Reflections on being an expert

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Abstract

In this essay, the author explores the journey of undertaking a Grounded Theory (GT) research project on a topical area closely aligned with her profession, although on a specific aspect about which little was known. By following the data as directed in GT, the area under study became one in which the researcher was more of an expert. How this shift from "little known" to "expert area" occurred and the challenges relative to overcoming the researcher's anxiety associated with this shift are two themes explored. The researcher's conclusion is that expert knowledge enabled nuances to be seen that may otherwise have been missed, but that having expert knowledge necessitated greater attention to ensuring sensitisation, not preconception.

Keywords: reflections, expert, classic grounded theory, abortion, grief

Classic Grounded Theory (GT) is best undertaken on a subject about which a researcher knows little, leaving him or her open to new discoveries untainted by prior knowledge or expectations (Glaser, 2013). As a novice researcher dedicated to learning GT, I took this directive very seriously to ensure my methodology was sound.

As someone who is an avid reader, passionate about the lives and experiences of women in the world, I had quickly become enamoured with the writings of Brené Brown (2012, 2015). On discovering that her understandings of people's inner experiences were founded in GT, my interest in this methodology began. As a counsellor and educator of more than 25 years, I am intrigued by the unique trajectories of people's lives and the common themes among them. I believed there was yet to be discovered depth that united people and I sought to discover such shared experiences. GT essentially fit my need to know more information. To this end, my initial foray into PhD research was in an area unrelated to my work, but one in which I was very interested, adoption. The study received approval however in spite of many attempts in which I failed effectively to recruit; the initial study was abandoned. During this time however, my learning of GT for the purpose of embarking on a first study made me more determined that this methodology of choice would suit whatever my next research focus became.

Pursuing my PhD changed focus and became a step toward adding credibility to my work in a highly ideological and polarising field of educating about the adverse impact of abortion wherein I have fast become considered an expert. However, my expert status seemed not to reconcile with GT as an appropriate methodology given the

recommendation that GT is best suited to a topic about which the researcher knows little.

One aspect of my work has been the development of education and resources for practitioners who deal with women experiencing challenging circumstances during pregnancy and who have adversely suffered after abortion; the objective is for the practitioners to be able more effectively to support these grieving women after a termination. While almost 300 professionals have accessed this education, I remained unaware of whether it had positively influenced practise.

Therefore, the aim of this PhD research was to identify gaps in practitioner knowledge and practise, and determine how these gaps may impact their interactions with women. The end goal was being to inform the development of more effective educational resources based on knowledge gaps. After embarking on my first interview with the ethics approved interview questions in hand, and my own broad opening question ready to take centre stage, I could not have anticipated where the data was about to lead me.

Participants had been provided with a participant information sheet and consent form, which detailed the specific topic area of pregnancy termination, so they were, in a sense, pre-conditioned about how to respond. When asked simply *Can you tell me about your current practise with women who might mention pregnancy termination?*, the responses were quick to follow. This was a subject on which practitioners had very specific things to say and they wanted to share them. "Eliciting a spill" (Nathaniel, 2008, p. 61) was not an issue as my interviewees quickly identified their main concerns.

The absence of knowledge content in the data eluded me until I was into the third interview and realised I was struggling with moving beyond descriptive words in my coding. In my mind, I was still trying to link the data I was coding to knowledge in some way without realising it. When a practitioner was *withholding* or *glossing over* certain information, the constant comparison process had me linking them to *not enough education* or *they don't tell us about this*. Something about this connection wasn't feeling right and I thought I wasn't understanding the process. As it became apparent that *withholding information* was a better fit than *it's risky to talk about that*, I began to experience some anxiety.

The ideological polarisation within my field of work was something I wanted to avoid with the focus of my questions, yet the data indicated that ideology, not knowledge, was the primary concern identified by practitioners. This shift to ideology created personal anxiety over the data as I realised that what I was seeing was not new to me and I didn't want to go there. Simmons (2010) addressed the need to let go of ideological or political beliefs in order to follow the data. My issue was not in the letting go of them, but in wanting to find a theory within a political/ideological field that was neither political nor ideological, thereby avoiding the ideological nature of abortion discussions. This quote from a student of Simmons, "I fought hard because I didn't want to go there, but I finally went where the data led me" (Simmons, 2010, p. 18), reflected this period of time for me.

It was here that the double-edged sword of my experience became most apparent. Aware of my extensive knowledge of the ground on which I was now treading, I was hyper vigilant about my own filters in analysis and often found myself

battling concerns that I would indeed be accused of "making it all up" (Simmons, 2010, p. 15).   My data was cross checked repeatedly by a supervisor, and discussions with my mentor were essential to ease my angst regarding my ability to effectively code the data in a way that avoided preconception based on my own experience and knowledge of the field. As I recognised more of my own experience in what the practitioners were telling me, and recollected so many other instances of similar experiences being described in my professional settings, many pieces began to fall into place.

In accord with Glaser's (1998) approach, I conducted a self-interview and added my field notes to the data to be coded and analysed accordingly.   The analysis of the self-interview brought with it some relief as the coding of my own data was consistent with the data I had already analysed.   However, while it added more incidents to existing categories and properties, there was nothing new.

It became clear that practitioners' interactions with clients were a direct result of the influences to which they were subject; and, they were able to identify many of these influences from within the dominant discourse of abortion.   I had spent a decade being critical of in its, and its active silencing of the negative ways in which many women experienced abortion.   While my own work was heavily censored and marginalised by advocates of the dominant discourse, I didn't yet understand either its power or consequences. I certainly lacked awareness of the pervasiveness of the dominant messaging or how powerful it was in its ability to censor and to silence.   I had lamented my own inability to gain traction in mainstream media and had dealt with significant hostility and censoring from ideological advocates unhappy with my approach.   However, I had attributed the inability of my work to gain mainstream attention to my work that to my lack of marketing skills and contacts.

As the theory developed, the professional challenges I faced at this time were significant, as my awareness of all the ways in which I had tackled issues of education, of supporting women, and of managing the dominant discourse seemed ineffective.   My desire to educate practitioners into being more knowledgeable and therefore supportive of women was founded on false assumptions that education was all that was necessary. The discourse was more powerful and more pervasive than I had imagined.   It was also more dangerous to my research than I had anticipated. I spent many months being paralysed and wishing I'd never begun. In this way, my experience in the field, combined with the exhaustive mental processing in ensuring such experience was sensitising me to the data rather than preconceiving it, created much delay.

As I began tentatively talking to colleagues about what I was discovering and incorporating some of my newfound language into my presentations, I was encouraged by the feedback. I noted many *aha* moments when people commented *I never looked at it like that before* or *wow that's brilliant*.   My supervisor, who has had many years of experience as a researcher in my area of study, talked about how powerful my theory was saying "nobody has ever seen it in this way before" and my GT mentor agreed my theory worked and was good.

In spite of this encouragement, it has taken a year of delay while I developed enough confidence in my theory and willingness to state it in order to experience progress in my writing. A passage from Glaser (2013) often paralysed me:

Experts in a field find it easy to say a category emerged or a TC emerged which is really just a product of their advanced training. They will claim preconceptively that their exquisitely tuned capacity guided them where to look to get the best categories and TCs. It is claimed as an undeniable asset that makes them open to learned and experienced preconceptions. In sum, highly trained people well formed in their field find it hard to transcend their experienced view. They see it everywhere rather than staying open, however much they pretend to be open. (pp. 21-22).

Now that I understand the extent and power that my data has revealed, I am super-sensitised and see it everywhere. However, there is no question for me that without the expertise I have in this area, I may not have seen the data for what it was. Being an expert, and having my own experiences of what practitioners described, were essential to my ability to see the data. In the end, it was the fact that I was able to follow the data to where it led, even when I was uncertain and anxious, that gave me the greatest confidence in the theory. It is unlikely I would have been sensitised to the subtlety of influence that practitioners were describing without it; and, I would have pursued my knowledge enquiries as silenced and unaware of the discourse as many of my practitioners were. I may not have been able to see how things are, or the significant influence the discourse had on me and I would have continued the cycle of perpetuation.

References

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