how these behaviors interacted with public authorities to reinforce suspicion of the public authorities and push the immigrant groups to become more conservative. Evident in the data was that traditional modes of solving family problems had been strained across migration. This strain seems to have resulted from attempts to recreate the model within a new setting in which (a) financial pressures translate into new family responsibilities, (b) the state has an interest in
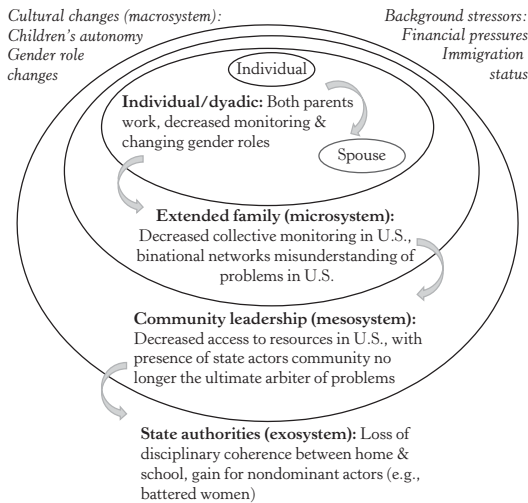
Cultural changes (macrosystem): Children's autonomy / Gender role changes

Background stressors: Financial pressures / Immigration status

Individual

Individual/dyadic: Both parents work, decreased monitoring & changing gender roles

Spouse

Extended family (microsystem): Decreased collective monitoring in U.S., binational networks misunderstanding of problems in U.S.

Community leadership (mesosystem): Decreased access to resources in U.S., with presence of state actors community no longer the ultimate arbiter of problems

State authorities (exosystem): Loss of disciplinary coherence between home & school, gain for nondominant actors (e.g., battered women)

FIGURE 3.1: The social ecology of West African immigrants' problem solving.

Source: "The social ecology of resolving family conflict among West African immigrants in New York: A grounded theory approach.," by A. Rasmussen, T. Chu, A. M. Akinsulure-Smith, and E. Keatley, 2013, *American Journal of Community Psychology, 52(1-2)*, p. 193, Figure 1. Reprinted with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media.

family functioning, and (c) the institutions that accompany this interest (e.g., child protective services, domestic violence shelters, police) ultimately hold power over traditional community structures.

Visual representations of data are particularly useful for representing theory. Figure 3.1 presents our theory on a background of stressors reported by participants that characterize their immigrant experience and cultural changes related to challenges to family well-being. Arrows indicate the paths by which participants seek out help in solving family conflict. The reluctance of actors to seek help beyond extended family networks because of the threat of shame and isolation is represented in Figure 3.1 by a thick line between micro- and mesosystems.

Integration With Existing Theory

Following the development of grounded theory from their data, researchers can then integrate existing theory and compare their findings to those in the extant literature. We believed that our multilevel model of solving family problems was best compared to Sluzki's (1979) stage model of conflict within migrating families. Parallel to decreasing family functioning a few years postmigration, the social ecology experiences instability.

Also helpful was conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), in which stress results from threats to existing resources. COR theory provided a more practicable interpretation for helping professionals interested in addressing the change in new immigrants' problem-solving social ecology. In the language of COR theory, the social ecological change represented in the model would reflect a loss spiral (Hobfoll, 2001), in which losses beget further losses, proceeding through the successive levels of analysis. Contextualizing our socio-ecological theory of solving family conflict within these grand theories allowed us to extend the model for future research with other immigrant populations that migrate from societies that are on balance more conservative than those they migrate to and have little sense that public institutions should be involved in family life.

CONCLUSION

Grounded theory is commensurate with many of the goals espoused by community psychologists: relying on empiricism, representing authentic voices, and developing theoretical models that remain faithful to those voices. To attain these goals, grounded theory eschews intensive review of research prior to engaging with participants, instead relying on sensitizing concepts and a specific set of processes to begin. Through the use of several key components—theoretical sampling, CCM, iterative coding, memoing, and theoretical saturation—researchers build substantive theory from their data. This theory is emergent in that it arises from granular examination of the data, substantiated and trustworthy by nature of a close reading—in a word, grounded.

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