

James Nelson: Queens University Belfast

Navigating grounded theory: a critical and reflective response to the challenges of using grounded theory in an education PhD¹

Academic biography

Dr James Nelson is a lecturer in Education at Queen's University Belfast. As well as grounded theory, James has research interests in common education and pedagogy in religious education.

Email: J.Nelson@qub.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection upon the use of a grounded theory approach within a doctoral study. As well as providing an outline of grounded theory, it begins by noting the existence of some powerful critiques of a grounded theory approach, in particular around the key concepts of 'theory', 'discovery' and 'ground'. It is argued that, in some cases, grounded theory struggles to counter these challenges, especially in its 'purist' forms. However, with reference to research carried out as part of a PhD study of sharing education in Northern Ireland which employed a grounded theory approach, a case is made for an open and critical grounded theory based upon three principles: pragmatism; research as practice; and reflexivity. It is concluded that a reasonable case can be made for grounded theory where: grounded theory researchers maintain a balance between belonging to and critique of the grounded theory community; where there is an emphasis upon theorizing rather than the discovery of theory; and where the strengths of grounded theory as 'practice' and 'craft' are maximised.

Keywords: grounded theory; qualitative; research methods

Few academics familiar with grounded theory are neutral about its effectiveness as a research method. It is a methodology that divides opinions – sharply. Nonetheless, this article argues for a balanced approach where grounded theory is regarded as a valid method of qualitative research, yet accepting the fact that there are significant challenges to grounded theory as a research methodology. It is also a story of my own journey of enthusiasm, disillusionment and, eventually, positive critical engagement with the approach as a qualitative method. So, I will provide some background to grounded theory; explain how I used it within my research as a PhD student and the challenges I faced;

and offer some conclusions in which I argue for a critical grounded theory.

Grounded theory – some background

In providing some background to grounded theory I want to offer a brief introduction to the method, but I will also give a reflective narrative of my own encounter with the methodology. This is intended to offer some additional insight into navigating the critical issues within grounded theory from the researcher's point of view and is in-keeping with the constructivist grounded theory perspective that the researcher's view is intimately connected with their research; 'it does not and cannot stand outside of it' (Charmaz 2006: 130).

Grounded theory had its beginnings during the sixties in the work of Bernie Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and it is often reported to be one of the most popular methods of qualitative research in the social sciences (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Concerned by the dominance of quantitative and (what they perceived to be) positivist, deductive approaches to research in the social sciences, and influenced by a philosophical heritage in the form of George Mead, John Dewey and Pragmatism (Crotty, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008), Glaser and Strauss developed a method for working in an inductive way, from data to theory, rather than the other way around. 'Ivory tower' theorizing, which sought examples from the world beyond to verify its propositions, was fundamentally challenged by a 'grounded' approach which discovered theory 'through interaction with the empirical world, not in isolation from it' (Dey, 2007: 82). Beginning with research questions, the researcher would employ documentary analysis, observation or interview to gather data. Using the data, and only the data, the researcher would move from sorting and organizing the material to explicating it on a conceptual level at which point a pattern or theory could be identified that would make sense of the data. Two cornerstones of grounded theory outlined by Glaser and Strauss in their foundational publication, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, were theoretical sampling and the use of the constant comparative method.

Theoretical sampling

Glaser and Strauss (1967: 45) define theoretical sampling as: 'the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and then decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges'.

This was articulated as a direct challenge to, what Charmaz (2006: 6) describes as, 'armchair and logico-deductive theorizing' of the time. While Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledge that a researcher requires some orientation to their field of study, this need only be a 'partial framework of "local concepts"' (ibid: 45) to help, for example, to inform initial site selection and sample; the researcher should certainly avoid coming to the field with 'a preconceived theoretical framework'

¹ An early version of this paper was first presented at the International Research Methods Summer School (IRMSS), Mary Immaculate College, Limerick 16.06.13

(ibid: 45). In practice then, the researcher does not follow a pre-determined path in choosing who or where to collect data from, rather the research moves from research questions to limited data collection to data analysis. Only when some analysis has occurred is the researcher in a position to select the next sample for data collection, and this allows ideas emerging from the analysis to be tested. This movement from data collection to data analysis continues until a 'saturation' point is reached: 'Saturation' means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61).

The constant comparative method

The constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has four stages. To begin, data are coded and placed in categories. In the process of defining each category the researcher is already comparing the codes to decide precisely what characteristics and properties they share. Charmaz notes, 'Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data' (2006: 43); it is both a sorting process and the first stage in analytic interpretation. In other words, 'through coding, you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means' (ibid: 46). Similarly, Strauss and Corbin draw attention to the analytical procedure involved in coding: 'The researcher scrutinises the data in an attempt to understand the essence of what is being expressed in the raw data. Then, the researcher delineates a conceptual name to describe that understanding – a researcher de-noted concept' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The second stage involves comparison across categories to determine how properties interact. In order to capture the analytical insights that emerge during this process Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest the writing of memos. Simply put memos are 'written records of analysis' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 117) though Charmaz notes they 'catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo-writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing' (Charmaz, 2006: 72). Diagrams are suggested as another form of engaging with the data to generate comparisons, categorisation, sorting and, most importantly, understanding the connections between concepts. In turn this should allow movement towards the prioritisation of higher and lower level concepts and, eventually, core concepts (or 'axial codes') and theory generation.

Thirdly, is the establishment of theoretical saturation, mentioned above, which comes after the cyclical process of data collection and data analysis and when a meaningful theory which connects the various core

concepts has emerged. And, fourthly, is the stage of writing the theory which, Seale (1999: 97) suggests, should be 'relatively straightforward', as 'categories and their interactions provide chapter headings or titles of papers, properties provide section headings and the coded data provide plentiful illustrative examples, which may even be counted so that the reader may assess the generality of the phenomena described.'

Expressed in this way, grounded theory has the appearance of a coherent methodology which has an established history (in social science terms), a clear structure and a tool-box of techniques and procedures to assist a researcher in the complex task of data analysis. And for these reasons it seemed an obvious choice for the research design of my doctoral research (Nelson, 2013), however, my confidence in the method wavered on several occasions before I was persuaded that this was indeed a valid approach to adopt. My doubts emerged as my understanding of grounded theory broadened and one very significant point became clear, that was, despite the strong foundation laid by Glaser and Strauss in the *Discovery* book, there were by now various (and competing) grounded theory traditions including Classic Grounded Theory (Glaser and Holton, 2004) and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2008; Clarke, 2005). Alongside these main traditions, a range of qualitative researchers claimed to be using grounded theory on the basis that it employed some grounded theory devices (e.g. coding, sorting, memoing), yet did not adopt the core techniques of theoretical sampling or the constant comparative method (Pidgeon, 1996: 79).

A journey into grounded theory

In my case I made what seemed, in the first instance, to be a relatively straightforward choice of grounded theory as my research design, but this turned into a long process of reading and reflection before I was confident that it was the most appropriate choice. The process was punctuated by bursts of enthusiasm, anxiety, certainty and indecision, though ultimately it was an important journey of critical reflection which I hope will be evident in the discussion below.

It was as a systematic, qualitative research tool employed by Cheetham (2001) in his investigation of collective worship in schools that I first encountered grounded theory, and which prompted me to read Kathy Charmaz's book (2006), *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Charmaz offered an updated and further developed grounded theory (which she described as constructivist grounded theory) that was much more sophisticated than I had first encountered in the work of Cheetham. With lots of questions beginning to emerge I looked for help from another source, the Corbin and Strauss book (2008), *Basics of Qualitative Research*. What was immediately obvious was the difference in approach and advice between Charmaz and Corbin and Strauss. At this stage I experienced a feeling of disorientation, especially in relation to the processes of identifying concepts and of generating theory. The approach of

Corbin and Strauss was more prescriptive (suggesting 3 specific phases of coding: open, axial and selective) and more directed towards theory generation. Charmaz on the other hand was reluctant to speak of theory: 'My preference for theorizing – and it is for theorizing, not theory – is unabashedly interpretive. Theorizing is a practice ... The fundamental contribution of grounded theory methods resides in offering a guide to interpretive theoretical practice not in providing a blueprint for theoretical products' (Charmaz, 2006: 128).

These two grounded theory handbooks claimed to offer clear guidance for how to 'do' grounded theory research, yet they seemed at odds with each other on important points, and I found that introductory texts to research methods tended to gloss over the differences between varieties of grounded theory, with the result that as a researcher new to grounded theory confusion quickly set in.

Heeding the advice of both books that the only way to understand grounded theory is to just do it, I chose some documentary data relevant to my research and began to code. It was at this point when I purchased CAQDAS computer software (MaxQDA) that I began to engage with the hard reality of what grounded theory ideas meant in practice, employing some of the techniques recommended by Charmaz, Corbin and Strauss such as coding and categorisation.

While I worked with my data, coding, selecting and sorting, over a period of time I began to be further perplexed at the differences between the different versions of grounded theory I had read and whether I should use open coding and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss) or initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz); a conditional/consequential matrix (Corbin and Strauss) or a messy map (Charmaz). So I continued to read, looking for further guidance and for reassurance that what I was doing was correct. It was at this point I encountered the contemporary work of Glaser and Classic Grounded Theory.

Two 'official' web-sites provided me with a useful introduction to Glaser's Classic Grounded Theory (<http://www.groundedtheory.com>; <http://www.groundedtheoryonline.com>), and, for a while, I felt I had found the solution to my problems. The websites and a recommended online article (Glaser and Holton, 2004) explained that there was nothing complicated about grounded theory, that it was only when it was distorted by revisions and changes (such as those suggested by Strauss, Corbin and Charmaz) that it became confused. In Glaser's terms grounded theory is separate and unique from other research methods. Other changes imported from the wider world of qualitative data analysis (QDA) are, he believes, subversive to the grounded theory process: 'When grounded theory becomes laced with QDA requirements, it is hard to follow to the point of confusion. Theory development is confused with QDA description thereby blocking grounded theory generation of conceptual theory' (Glaser and Holton

2004: para. 15). So, all I needed to do was follow the clear guidance provided by Glaser and his team via his books or training programme and all would be well.

With my optimism at this prospect I was, for a while, able to suppress the reservations I had about Classic Grounded Theory. Beneath my new-found enthusiasm for Glaser's brand of grounded theory I was concerned by several things: the strong marketing element evident on the web-sites through an emphasis upon training and workshops in the Glaserian method; the fact that the editorial board and the authors of the official journal, *Grounded Theory Review*, showed a remarkable overlap with the authenticated trainers from the 'official' Classic Grounded Theory website (<http://www.groundedtheoryonline.com>); that Glaser's publications came from a single publishing house and that in the last twenty years he has hardly published in mainstream academic research journals;; and that much of the writing on the official websites and in Glaser's writings is occupied with boundary maintenance and attempts to draw a clear distinction between Classic Grounded Theory and other forms of grounded theory, as well as its uniqueness from the wider field of qualitative data analysis.

Only when I enquired about a course from a local Fellow of the Grounded Theory Institute did I begin to really worry about the validity of this approach. In his reply the Fellow made it very clear that his was not an 'inclusive' course – students of any form of grounded theory apart from Classic Grounded Theory were not welcome. His desire for methodological purity seemed at odds with my view of what academic debate should be about and the manner in which academics engaged with each other in conference settings. Certainly, academics have a habit of gravitating to others who share similar positions and where their ideas have a welcome hearing, but the exclusion of one methodological variation over another seemed akin to striving for doctrinal purity and the exclusion of heretical notions within a religious context. Thereafter the appealing simplicity of the Glaserian approach fell away and the exclusivity and narrowness seemed blindingly obvious: 'GT stands alone, on its own as a conceptualizing methodology' (Glaser and Holton 2004: para. 39).

My worries were confirmed in the strongest of terms when I read a devastating and excellent critique of grounded theory by Thomas and James (2006). In their article the pair concludes:

To use grounded theory involves a rejection of simple understanding. It entails an explicit denial of what we know and our ways, as practitioners (and as human beings), of making sense. For grounded theory elevates a certain kind of thinking while it demotes and eschews other kinds of thinking and understanding. In its hankering after order – with its fracturing, its axial coding, its categories and sub-categories – it seeks to impose a

certain kind of patterning, shape, and even rationality. Via such procedures it thereby relegates the original voice – the narrative – of both the respondent and the discussant in the research exercise. By the super imposition of method, and the ultimate production, supposedly, of theory, it implies a dismissal of the direct validity and import of people's accounts, such as those children who fail to adapt to the school system or fail to learn in that system. (ibid: 790)

The basis for such damning criticism is a critique of three central concepts of grounded theory: 'theory', 'discovery' and 'ground'.

According to Thomas and James (2006) the notion of 'theory' in grounded theory is confused. In their view 'theory' is generally of two types: a) inspiration, when one discovers something new, sometimes referred to as an 'A-ha!' moment, and involves 'patterning or accommodation' (ibid: 72) or b) explanation and prediction, when researchers can, as a result of observation and rigorous testing, make certain generalizations. However, they contend, grounded theory 'conflates and confuses' these two processes (ibid: 772) under the guise of inductive reasoning. Ultimately, grounded theory cannot *explain* anything; it might help us understand a social process but the claims made by grounded theory practitioners are generally grander than this. For example, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 1) believe it capable of producing 'relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications'.

Secondly, the concept of 'ground', suggests a way of conducting research that is informed solely from the data in the field and uncontaminated by *a priori* assumptions, including literature concerned with the area under investigation. Thomas and James believe that there is at best naïveté, at worst wilful neglect, of the role of the researcher as interpreter in the research enterprise; they comment, 'The problem is that *a priori* assumptions are uneliminable' (2006: 783). This is something, they consider, shouldn't require saying, for it is so obvious: 'meaning is constructed by the interpreter. The interrelationship between interpreter and interpretation is indissoluble; there is no ground, no hidden truth residing somewhere in the data ready to inscribe itself, just as there is no Lockean *tabula rasa* in the researcher waiting to be engraved' (p. 782). The idea that researchers can somehow temporarily set aside their education, emotions, preferences and the rest of their mental lives to discover grounded theory is, they believe, simply impossible.

Thirdly, the idea that theory can be 'discovered' suggests a modernist view whereby truth exists in data and with the use of careful procedures can be uncovered: 'When the word 'discovery' is used, the presumption is therefore of the revelation of a solid, disclosable thing – an entity transcending interpretation

... Discovery implies a clean lineage from thing to thought and an uncomplicated correspondence between the two' (Thomas and James, 2006: 786). They contrast the use of 'discovery' with 'invention' which they perceive to be a much better description of qualitative research, but which does not suit the high ambitions of grounded theory, for it implies 'one unique construction among a plethora of possible constructions. Inventions are mutable, not static' (2006: 786).

At the point I read the Thomas and James article I was convinced that I had made a mistake in my choice of methodology and felt ready to abandon it entirely. However, in time, and with further reading and reflection, I came to believe that there is a reasonable case that can be made for the use of a grounded theory approach, although not through a return to a pure 'original' form of the method, but through adopting a critical approach, as a number of scholars (Charmaz, 2006, 2008; Clarke, 2005) who argue for a constructivist approach to grounded theory have done.

Clarke and Charmaz prefer to speak of 'theorizing' rather than 'discovering theory' and Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe the outcome from a grounded theory study as one 'analytic story' among several possible stories that might emerge from the data. Understanding this move from an objectivist to a constructivist form of grounded theory (Bowen, 2008) helped me to develop my own case for employing the method in my doctoral research, as will be outlined further below.

A case for grounded theory

There are three key reasons why I believe grounded theory continues, in its constructivist forms, to be a valid and valuable research method that cannot be dismissed outright in the way that Thomas and James suggest. My reasons are: pragmatism; research as practice; and reflexivity.

Pragmatism

There is no perfect methodology, all methodological frameworks are provisional (Seale et al 2007: 7), so to reject grounded theory in order to pursue a search for such would be fruitless. What is important is to enter into the use of any methodology with critical awareness. In this case that probably begins with the acknowledgement that there is no 'grounded theory', if by that we mean, 'a single, unified methodology, tightly defined and clearly specified' (Dey, 2007: 80). There is, however, a self-critical research community where the language and procedures of grounded theory have currency and within which questions and issues relating to the nature of research in its widest sense or particular aspects of qualitative research can be discussed and debated. Thus a critical community is 'enough' and alerts one to those who say it is not. In this case, this means those who aspire to methodological fundamentalism (such as Glaser and Classic Grounded

Theory) on the one hand and those who dismiss the approach entirely (such as Thomas and James) on the other. For the desire to dismiss it entirely is also a form of methodological purism which denies the value of the critical community which gives it continuing value.

It seems odd that Thomas and James (2006: 787) commend Adele Clarke's book *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences and the Problems of Sex* (Clarke, 1998) as 'an excellent analysis of the American reproductive sciences', but contend that the grounded theory method used in the study was inappropriate; they believe she could have reached the same results without a grounded theory approach. They choose to ignore the critical way in which Clarke engages with the methodological issues around grounded theory in her work and how the results she achieves not only illuminate her field of study but refine and improve upon the research process (for example through the addition of a 'social worlds' approach (Clarke, 1998)). Similarly, Thomas and James (2006: 789) commend the work of Charmaz, saying, '... she endorses a wholly appropriate and interpretivist form of constructivism. What is puzzling is her apparent need to tether this to grounded theory as a methodological label'. Again, they see value in this scholar's work yet wish to cut her off from the community of practice within which she operates.

What matters is that Charmaz and Clarke exist within a community of healthy criticality, and engage with developments and arguments in the wider field of research methods (see also Pidgeon, 1996; Pidgeon and Henwood, 1996; Dey, 2007). Where certain grounded theory writers are reluctant to engage in this wider debate, then it is reasonable to have concerns, as do those within the grounded theory community itself. Clarke (2005: 11) describes the Classic Grounded Theorists as 'recalcitrants' and notes that she is in 'deep disagreement with many of Glaser's fundamental(ist) points'.

A pragmatic approach is, as Seale et al (2007: 6) suggest, to be 'cautious' about methods and to focus on practice in a self-conscious and systematic manner. Therefore it is possible that, keeping in mind the guidelines for quality research like those suggested by Seale et al (2007: 9ff) or Miles and Huberman (1994: 2), a self-conscious and self-critical grounded theory (such as Charmaz and Clarke's constructivist approach) can yield valuable results.

Research as practice

In their introduction to the edited volume, *Qualitative Research Practice*, Seale et al (2007: 1) identify three common problems with 'how-to' books in qualitative research: the provision of 'arid principles' that are not situated within a real context; the failure to acknowledge 'the extent to which doing qualitative research is a craft skill'; and an oversimplification of approaches to qualitative research, usually by way of a 'progress narrative', that prioritises the most recent as

the best way. Of course, it is as easy to get sidetracked into theoretical argument far removed from the practice of research in grounded theory as any other method, but, on the whole, grounded theory authors attempt to maintain an emphasis upon practice. Pidgeon (1996: 77) reminds us that Glaser and Strauss's approach 'was expressly concerned to overcome the tendency for the research process to be sterilized by overly rigid methodological prescriptions'. Charmaz (2006: 10) states, 'I treat grounded theory methods as constituting a craft that researchers practice'. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 16) note, 'Qualitative analysis is something that researchers have to feel their way through, something that can only be learned by doing'. And Dey (2007: 92) notes that a significant reason to employ the use of grounded theory as a research method is its ambition 'to generate theory that is relevant and practical as well as analytic – what Bent Flyvberg (2001) aptly describes as 'phronetic' social science'.

The emphasis on practice is also evident from the contents of the numerous handbooks on grounded theory which provide detailed 'hands-on' guidance to coding, memo-writing, diagramming and so on. The downside is that these authors' attempts to provide tools for the job of doing the research can quickly be seen as recipes which are formulaic or prescriptive. This mechanical/procedural approach is also associated, and some have said encouraged, by the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) designed for use in grounded theory projects. The software offers tools for coding, sorting and memo-writing, but it is the 'code-and-retrieve logic' (Seale 1999: 103) which can be used to sort the data which can be employed by some researchers in place of comprehensive data analysis thus favouring "'interrogating" data over "interpreting" it' (Dey 2007: 86).

Yet these dangers with pursuing a procedural and mechanical approach, with or without the use of CAQDAS, are primarily issues for the researcher to attend to and cannot in themselves be a reason for dismissing the efforts of an author to make the practice of research meaningful. Over and over, grounded theory authors draw their readers' attention to the fact that the tools they suggest are not recipes or formulas. Charmaz (2006: 9) states, 'I view grounded theory methods as a set of principles and practices, not prescriptions or packages'. And Corbin and Strauss (2008: 12) caution their readers from a prescriptive reading of their text: 'No researcher should become so obsessed with following a set of coding procedures that the fluid and dynamic nature of qualitative analysis is lost.'

Ultimately, grounded theory is a method which has the practice of data collection and data analysis at its very heart and for this reason was a powerful tool for investigating my research questions through memo writing and diagramming in particular. Memo-writing is encouraged as a core activity for the grounded theory researcher (Charmaz, 2014: chap.7). In my research, to begin with, memos were elaborations of my codes,

usually just a few sentences, but as the analysis progressed they were revisited, expanded, shaped, merged with others and generally used to develop descriptions of full-bodied concepts. Diagrams and matrices helped me to 'play' with the concepts assisting me in sorting codes, investigating comparisons, identifying categories and, most importantly, understanding the connections between concepts. Clarke, in particular has exploited the use of diagrams in her approach to grounded theory and believes they maximize the reflexive thrust of constructivist grounded theory helping us 'to see things afresh', to make 'assemblages and connections' and analyse 'relationality'.

A grounded theory approach has over many years now cultivated highly valuable research tools and through adaptations and additions new researchers within the constructivist school of grounded theory are helping to evolve these in new ways. These riches within the grounded theory approach help to make a sound case for sustaining grounded theory as a research method.

Reflexivity

The importance of self-criticality has already been noted above in the section on pragmatism and it is clearly an aspect of good qualitative research. Two features of quality research noted by Seale et al (2007: 9) are:

- i) the researcher should demonstrate openness to emergent issues; and
- ii) the researcher should seek to be transparent and reflexive about conduct, theoretical perspective and values.

Any research method which has potential to encourage reflexivity must, therefore, be valued, and it is for this reason that grounded theory again can be seen to be a worthwhile research method. The 'theoretical sampling' technique is the clearest example, whereby the researcher continually evaluates the progress of the data collection (e.g. the selection of site, participants and research tools) in the light of the analysis of earlier data. This 'spirit of self-awareness and self-criticism' and 'openness to new ideas' is, according to Seale (1999: 104), 'often a hallmark of research studies of good quality'.

Yet, in their critique of grounded theory Thomas and James (2006) have little to say about its reflexive strengths, they are more bothered by the aim of the reflection – an attempt to uncover hidden truth – yet this issue has been clearly addressed by later constructivist grounded theorists:

In the final analysis, constructionist grounded theorists leave far behind them the false sense of security that comes from a belief in establishing absolute foundations for knowledge in either the rules of method or direct access to the empirical world. Instead, they enter the hermeneutic circle of multiple,

partial and competing interpretations' (Pidgeon 1996: 85).

During the research process in my doctoral studies I found the reflexivity inherent in theoretical sampling and the memo-writing process to be foundational to producing a piece of work that was both rigorous and transparent. The fact that I did not discover a theory did not invalidate the work; the reflexive process allowed me to develop an 'analytic story' that was a meaningful and legitimate interpretation of my field of study.

Conclusion

Using grounded theory in my research into sharing education was at various times an intuitive, frustrating, fascinating and challenging experience. Certainly my initial assumptions about the approach were naïve, and it is important to acknowledge that significant challenges to grounded theory exist.

Nonetheless, after further investigation (and also now with further experience) I feel that it is possible and reasonable to make a case for grounded theory, in particular a grounded theory that includes: a critical approach which engages with the wider research community and which places an emphasis upon theorizing rather than the discovery of theory.

On this first point it is my view that it is vitally important that any grounded theory researchers maintain a balance between belonging and critique, community and criticality. This is both pragmatic and reflexive. It requires grounded theory researchers to avoid the exclusivist claims that can sometimes characterise it, especially in its 'classical' forms, and to engage fully in the broad research community.

On the second point, I agree with Thomas and James that we are right to be suspicious of some of the claims made for grounded theory theories. However, I would also want to disagree with the view of Thomas and James (2006) that theory generation should be abandoned. They make a distinction between the ability of qualitative research to 'understand' and to 'explain'. They believe that grounded theory research can only achieve the former but not the latter. However, this seems to be a rather limited perspective on the value of qualitative research in general. Of course, researchers need to be cautious in their claims for validity, but it would be a very narrow-minded perspective to dismiss the potential for qualitative research to possess any explanatory power. The 'theorising' approach would seem to encapsulate the explanatory potential of grounded theory in a way that is provisional and tentative, but meaningful and genuine. As Miles and Huberman (1994: 1) note, 'qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings to new integrations; they help researchers to get beyond initial conceptions and to generate or revise conceptual frameworks'.

Finally, I want to point to the primary reason for not abandoning a grounded theory approach and that is the strength in its emphasis on research as practice and craft. And it is this emphasis, I believe, that will continue to attract new generations of researchers and sustain the method into the future.

References

- Bowen, G.A (2008) Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: a research note. *Qualitative Research*. Vol 8, No. 1: 137–152.
- Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Cheetham, R. (2001) How on earth do we find out what is going on in collective worship? An account of a grounded theory approach. *British Journal of Religious Education*. Vol. 23, No. 3: 165-176.
- Clarke, A. (1998) *Disciplining Reproduction: modernity, American life sciences and the problems of sex*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clarke, A. (2005) *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the postmodern turn*. London: Sage.
- Corbin, J. and Strauss, A.K. (2008) *Basics of Qualitative Research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research: meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.
- Dey, I. (2007) Grounded Theory. In Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F. and Silverman, D. (Eds.) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage: pp. 80-94.
- Engeström, Y. (2009) Expansive Learning: toward an activity-theoretical reconceptualization. In K. Illeris (Ed.) *Contemporary theories of learning: learning theorists -- in their own words*. London: Routledge: 53–73.
- Glaser, B.D. and Holton, J. (2004) Remodeling Grounded Theory. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. Vol. 5, No. 2. [Online] Available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/607/1315> [Accessed 13 April 2015].
- Glaser, B.D. and Strauss, A.K. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Lempert, L.B. (2007) Asking Questions of Data: Memo Writing in the Grounded Theory Tradition. In A. Bryant and K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage: 245-264.
- Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nelson, J. (2013) *Common Education and Separate Schools: A Study of Sharing Education in Northern Ireland Using a Grounded Theory Methodology*. PhD Thesis: Queen’s University Belfast.
- Pidgeon, N. (1996) Grounded Theory – theoretical background. In Richardson, J.T.E. (Ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. Leicester: British Psychological Society.
- Pidgeon, N. and Henwood, K. (1996) Grounded Theory – practical implementation. In Richardson, J.T.E. (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. Leicester: British Psychological Society.
- Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F. and Silverman, D. (Eds.) (2007) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: SAGE.
- Strauss, A.K. and Corbin, J. (1994) Grounded Theory Methodology’, in: N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage: 273-285.
- Thomas, G. and James, D. (2006) Reinventing grounded theory: some questions about theory, ground and discovery. *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 32, No. 6: 767-795.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.