Article

Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts

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Abstract

Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that uses inductive analysis as a principal technique. Yet, researchers who embrace this approach often use sensitizing concepts to guide their analysis. In this article, the author examines the relationship between sensitizing concepts and grounded theory. Furthermore, he illustrates the application of sensitizing concepts in a study of community-based antipoverty projects in Jamaica. The article contains commentary about trustworthiness techniques, the coding process, and the constant comparative method of analysis, as well as a synopsis of study findings.

Introduction

Grounded theory is a popular research approach embraced by scholars in anthropology, sociology, health care, and many other fields. Sensitizing concepts provide a theoretical foundation for its development. In this article, I provide an overview of grounded theory and explain the purpose of sensitizing concepts within the context of the research method. Moreover, I illustrate the functions of sensitizing concepts in a study of community-based antipoverty projects, which generated a theory of development-focused stakeholder collaboration. In particular, I examine the relationship between the initial concepts, emergent themes, and the theory itself.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a research approach or method that calls for a continual interplay between data collection and analysis to produce a theory during the research process. A grounded theory is derived inductively through the systematic collection and analysis of data pertaining to a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with one other. Sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) discovered grounded theory in the 1960s; Strauss and Corbin (who has a nursing research background) are credited with refining the approach.

Inductive Analysis

Inductive analysis is the principal technique used in the grounded theory method. "Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 1980, p. 306).

Grounded theory is a very popular method in nursing research (see, e.g., Beck, 1993; Knobf, 2002; Marcellus, 2005; Nathaniel, 2006; O'Connell & Irurita, 2000). Over the years, scholars in many other fields have embraced this research approach. Student affairs professionals, for instance, view grounded theory as a powerful research method that can produce information to increase educators' understanding of the complex interactions between students and college environments (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002).

Themes

A grounded theory is generated by themes, and themes emerge from the data during analysis, capturing the essence of meaning or experience drawn from varied situations and contexts. According to Morse and Field (1995),

> Thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend throughout an entire interview or set of interviews. Themes are usually quite abstract and therefore difficult to identify. Often the theme does not immediately "jump out" of the interview but may be more apparent if the researcher steps back and considers. "What are these folks trying to tell me?" The theme may be beneath the surface of the interviews but, once identified, appears obvious. Frequently, these themes are concepts indicated by the data rather than concrete entities directly described by the participants. . . . Once identified, the themes appear to be significant concepts that link substantial portions of the interviews together. (pp. 139-140, emphasis in original)

Although Morse and Field focused on interviews, a variety of data sources may be tapped in a grounded theory study. As the researcher analyzes the data, major themes are expected to emerge and to be categorized in such a way that they yield a theory.

Sensitizing concepts

In this section, I define and explain the purpose of sensitizing concepts within the context of grounded theory. The term originated with Blumer (1954), the late American sociologist, who contrasted definitive concepts with sensitizing concepts. Blumer explained,

> A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks. . . . A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or bench marks and consequently it does not enable the user to move

directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. (p. 7)

Social researchers now tend to view sensitizing concepts as interpretive devices and as a starting point for a qualitative study (Glaser, 1978; Padgett, 2004; see also Patton, 2002). Sensitizing concepts draw attention to important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research in specific settings. According to Gilgun (2002), "Research usually begins with such concepts, whether researchers state this or not and whether they are aware of them or not" (p. 4).

Sociologist Charmaz (2003) has referred to sensitizing concepts as "those background ideas that inform the overall research problem" and stated further,

> Sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and perspectival proclivities. Although sensitizing concepts may deepen perception, they provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it. We may use sensitizing concepts only as points of departure from which to study the data. (p. 259, emphasis in original)

For his part, Blaikie (2000) has argued that research that is concerned with theory generation might require sensitizing concepts but no hypotheses. Indeed, qualitative research, including grounded theory research, does not start with hypotheses or preconceived notions. Instead, in accordance with its inductive nature, it involves the researcher's attempts to discover, understand, and interpret what is happening in the research context.

Sensitizing concepts can be tested, improved, and refined (Blumer, 1954). However, researchers taking the grounded theory path do not necessarily seek to test, improve, or refine such a concept. They might use sensitizing concepts simply to lay the foundation for the analysis of research data. Researchers might also use sensitizing concepts in examining substantive codes with a view to developing thematic categories from the data. For example, MacIntosh (2003) reported that in the process of substantive coding, she used sensitizing concepts in further data collection and analysis. Although Macintosh cited Will van den Hoonaard's (1997) primer, Working with Sensitizing Concepts, her description of the application of sensitizing concepts in the research process is at best vague and inadequate.

It is important to bear in mind that whereas sensitizing concepts might alert researchers to some important aspects of research situations, they also might direct attention away from other important aspects (Gilgun, 2002). In any case, the ultimate survival of a sensitizing concept "depends on where the data take us; emergent concepts may supplement or displace them altogether" (Padgett, 2004, p. 301).

Illustrating sensitizing concepts in a study

I used sensitizing concepts to shape my study of community-based antipoverty projects in Jamaica, which generated a substantive-formal theory of stakeholder collaboration (Bowen, 2003, 2005). It was an exploratory qualitative study of projects supported by the Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF), an autonomous agency of the national government that funds small-scale community improvement projects. In exploratory research, social phenomena are investigated with minimal a priori expectations to develop explanations of these phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I collected data primarily by means of in-depth, open-ended interviews involving knowledgeable respondents from community-based organizations or nongovernmental organizations that sponsored

social fund projects in each of eight selected communities in Jamaica. Nonparticipant observation of organization/community conditions and products, as well as reviews of available project documents, also produced data for analysis.

The use of sensitizing concepts was appropriate for a study that fit into the framework of "naturalistic" ontology. Naturalistic research includes, among other characteristics, inductive analysis and special criteria of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In my study of social fund projects, I used an inductive approach to identify patterns and interrelationships in the data by means of thematic codes. The trustworthiness standard in naturalistic research is in contrast to the conventional, positivistic criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In my study, I included such trustworthiness techniques as member checks, negative case analysis, "thick" description of phenomena, and an audit trail, so that the process of theory development would be both visible and verifiable. Ultimately, I was able to produce a plausible and coherent explanation of the phenomena.

Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework links various concepts and serves as an impetus for the formulation of theory (Seibold, 2002). The sensitizing concepts included in my study formed the conceptual framework. These concepts were derived from a thorough review of the literature on social funds, poverty reduction, and community development. The reviewed literature indicated that the basic theoretical argument was that involving local community residents in partnership-based social fund projects could create social capital and foster empowerment of the community, and of lower income people, in particular. Partnership based means that stakeholders from various social sectors—public (government), private (business), and civic (community)—were involved in the funded projects. The concepts of community participation, social capital, and empowerment seemed to underpin social funds as an approach to poverty reduction, and I assumed that these concepts contained theoretical ideas that would help to set the context and direction for my study. Therefore, I decided to examine the nexus among them.

Hence, the conceptual framework for the study included three sensitizing concepts, which formed part of the analysis. I treated these concepts as variables through the specification of procedures to measure them (Blaikie, 2000). The concepts provided an analytic frame, serving as a point of reference and a guide in the analysis of data with theory-producing potential.

Community/citizen participation

Community participation was deemed essential to every phase of a JSIF-funded project—from identifying and preparing the project to managing and evaluating it. Moreover, predetermined criteria for approving the allocation of funds included community participation in all phases of the project and a (minimum) 5% contribution from the local sponsor. In theory, the "demand-driven" approach used by JSIF allowed poor communities to articulate their priority needs and to receive funding for projects selected by the community (Bowen, 2003, p. 27). JSIF claimed to value local knowledge and involvement in the design of projects. This was indicative of a "bottom-up" approach to local development.

According to one report, the Jamaica Social Investment Fund had put "a strong emphasis on using participatory approaches which allow all, young/old, men/women, poor/less poor and those traditionally unseen and unheard to be actively involved" in the JSIF-funded development projects (Jupp, 2000a, p. 2). After reviewing the literature, I concluded that "how such an 'emphasis' is translated into action needs to be examined, and how effective this approach really is remains to be seen" (Bowen, 2003, p. 29).

A detailed review of the literature revealed that community participation was often treated as synonymous with citizen participation. Citizen participation is defined as "the active, voluntary engagement of individuals and groups to change problematic conditions and to influence policies and programs that affect the quality of their lives or the lives of others" (Gamble & Weil, 1995, p. 483). Community participation, therefore, was seen as citizen engagement in the change or development process at the community level. In reviewing the literature, I argued, "To the extent that a CBO (community-based organization) truly represents ordinary citizens, the two concepts, community participation and citizen participation, properly merge in relation to a social fund project" (Bowen, 2003, p. 28, italics in original).

The term community participation, or citizen participation, was defined operationally more easily than the other concepts were. In my study, community/citizen participationwas defined as the active involvement of local community residents, and particularly persons identified as poor, in the social fund project and in project-related activities. Genuine participation, and not mere presence, would be indicated by, inter alia, community members' roles in designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and maintaining the project; sharing of information and contribution of ideas; and contributions to decision making.

Social capital

JSIF projects aimed to create social capital by providing support, training, and opportunities for people to build trust and collaboration within communities (World Bank Group, 2001a). Social capital facilitates cooperation and collective action, necessary factors for the success of JSIF projects (Jupp, 2000b). In an exploratory study, I could not afford to ignore this concept.

Social capital involves norms, social networks, and relationships (Coleman, 1988). It has been described as the glue that holds groups and societies together (Jupp, 2000b). Jupp has described two types of social capital "glue": (a) "bonding"—the glue within homogeneous groups, which provides help for group members; and (b) "bridging"—the glue that links these groups to other, unlike groups (e.g., linking poor communities to the business sector or utility companies). Several researchers have indicated that social capital was related to poverty alleviation (e.g., Moser & Holland, 1997; Narayan, et al., 2000; Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson, & Nucci, 2002). One illuminating study found a significant relationship between social capital and the probability of escaping poverty (Gray-Molina, Jiménez, Pérez de Rada, & Yáñez, 2001).

Although the literature is replete with references to social capital, this concept remained difficult to define in operational terms. In fact, according to the World Bank, obtaining a "true" measure of social capital is probably not possible (World Bank Group, 2001b). In light of this, many researchers have been using proxy measures. I expected that the most visible proxies for social networks in local Jamaican communities would be parent-teacher associations, citizens' associations, community councils, youth and sports clubs, and informal or semiformal credit and job networks.

Empowerment

The final concept that seemed to undergird a social fund strategy of poverty reduction was empowerment. A principal objective of the Jamaica Social Investment Fund was to assist in empowering communities by seeking to ensure greater levels of community involvement in development programs and community participation in decision making. JSIF claimed to invest in communities by empowering them and building their capacity to manage their own development more effectively (Jupp, 2000a).

The idea of capacity building has generated considerable interest among community development practitioners and scholars in the United States (McLean et al., 2001). Capacity for local community action appeared to be intertwined with empowerment and was a common theme underlying both community participation and social capital. Community participation is now regarded as an important means by

which community capacity can be enhanced (Carvalho et al., 2002); and capacity to engage in effective community development work typically involves some combination of knowledge, skills, commitment, and resources (McLean et al., 2001).

Like community participation, the concept of empowerment is said to have its origin in the fight against poverty (Barry & Sidaway, 1999). An empowered community is one that initiates self-improvement efforts, responds to threats to quality of life, and provides opportunities for citizen participation, according to Zimmerman (2000). In my study, indicators of empowerment were expected to include entrepreneurial activities by local residents, organizational leadership, control of funds, and results of decision-making processes in relation to public and social services.

The second of three questions that I attempted to answer in the study was related to these three sensitizing concepts. The question was this: Does a social fund project (a) foster community/citizen participation, (b) create social capital, and (c) empower the poor—and if so, in what specific ways?

Analysis

A constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Schwandt, 1994) underpinned my study. Accordingly, I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In line with this approach, my interpretation of events and situations involving local community actors provided building blocks for theory construction. As explained by Glaser and Strauss (1967), comparative analysis can be used to generate two basic kinds of theory: "substantive" and "formal" (p. 32). Substantive theory is developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry; formal theory is developed for a formal, or conceptual, area of sociological inquiry. Both substantive and formal theories must be grounded in data.

In my study, the substantive (empirical) area of inquiry was poverty, whereas the formal (conceptual) area of inquiry was community/citizen participation, social capital, and empowerment, taken together. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) observed, most studies generating substantive theory will ultimately generate and improve formal theory.

I used the constant comparative method, marked by an iterative process, to identify the latent pattern in multiple participants' perspectives, as specified primarily in their words. In this regard, I reviewed line, sentence, and paragraph segments of the transcribed interviews and field notes with a view to deciding what codes fit the concepts suggested by the data. The interview data were given more weight in the analysis than were the nonparticipant observation and the document reviews. Each code was constantly compared to all other codes to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns.

Themes gradually emerged as a result of the combined process of my becoming intimate with the data, making logical associations with the interview questions, and considering what was learned during the initial review of the literature. At successive stages, themes moved from a low level of abstraction to become major, overarching themes rooted in the concrete evidence provided by the data. When "theoretical saturation" occurred—that is, when additional data failed to uncover any new ideas about the developing theory—the coding process ended.

Relationship of sensitizing concepts to theory

Four emergent themes together, with a substantive-formal theory of development-focused collaboration, became the major findings of the study. A complete analysis of the data has revealed that the approach to poverty reduction in social fund-supported communities is a process of development-focused collaboration among various stakeholders. The underlying theory posits that collaboration increases the

productivity of resources and creates the conditions for community-driven development. "Community-driven development represents a people-centered approach to social change, whereby local actors take the lead in conceptualizing projects and programs that address social and economic needs" (Bowen, 2003, p. 76).

Noting that local actors were also fully involved in implementing such projects and programs, I concluded that stakeholder involvement was a key element of development-focused collaboration (Bowen, 2003, 2005). Furthermore, a major hypothesis embedded in the stakeholder involvement theory is that "the greater the collaboration, the greater the productivity of the resources and the more favorable the conditions for community-driven development" (Bowen, 2005, p. 78).

Communities that received social fund assistance for projects attempted to deal with local-level poverty-related problems by following a four-stage process: (a) Identifying Problems and Priorities, (b) Motivating and Mobilizing, (c) Working Together, and (d) Creating an Enabling Environment. Each stage is regarded as a theme. The first stage (theme) encompasses subthemes that reflect community conditions; the conditions identified at the first stage produced strategies at the second stage of the collaboration process; three forms of interactions comprise the third stage (Working Together); and consequences of social fund projects in beneficiary communities are mirrored at the final stage of the process (see Table 1).

Conditions	*Identifying Problems and Priorities*
	Voicing common concerns
	Understanding the system
Strategies	Motivating and mobilizing
	Focusing on the common good
	Emphasizing collective responsibility
	Seeking stakeholder support
Interactions	Working together
	Matching resources to requirements
	Getting the job done
	Showing tangible results
Consequences	Creating an enabling environment
	Looking beyond the present
	Sustaining interest and support
	Maintaining pride and satisfaction

Table 1. Stakeholder collaboration theory

For each stage, codes at three levels—open, axial, and selective—were identified, compared and contrasted, and collapsed to produce themes. In analyzing the data, I sought to answer the research question regarding the sensitizing concepts by looking for empirical instances of citizen participation, social capital, and empowerment. The themes outlined above were truly emergent and therefore do not reflect any a priori selection on my part.

What follows is a brief examination of the three sensitizing concepts in relation to the theory of local-level stakeholder collaboration. Each concept is considered in turn.

Community/citizen participation

Social fund projects, according to background documents, have roles for local beneficiary communities in every phase: selection, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. However, in the study, I found that by and large, community participation was limited, if not lacking, in several phases of the funded projects. Participation was highest during project implementation (Bowen, 2003). Yet, community/citizen participation found its way into the theory as part of the third stage of the process of development-focused collaboration, when local project sponsors concentrated on "matching resources to requirements" and "getting the job done." However, this sensitizing concept was not forced on the data.

Line-by-line coding of the data (and additional data collection after the first round of coding) led to the refinement of the community/citizen participation concept. This initial concept helped me make sense of the data and was integral to the theory-generating analysis. For example, to meet the social fund guidelines for community participation, communities and project sponsors identified money, materials or supplies, personnel, and labor as the available resources. A respondent stated,

> Our association tried to pool whatever resources we had available to us. We decided to beg, borrow, or steal—no, we didn't really steal! However, we asked the business people to support us and we decided to put in as much work as necessary so we could have the project.

Through coding this statement (as well as others) line by line, I linked it to the emerging theme, "Matching Resources to Requirements." The analysis showed this theme to be part of the third stage of development-focused collaboration, when community associations concentrated on project implementation.

An additional example of line-by-line coding is given in Table 2. The respondent whose four-line statement is quoted was a member of the executive committee of a community-based organization that organized a funded project. The "community involvement" and "people's responsibility" codes come closest to the community/citizen participation concept identified in the literature.

Social Capital

The findings indicated that social capital formation across communities in the study was not substantial. "Bonding" social capital was evident in all communities, albeit to varying degrees, whereas "bridging" social capital was less evident. Rural communities had higher levels of social capital than urban communities (Bowen, 2003). The main manifestations of social capital included the collective action of citizen groups during the planning and implementation stages of each social fund project as well as in subsequent projects and programs. The findings suggested that leadership roles tend to be distributed mostly among "better off" people in the communities.

The social capital concept per se was not included in the theory. Arguably, however, it was reflected in the concept of collaboration, which turned out to be central to the emergent theory. The literature had indicated that social capital was connected to collaboration, in the sense that social capital is a resource for collective action, and collective action is the essence of collaboration. To be sure, collaborationis defined as "a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties to achieve common goals by sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for achieving results" (Chrislip & Larson, 1994, p. 5). The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party.

Empowerment

In general, the JSIF-funded projects were more enabling than empowering. "Creating an enabling environment" was identified as the final stage of the process of development-focused collaboration (Bowen, 2003). The state—through its social fund agency, with the assistance of one of JSIF's partners, the Social Development Commission—created an enabling environment for local communities to get involved in local development processes. In other words, the state created conditions for citizen groups to carry out certain tasks and make certain decisions to deal with specific social or economic problems within a community. However, the projects did not allow the communities to gain power or control resources on their own without further substantial support from public or private institutions or agencies. Therefore, although some activities in social fund beneficiary communities were potentially empowering, there was only minimal empowerment of those communities.

By considering the concept of empowerment in the analysis, I discovered the concept of enablement in relation to the thematic categories identified by the study. Thus, based on my analysis of the data, enablement supplanted empowerment.

Line-by-Line Coding	*Interview Statements*
Recognizing limitations	"We the executive can do so much and no more"
Recognizing limitations	"We the executive can do so much and no more"
Noting importance of community of involvement	"We always try to keep all the members actively involved in everything we do in the community"
Accepting "ownership" of community	"After all, this community belongs to all of us; and we cannot depend on the government to do everything for us"
Emphasizing people's responsibility (combined with government's)	"We have to take some responsibility too"

Table 2. Line-by-line coding of an interview statement

In sum, I included the sensitizing concepts in an analytic frame that reflected current theoretical ideas from the literature on social funds, poverty reduction, and community development. In the course of the analysis, the first sensitizing concept, community/citizen participation, became an integral part of one of the themes. The other sensitizing concepts, social capital and empowerment, were, in effect, discarded. Although they did not find a place in the emergent theory, those concepts sensitized me to more fruitful lines of inquiry. By putting aside preconceptions and using the constant comparative method of analysis, I was able to move beyond extant concepts in the literature and to "ground" the theory.

Conclusion

Sensitizing concepts provide starting points for building analysis to produce a grounded theory. As a research approach, grounded theory is appropriate for identifying and explaining social processes. Sensitizing concepts give the researcher a sense of how observed instances of a phenomenon might fit within conceptual categories. My research has demonstrated that sensitizing concepts can be effective in providing a framework for analyzing empirical data and, ultimately, for developing a deep understanding of social phenomena. In this regard, what is interesting is that the process has become clear to me only in hindsight.

In this article, I have discussed the place and purpose of sensitizing concepts in relation to grounded theory research. Furthermore, I have illustrated the use of such initial concepts in a study of community-

based antipoverty projects. A vital part of the process of theory generation was to move beyond the sensitizing concepts. It was vital, too, to move beyond the words drawn from interview transcripts and various documents—from a descriptive to an interpretive and explanatory mode—so that concepts would give way to themes and themes would produce a theory. As a researcher recently reminded us, "Theory is powerful because it organizes what professionals pay attention to and how they pay attention. It shapes beliefs that in turn shape action" (Domahidy, 2003, p. 76). If the emergent theory contributes to problem solving and positive social change, then the research project will truly have been worthwhile.

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