Collaborative Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This article describes how two researchers' professional relationship began as a mentor/mentee relationship and transformed into co-researchers using grounded theory. We explain how we navigated each stage of the process of conducting a GT study using a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. The article also presents some key takeaways for researchers to consider when working collaboratively.

Keywords: collaborative, co-researchers, interdisciplinary, grounded theory

Introduction

This article presents how two researchers' professional relationship evolved from a mentor/mentee relationship into co-researchers using grounded theory (GT). While the topics of collaborative and interdisciplinary research teams have been extensively researched and written about for many years (Abramo et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2018; Tkachenko & Ardichvili, 2020), little is written on collaborative, interdisciplinary research teams using GT.

Authors have cited many reasons for the increased use of collaborative and interdisciplinary research teams. Some reasons include the increased pressure to publish within academia, the need to address increasingly complex problems, and access to resources to name a few (Abramo et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2018; Tkachenko & Ardichvili,

2020). There are also numerous articles that focus on the advantages and drawbacks of the use of collaborative and interdisciplinary research teams (Oliver et al., 2018; Tkachenko & Ardichvili, 2020). The experiences of the authors of this article align with the previous findings but this article focuses on the unique aspects of collaborative and interdisciplinary research teams using GT.

In this article, the authors described how our relationship began as a mentor/mentee relationship and transformed into co-researchers. We present how we navigated the various stages of the process of conducting a GT study using a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. The article ends with some key takeaways for researchers to consider when working collaboratively.

How Our Relationship Began

From 2007 to 2009, Dr. Cathy Thompkins[1] was a John A. Hartford Foundation Geriatric Fellow who provided resources for faculty development. With these resources, she decided to become skilled in a different research method, grounded theory, for a study she was preparing on grandparent-headed households. As a gerontologist, she was interested in the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren when a grandparent was the primary care provider.

Through the fellowship, she had funds to hire a mentor to teach her GT. She first contacted Dr. Simmons who referred her to Dr. Kara Vander Linden, who at the time was a recent graduate and mentee of Dr. Simmons. While Kara had been mentoring doctoral students using GT for 2 years, she had never mentored an experienced researcher. With Cathy's understanding of this, Kara mentored Cathy using the same approach she used with her students. Cathy in turn taught what she was learning to her research assistant. Later Cathy served on GT dissertations committees with Kara. Now, 14 years later, Kara and Cathy are still collaborating.

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[1] The authors of this article are the two researchers, but to make it clear about our working relationship and how it evolved, we refer to ourselves in the third persons.

The Mentor/Mentee Relationship

As Kara does with all her mentees, she recommended that Cathy read the seminal books, specifically the *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967), *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978), and *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions* (1998). Kara and Cathy met regularly to discuss Cathy's questions about the books. Kara said, "My goal was and still is to be an experienced role model, who provides encouragement, advice, coaching and moral support to learners who want to learn, and more importantly, DO grounded theory" (Vander Linden & Tompkins, 2021). The real way to learn grounded theory is by doing it (Glaser, 2011)

"Phillis Stern has dubbed minus mentors, academics who want to learn to do grounded theory but who do not have immediate access to face-to-face mentors" (Gynnild & Martin, 2011, p. 1). However, as Kara and Cathy's experience will demonstrate, mentor/mentees do not have to meet face-to-face to have an effective mentoring relationship or to be collaborative researchers.

How the Relationship Transformed

Over time the mentor/mentee relationship transformed into that of co-researchers. It went from Kara teaching Cathy how to do GT to doing classic GT together. The rest of this article will explain what that looked like.

Neither the mentor/mentee relationship nor the relationship as research collaborators has been face-to-face. In 14 years of working together, Kara and Cathy have only seen each other in person once. The rest of the time the relationship has been long-distance with Kara in California and Cathy in Virginia.

In addition to the distance, Kara and Cathy have also been at different stages in their personal and professional lives throughout the relationship. In the beginning, Kara was starting her career and her family in California. Cathy was about 15 years into her career and in the middle of raising her two girls in Virginia. Much of our relationship has been the juggling of careers and family while doing research on the side. However, it is something

both are dedicated to doing, and having a collaborator provides accountability helps keep the research moving forward.

After 2 years, the John A. Hartford Foundation Geriatric Fellow funding ended, but Kara and Cathy agreed to keep working together and it was at that point the relationship transformed into being collaborative co-researchers. Kara took a more active role in the process of conducting the study. The subsequent sections will explain how the collaborative relationship worked within each stage of conducting a GT study as outlined by Simmons (n.d.).

Preparation Stage

The preparation stage had many of the same elements as any classic GT study: selecting a topic, navigating the IRB, and limiting preconceptions. One added area unique to a collaborative project is negotiating roles.

Selecting a Topic

The study topic, selected by Cathy prior to Kara's involvement, was kinship care in grandparent-headed households. Kinship caregiving is when the relative, most often grandparents, takes on the primary responsibility of a grandchild because the biological parents are unable to for various reasons (Hayslip et al., 2019; Smith & Palmieri, 2007). Sometimes those reasons include incarceration, drug addictions, or a plethora of other reasons, but the grandparents are often from very vulnerable populations without many resources (Hayslip et al., 2019; Smith & Palmieri, 2007). As a gerontologist, Cathy is passionate about improving the quality of life for older adults.

Institutional Review Board

While Cathy has done many projects where she needed to work with her university's Institutional Review Board (IRB); there can be challenges when working across universities in a collaborative research project. For example, Cathy and Kara's IRBs require CITI training, but sometimes it is challenging to get that training recognized by one institution to be recognized by the other institution.

Another challenge is that sometimes two different IRBs come to different conclusions, and researchers must work with them to get the project approved. This process has improved since the implementation of reliance agreements. However, even with the use of reliance agreements, it can take longer to get research projects approved by the IRB.

Negotiating Roles

Another issue to address during the preparation stage when working collaboratively on different projects is each person's respective roles with the projects. Since transitioning from mentor/mentee to collaborators, Kara and Cathy spoke about authorship and how to divide up the various tasks within the research project, including data collection, data analysis, and writing up the theory which will all be discussed later.

Limiting Preconception

One challenge for researchers, who are well established in a field, is limiting preconceptions. Cathy acknowledged that this was hard. She said,

> I had to forget everything I knew about kinship care and older adults, which seemed a bit odd to me because for the last 15 years I had been doing nothing but studying older adults and learning about kinship families. . . . But I worked really hard at it. It was hard for me to do, but it's a skill that you develop over time. (Vander Linden & Tompkins, 2021)

Avoiding a preliminary literature review also felt odd to Cathy at first since it was different from how she had previously conducted studies. Glaser (1998) provided six reasons for avoiding a preliminary literature review that can be loosely grouped into two areas: (1) not allowing the literature to block the emergence of concepts from the data, and (2) not knowing what literature is relevant prior to the emergence of the theory from the data. However, after experiencing how concepts and theory can emerge from data, Cathy really embraced the idea of using literature as data and allowing it to earn its way into a study.

While many collaborators work with colleagues within their own field, Kara and Cathy's fields were different; Cathy's area of specialization is social work and Kara's is education. Neither Cathy nor Kara were familiar with the literature and theories that inform each other's fields. Coming from different fields resulted in an advantageous pairing because we were able to see each other's areas of preconception which has influenced our thinking during the years about the idea of setting aside preconceptions and strategies. Coming from different fields is an added benefit of doing collaborative GT. Two researchers with different knowledge and training backgrounds can help each other recognize preconceptions. It is often easier to see someone else's preconceptions and they can help us become aware of our own.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited and data were collected primarily in Virginia, the area surrounding Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland, where there are large populations of grandparent-headed households. To help with recruitment, $25 grocery gift cards were offered.

Interviews were collected by Cathy and a graduate student research assistant. Initially, the plan was to interview the grandparents and the children separately which is why Cathy and her assistant attended every interview. However, with every family interviewed, the grandparents did not want the grandchildren interviewed without them being present. Approximately 15 families were interviewed during the course of about a year. Cathy and her assistant also went back to the families using theoretical sampling to collect more data when more questions arose as the data were analyzed.

As the data were collected, it was transcribed so that Kara, Cathy, and her assistant could analyze it. Kara would go over the transcripts and then Kara and Cathy would talk about how to not let preconceptions enter the interviews such as avoiding leading questions.

At one point, Cathy and her assistant collected multiple interviews before coding the previous ones because many grandparents wanted to participate to receive the $25 grocery

gift card. Kara used this desire as a teachable moment to discuss theoretical sampling, explaining the importance of allowing the analysis of previous data to direct future data collection (Glaser, 1978). Kara taught Cathy and then Cathy taught her assistant. This process follows a nested model of mentoring (Fouché & Lunt, 2010).

Data Analysis

Our relationship fully transformed into co-researchers during data analysis. While still teaching Cathy the process, Kara actively engaged in the process of data analysis with Cathy.

Kara and Cathy would each code and memo independently, but then meet via video conference calls to discuss their works. We would read each other's work, write comments, and ask questions which always stimulated more memoing on both of our parts as we discussed what we were seeing emerge from the data. We also talked about who and where the next piece of data should come from, deciding where to theoretically sample next. As noted previously, Cathy and her assistant did most of the interviewing, but we engaged in the process of open and selective coding, constant comparative analysis, and memoing together.

Ideas are fragile and they can easily be lost if a researcher talks about them (Glaser, 1978). One technique we used was to record our calls. Cathy would have her assistant listen to the recordings and capture the ideas so that we could work with them further. This helped us not lose ideas as we talked about the research.

During this process, it was interesting to see how our fields of study affected how we coded the data. We became more aware of how much we can be influenced by our own preconceptions and by the language and the concepts that are from within our fields. As mentioned previously, being co-researchers from different academic backgrounds can help with identifying and minimizing preconceptions.

Kara's work with numerous doctoral students using GT was also beneficial. Kara was able to use her students' works as examples for Cathy. We began to see theoretical ideas

from our study intersecting with concepts from the students' studies. There were times when we used theoretical sampling to examine how similar theoretical concepts from other studies fit within a new substantive area.

After engaging in substantive coding (open and selective coding), sorting was used to begin to group concepts in relation to each other as they became saturated, where no new variation was found. This stage led to the discovery of two possible theoretical coding families. Sorting generated more memos, especially about the relationships between the concepts. Like with coding, we would both sort, memo, and work on the theoretical outline that was emerging. We would share our work with each other and discuss what we were seeing as we sorted and developed a theoretical outline. We would explain our rationale for where we put each concept in relation to the other concepts. As previously mentioned, we would record our calls to capture ideas. This whole process generated more memos.

The stage of sorting concepts is like putting together a puzzle. Finding the right spot for each concept so that it works in relation to the other concepts in explaining the overall pattern of behavior being used is important in generating a fully integrated theory. Through our conversations, the pieces came together. The process was not quick because we were both busy with many personal and professional responsibilities. However, this process kept us committed and helped us think through the logic and organization of the theory as it developed.

Kara admitted that one mistake she made in first mentoring Cathy was not thinking about the difference between developing a theory for journal publication versus for a dissertation, where an unlimited page limit might exist. Kara and Cathy recognize now that they went much further than they needed to for one publication which will be explained in the next section.

Writing Up and Presenting

Two researchers analyzing data produced many pages of memos. While GT may take longer than some other research methods, the data and the process of analyzing the data lead to a

richness and depth of theoretical understanding that researchers might not get from other methods. Because of the scope of the research, the amount of data, concepts, and memos, we began to realize as we sorted the concepts that we had two related theories that we could develop into manuscripts for publication. Cathy has also presented this work at various conferences.

One theory, *Compounded Complexity*, used the 6Cs coding family (Glaser, 1978) addressing contextual factors affecting grandparent-headed households. It explains multiple factors that affect the context and challenges within kinship care families, and especially grandparent-headed households. This theory was published in a premier gerontology journal.

Getting it published within a top-tier journal was not without a struggle. There was a lot of back and forth with edits. One of the reviewers was familiar with Straussian GT but not with classic GT. Many of the comments and requested edits did not align with classic GT. We had to respectfully address the comments and help the reviewer better understand the differences between the two versions.

The second theory that emerged from the data was a process theory that explains the process of taking on the responsibility of being a kinship caregiver. It is called Doing One's Best: Becoming a Kinship Caregiver and has been published previously in the Grounded Theory Review. Thus, as is evident, Kara and Cathy have had a successful relationship as co-collaborators using GT.

Conclusion: Key Takeaways

We want to leave the reader with some key takeaways regarding a collaborative GT study:

1. Having a collaborator provides accountability to help keep the research moving forward.

2. Defining roles within the project is helpful but as researchers progress through the study a redefinition of roles may be needed.

3. Collaborators from different fields provide a useful opportunity to become aware of preconceptions, especially those based on one's academic area.

4. The process of individually coding, engaging in constant comparative analysis, and memoing and then comparing the codes and memos, helped generate a lot of memos, raise the level of abstraction and move the project along as there was a synergy created in the process.

5. Collaborative research is exciting and provides an enthusiastic environment, especially when you have the correct partner.

We hope that you, the reader, will consider beginning your own collaborative grounded theory study.

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