

## **Refuting Denzin's Claims: Grounded Theory and Indigenous Research**

Steve Elers, Massey University, New Zealand

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to refute claims made by Denzin (2007, 2010) concerning grounded theory and indigenous research. I will argue that Denzin does not provide anything of substance to support why grounded theory, unless modified, will not work within indigenous settings. I will refer to some examples of indigenous researchers who have used grounded theory for their research within indigenous settings, including my own doctoral research. Further, I will argue that the basis for his claims are dubious as he paraphrased, out of context, the work of a Māori scholar, to justify his argument.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Māori, kaupapa Māori, Denzin, grounded theory

### **Introduction**

Glaser (2009) wrote that classic grounded theory "has been virtually high jacked by so many who have not appreciated that classical GT is not a qualitative descriptive method; some simply because they do know better and others because they think they do know – or know better" (p. 13). Examples can be found in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* including Denzin (2007) who claimed that ". . . critical theory, and grounded theory, without modification, will not work within indigenous settings" (p. 456). Denzin (2010) later repeated this assertion. The purpose of this paper is to refute Denzin's claim and to argue that it is founded on "tricky ground".

### **Indigenous Research**

Indigenous research is becoming more noticeable in the social sciences due to the efforts of indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who wrote the seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Smith, 1999), which had a focus on Māori research. Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand (King, 2003). Other books about indigenous research have recently been published (Brown & Strega, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Mertens, Cram & Chilisa, 2013; Lambert, 2014; Walter & Andersen, 2013; Wilson, 2008), alongside a plethora of journal papers. Within the Māori scholarship, the philosophical perspective that informs most Māori research is *kaupapa Māori*. According to Smith (1999), most of the literature pertaining to kaupapa Māori is "located in relation to critical theory, in particular to the notions of critique, resistance,

struggle and emancipation" (p. 185). While kaupapa Māori appears to be the dominant philosophical perspective among Māori research, a cursory search of the repository databases of New Zealand's eight universities shows that grounded theory is frequently used by Māori researchers in order to make sense of their data (Baker, 2008; Pohe, 2012; Stuart, 2009; Wilson, 2004; among others).

Kaupapa Māori was the philosophical perspective for my Ph.D research and I used grounded theory as the method of analysis. First, I should point out that kaupapa Māori is political, and as Pihama (2001) asserted, everything associated with the struggle for the position of Māori is political. Classic grounded theorists may argue that this perspective potentially brings preconceived assumptions that could influence how the data is conceptualized. Yes, this perspective is possible but a researcher must work with the data independently of external influences, which is why Glaser and Strauss (1967) wrote that researchers should "ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study" (p. 37). However, Glaser (1998) did go on to state that during the sorting and writing up process, "the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison" (p. 67). The literature pertaining to Māori is intertwined with kaupapa Māori; there is no way to avoid it if one is conducting research about Māori. Therefore, the kaupapa Māori literature and other scholarship relevant to the phenomenon are likely to become part of the data for constant comparison.

In terms of my data collection with research participants, much of the fieldwork was carried out at *marae* [traditional Māori meeting houses]. It cannot be argued that a marae is not an indigenous setting. I have presented my doctoral work at conferences for Māori researchers (National Māori Doctoral Conference and the Māori Association of Social Science Conference). Through my discussions with other Māori researchers I have found that many have used grounded theory or are familiar with it. In other words, grounded theory is frequently used within indigenous settings, or at least Māori research settings.

### **Denzin's Claims**

Denzin (2007) stated, ". . . critical theory, and grounded theory, without modification, will not work within indigenous settings" (p. 456; Denzin, 2010, p. 298). Interestingly, in a different publication, Denzin (2009) used the *same* ideas and very similar sentences and paragraphs, when he stated, ". . . critical, interpretive performance theory, and critical race theory, without modification will not work within indigenous settings" (p. 180). So about which theory is he talking? The same piece was also published in Denzin and Lincoln (2008). I recommend a close reading of Denzin (2007, 2009, 2010) and Denzin and Lincoln (2008) in order to assess the similarities.

The major issue with Denzin's (2007, 2010) statement is that he does not provide anything of substance to support *why* grounded theory (or the other theories for that matter), unless modified, will not work within indigenous settings. The basis for his claims against grounded theory are dubious. For example, Denzin (2007) wrote:

Paraphrasing Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005: 85), the ground on which grounded theory stands is tricky. It is tricky because it is "complicated, and changeable, and it is tricky also because it can play tricks on research and on the researcher" (L. Smith, 2005: 85). Grounded theory's ground, and the spaces it

encompasses, are always constructed, never bedrock solid, always nuanced, and potentially dangerous. The ground itself is a function of the researcher's shifting relationship to the world. (p. 458; Denzin, 2010, p. 300)

The problem with Denzin's (2007, 2010) paraphrasing is that the original source (Smith, 2005) does not refer to grounded theory. In fact, grounded theory is not mentioned *anywhere* in the chapter (23 pages) by Smith. Here is what Smith (2005) wrote about the "tricky ground":

In the spaces between research methodologies, ethical principles, institutional regulations, and human subjects as individuals and as socially organized actors and communities is tricky ground. The ground is tricky because it is complicated and changeable, and it is tricky also because it can play tricks on research and researchers. Qualitative researchers generally learn to recognize and negotiate this ground in a number of ways, such as through their graduate studies, their acquisition of deep theoretical and methodological understandings, apprenticeships, experiences and practices, conversations with colleagues, peer reviews, their teaching of others. (p. 85)

It seems that Denzin's (2007, 2010) assertion is on "tricky ground" as he has used Smith's (2005) work out of context to support his argument. This idea is interesting as Denzin co-edited the book in which Smith's chapter appeared, and he has co-edited a book with Smith (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008). I am unsure of Denzin's (2007, 2010) motivation but perhaps his assertion was designed to move indigenous researchers away from using grounded theory, and direct them towards his own methodology. Denzin (1997) has stated that he was "a failure at grounded theory" (pp. 1-2), and that he "became a critic of grounded theory" (p. 2). He further elaborated, "Later I developed my own version of what Anselm [Strauss] does. I called it interpretive interactionism" (Denzin, 1997, p. 2). Regardless, Denzin (2007, 2010) did not substantiate his claims about grounded theory.

## Discussion

My doctoral research focused on Māori perspectives of public information advertisements (aka public service advertisements) in New Zealand. I conducted focus groups and individual interviews with Māori and developed notes about important points, concepts and ideas, as I searched for patterns in the data; this is grounded theory. Grounded theory procedures are fairly simple (Glaser, 2004), and can be used with any data (Glaser, 2008). Moreover, grounded theory is "possessed by no discipline or theoretical perspective" (Glaser, 2005, p. 1). However, some authors have complicated grounded theory by publishing "grounded theory" literature that is not consistent with the original methodology, remodelling it as an extension or part of symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, among other perspectives. This movement is best summarized by the co-founder of grounded theory:

The jargonizers adopt adapt and co-opt classical GT with structurally based possessiveness as they remodel GT to multiple QDA [qualitative data analysis] methods. The structure of their departments, books and journals give them an assumed authority, with little or no scholarly grounding. (Glaser, 2009, p. 10)

Unfortunately, this movement has a degree of influence in academia. Denzin is internationally renowned as a sociologist (Marvasti, 2008), qualitative researcher (Paternoster & Bushway, 2011), and prominent editor (Olesen, 2002). Moreover, Denzin is a co-editor of the book, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008). It is reasonable to suggest that Denzin's (2007, 2010)

statement may dissuade indigenous researchers, especially emerging indigenous researchers, from using grounded theory. For my own doctoral dissertation I was advised to stipulate that my research was *based on* grounded theory and to include reference to thematic analysis. This approach was recommended because of concerns that a doctoral examiner may hold biased views against grounded theory. This is not surprising as doctoral students who use grounded theory may encounter obstacles within the academy (Elliott & Higgins, 2012; Glaser, 2015; Guthrie & Lowe, 2011; Jones, 2009), despite the fact that grounded theory is one of the most popular research designs for use with qualitative data (Birks & Mills, 2015; McCallin, Nathaniel & Andrews, 2011). Claims such as those by Denzin (2007, 2010) seep into the academy and go unchallenged because of the status of the author; thereby adding confusion to what is really a "straightforward methodology" (Glaser, 2004, p. 4).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have refuted Denzin's (2007, 2010) claims about grounded theory and indigenous research. I pointed out that Denzin did not provide anything of substance to support *why* grounded theory, unless modified, will not work within indigenous settings. Moreover, I highlighted Denzin's (2007, 2010) paraphrasing of Smith (2005) was on "tricky ground". The fact is that grounded theory can be used for indigenous research and it does work within indigenous settings. Grounded theory can work with any theoretical perspective including indigenous methodologies. This is best summarised by Glaser (2005):

. . . as a general method it can use any other type data, even other types of qualitative data, as well as quantitative, visual, document, journalistic and in any combination, and any other theoretical perspective, such as e.g. systems theory, social structural theory, structural functional theory, social organization theory, cultural theory etc. (p. 1)

In conclusion, I hope that indigenous doctoral students, irrespective of discipline, will not be dissuaded by Denzin's (2007, 2010) claims, as grounded theory does indeed work within indigenous settings. This belief is demonstrated by the growing body of work by indigenous researchers who have used grounded theory. As pointed out by Barney Glaser when I queried him about whether grounded theory would work within indigenous settings: "It is all just data with patterns in it" (Glaser, personal communication, July 7, 2014). Indigenous data also has patterns in it.

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