Utilizing Grounded Theory to Enhance:
the Education of Graduate Clinical Social Work Field Students

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Abstract

Recently, Glaser (2014) wrote that there is little in the literature regarding the varied ways in which grounded theory (GT) can be applied, stating that the exploration of the application of GT "is a vital topic for our profession and ourselves" (p. 1). This article presents the first published discussion on how GT can be used in social work field education to enhance learning and interpersonal awareness of graduate students. *All is data* is a well-known mantra of GT and in this research, student field journals are read monthly, coded, and themes conceptualized and shared with students to assist in joint learning and reflection of common experiences. The GT research process used for field pedagogical purposes is shared in the hopes that it may serve as a guide for others and the themes emerging from the research are presented.

Keywords: Social Work Field Education, Social Work Grounded Theory, Social Work Education Research.

Introduction

Recently, Glaser (2014) wrote that there is little in the literature regarding the varied ways in which grounded theory (GT) can be applied, stating that the exploration of the application of GT "is a vital topic for our profession and ourselves" (p. 1). After an extensive literature review, this article presents the first published discussion on how GT can be used in field education to enhance learning and interpersonal awareness of graduate students.

For the past ten years, I have been teaching clinical practice and field courses to second-year social work graduate students. For two hours each week, I meet with twelve students to discuss their field internship experiences, how they are acclimating to their agencies, their successes and challenges with clients, and how they are personally and professionally changing based on these experiences. As part of my field course they are to turn in a five to six-page journal once per month describing experiences and reflecting upon events relevant to their learning and growth as social work practitioners.

The grading of these journals has always been a bit troubling to me because, when done correctly, a journal is a private place to process ideas, feeling, and events that have been personally and professionally impactful. I have felt that the process of critiquing their journals never felt right, much less helpful, and certainly got in the way of the students feeling free enough to openly process their experiences. If students are thinking about my grading when

they are writing their journals, then it directly affects the expression of their real feeling and experiences.

The problem for me as a professor was how to include a very pedagogically sound assignment like a field journal in the course while reviewing it in a manner that doesn't overly influence the writer to the extent that it ceases to be a true reflection and becomes more of an exercise in telling the teacher whatever is thought will receive a good grade. After much thought, two ideas came to mind to answer this question. First, it seemed extremely helpful to student learning if my role as a professor could be to help them pull themes from their journals so that these themes could be discussed. Second, it would be helpful if the class journals could be compared and common emerging themes across all journals could be discussed. These commonly experienced themes could then be brought back to the class in a confidential way so that no student is singled out; the common themes emerging from the journals could be discussed with the group to enhance learning and shared experiences. I wish to point out that I utilized grounded theory in the analysis of field journals as a teaching tool but I did not teach students grounded theory since the focus of the course was field.

Literature Review

My first step was to look for ways in which social work journals had been compared or analyzed previously for the purpose of finding a research method I could use with my course. I emphasize that the literature review was not to form a hypothesis about what students may be experiencing in field but to find a research method. As Glaser (2014) has pointed out, literature reviews can often get in the way by overly influencing the thoughts and expectations of the researcher. I was very attuned to not influencing my results.

A literature review turned up no systematic discussion of how social work field journals could be analyzed to find common themes, nor ways in which these themes could be used pedagogically to enhance student learning. With no results, my next step was to explore the ways in which I might systematically analyze student field journals. Three things were important in this search: (1) that the approach be focused on, or allow for, analysis of written journals, (2) that the approach be open enough to have no preconceived notions of themes, (i.e., no preconceived hypothesis), and finally that the process be rigorous but also practical enough for a professor to be able to conduce the analysis of 12 journals ranging in length between five to six pages in a week's time.

After a thorough literature review exploring research and theory I came across Glaser's (1978) seminal book Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory and subsequent articles (Glaser, 1998, 2007, 2014). Most impactful to me was Glaser's (2007) article All is data in which he discussed an openness and awareness to the contextual factors of research. For me, the concept of all is data can be summarized as data without pretention. I immediately liked the practicality of this idea for I had a fear that because journal data was being collected in a classroom that it would somehow be excluded or diminished in some way in the paradigm of research.

Glaser (1978) further discussed that GT is not to be seen as defining truth, but it is instead a method used to discover thematic elements from data in a conceptual way in localized context. This was yet another strong moment of connection for me with GT because I was seeking a research approach to explore the local, contextual experience of my students and not necessarily to make truth claims at a larger level.

Finally, Glaser (1978, 2007, 2014) differentiated GT from other forms of grounded approaches such as qualitative data analysis (QDA) by suggesting that GT is an empirical *process*, not only *analysis*, from which a theory of behavior is generated. Glaser (1978) stated, "The goal of grounded theory is to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved. The goal is not voluminous description, nor clever verification" (p. 93).

This insight was important and a great fit for my goals of using research to discover themes for pedagogical reasons. Glaser's GT approach was one that was contextually informed enough to allow this flexibility of use and thought. I will now share the research process used in my data collection and analysis of graduate social work field journals.

Participants and Data Collection

Each year I have twelve graduate social work students in my field course and the course runs across two semesters. In total, the students are with me for seven months and they are required to turn in one journal each month except the final two weeks of the course. I am able to collect a total of six journals from them at monthly increments across the semesters and each journal is five to six pages in length.

I share with students at the beginning of the semester that the journal is not a graded assignment and is a space for them to process their experiences. The assignment as written in the syllabus states:

> Each student is required to maintain a reflective journal that includes significant aspects of the learning process, issues and concerns that arise in placement, and anecdotes and/or impressions that identify new self-awareness and professional growth. Journal entries will be reviewed by the faculty liaison with comments designed to guide the student's learning process. The contents of the journal will be held confidential. This assignment will afford the opportunity for the faculty liaison and the student to engage in a dialogue regarding the learning process.

I ask that these journals be turned in to me in electronic format. This requirement is important because for my data analysis I use Microsoft Word to highlight, mark, and note emerging themes.

Data Analysis

When students turn in their monthly journals electronically I begin by having my teaching assistant remove any identify information from the journal so that I do not know the author. I then open the electronic journals and begin the traditional grounded theory open coding

process, followed by utilizing Glaser's six Cs to sort into general categories of causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariance, and conditions (Glaser, 1978). As categories unfold, I then sort larger categories into sub-categories, and write memos to help me organize my thoughts. Note that I utilize Glaser's traditional theoretical coding during this process.

After reading all the journals and coding them I then reread the journals and use highlight colors to further code themes. I have a computer with three screens that allows me to compare and contrast multiple journals simultaneously. I read and reread, first looking for emerging thematic agreements, followed by reading for disagreements.

Results

The results of this analysis are used in two ways. First, the emergent themes from each individual student's journal are written by me, attached to the end of the journal, and returned to the student so that the student may reflect on, and learn from, the findings. In this way the GT results are personalized to the individual and context, and are actively useable for reflection. Second, in class with all the students I share the results of the compared journal themes and we discuss these together, gain feedback, and reflect from the class discussion.

Because the results of the GT process is primarily for the students of each class, and the purpose of this article is to share how GT may be used in social work education, for this paper I share the results in the spirit of Glaser (2007) who maintained that behavior can be empirically analyzed and that emerging themes can transcend person, place, and time. Glaser and Holton (2004) stated, "The conceptual nature of classic GT renders it abstract of time, place and people. While grounded in data, the conceptual hypotheses of GT do not entail the problems of accuracy that plague QDA methods" (p. 1).

With each new journal the students enter a new stage of student experience. For ease of reading and clarity I will divide the findings by journal assignment number and the name of the stage that the students are experiencing:

Journal 1 - Student Apprehension Stage

Emergent themes from the first journal (12 students) are primarily the fear of entering the field and a self-unease about how they conceptualize themselves as social workers. This phase of student experience can be understood to be the student apprehension stage in which fear is centered on three areas, (1) fear of engaging with clients, (2) fear of not-knowing enough to assist clients, and (3) fear about whether social work was the correct career choice.

Journal 2 - Ease of Anxiety and Development of We-ness Stage

Emergent themes from the second journal involve a general ease of anxiety regarding clients. Most students have seen clients at this point and there is a theme of what I describe as "we-ness;" the idea that clients are not separate from the students, but that client and student share more in common than not. This sense of we-ness allows students to relax with clients as

they recognize that social worker and client operate as teams together in helping. Students recognize that the burden of change creation does not lie entirely on them. Fear remains about specific techniques to use with clients, while questions of social work as the correct career choice diminishes slightly.

Journal 3 - Changing Identity Stage

By the third journal, students are entering the changing of identity stage of which the largest theme is the development of a more sophisticated social work identity of the students. They are now more at ease with their career choices as a whole but anxieties emerge about what job they will specifically seek upon graduation. Students begin to speculate about the client populations with whom they would like to work and which types of problems they would like to help clients overcome. Those in substance abuse internships begin to wonder specifically about working with non-substance abusers and explore ways to expand their exposure to a wider range of clients. This represents a confidence in their skills and an acceptance of themselves as social workers while anxiety begins to surface about the future.

Journal 4 - Acceptance and Patience Stage

Students' transition from stage three in which a social work identity is formed into stage four, represented by acceptance and patience. Themes emerging from the fourth journal are an initial acceptance that, as students, it is impossible to know all of the clinical theories available to them to assist clients. This realization is specifically more present in students who saw themselves as perfectionists or had a general resistance against the ambiguity the social work field presents. All students have developed a sense of patience about client change and recognize that the speed and degree of change is client dependent. Students become less anxious to push their clients to change and become more aware that their anxiety over client change can be counterproductive in counseling. A new focus ensues about employment after graduation and their attention shifts away from worry over their practicums.

Journal Five - Thinking Forward to Employment Stage

All students have acquired a sense of focus by this point, and their goals are to complete their internships and to continue to develop supportive relationships with supervisors for learning and so they can have strong job recommendations. Anxiety with working with clients is all but diminished. In this stage, clinical thought has become much less generalized and clinical questions are explored with more precision. Clinical confidence has risen due to learning more about clinical practice but also through the realization that each practitioner has a unique style and is successful with clients from a variety of clinical approaches. This awareness creates a sense of ease for the students that they will be able to fit into social work in a unique way and be successful with clients while retaining a sense of self with which they are comfortable. Anxiety by this stage has shifted strongly to worry about employment after graduation and students think forward to their employment and begin planning for the future.

Journal 6 – Launching Stage

By the final journal, the students enter the launching stage. Common themes among students are a tension between seeing themselves as students and as professionals. They will be graduating in three weeks from the date of this final journal and while there is a belief that they have successfully learned what they were required to learn in the social work program, they are beginning to wonder if they are in fact prepared for the realities of full time social work employment. Anxiety is centered on the transition to the professional arena and the jobs available to them. Confidence is present in terms of their choice of the profession, their ability to interact with clients, and their general knowledge base. Anxiety is present in the transition from student to paid professional and the employment opportunities in their future.

Conclusion

After conducting a thorough literature review, GT has been used in the study of adjunct faculty teaching (Tyler, 2011), field instructor's teaching perceptions (Havig, 2013), and the study of counselors' experiences (Helpard, 2011), but nothing has been published in the literature about the use of GT as a pedagogical approach in social work field education. This article is the first.

The use of GT pedagogically in the process of social work graduate field teaching has been tremendously helpful in expanding the insight and knowledge base of students, as well as for me, as a professor, in organizing my feedback to students in a helpful way. The use of GT has been impactful in that it is an active use of research in an active ongoing course, for an active ongoing learning purpose. Students have been appreciative, not only of the shared insight gained by the use of GT for teaching, but also because it is an example of the practical ways that research can be used to directly inform and benefit others. Ultimately, GT used in this manner is an active process that has added value to the learning of social work graduate students.

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