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Researching Difficult-to-Reach and Vulnerable Groups Using Grounded Theory

Methods

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Discipline

Health

Sub-discipline

General Health and Social Care

Academic Level

Postgraduate

Contributor Biography

Luke Cartwright is a lecturer in social work, and his current research interests are in the broad area of health. Luke completed his doctoral research in 2013 and has since worked on research projects that have focused upon eating disorders.

Published Articles

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Cartwright, L. (2015). Respite and repair: How mothers of incarcerated long-term problematic drug users make prison work for them. *Journal of Substance Use*. Advance online publication. doi:10.3109/14659891.2015.1052106

Abstract

This case study describes a research project that used grounded theory methods. The aim of this research was to develop new knowledge about how parents experience their offspring's problematic drug use. Unstructured interviews were used during the data-gathering phase of the research, and data were collected in two distinct periods.

The case study is divided into four sections. Section 1 outlines the approaches used to find and recruit research participants. This section also describes how I engaged with the participants in ways that I hoped would encourage participation and build a rapport. Section 2 outlines significant life events that some of the research participants experienced and the importance of working sensitively with vulnerable participants and how this can contribute to your research endeavor. This section also highlights some of the ethical issues that need to be negotiated during the fieldwork phase of a research project. Section 3 describes the methods used during the data collection and data analysis stages of the project. The processes involved are broken down with each stage being explained. The process is presented as a linear model; however, in grounded theory, it is possible to move back and forth between stages, and the benefits this may bring are explained in this section. Finally, Section 4 offers a reflexive account of the research journey. Reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative research and this section highlights why it is important.

Learning Outcomes

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By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand the benefit of active engagement with your research participants
- Describe the stages of data collection in grounded theory
- Describe the stages of data analysis in grounded theory
- Understand reflexivity and its importance to qualitative researchers

Case Study

Introduction

The aim of this research project was to investigate the experiences of parents of problematic drug users. The voice of this service user group is largely missing from the research literature.

Grounded theory has been identified as a method that can effectively be used in research areas where little is known (Birks & Mills, 2001; Charmaz, 2014). In addition, grounded theory is an appropriate approach to use when the “generation of theory with explanatory power is a desired outcome” (Birks & Mills, 2001, p. 16). This method was chosen as it supported the achievement of the research aims and helped create understandings of the social situation from the perspective of the research participants. Grounded theory was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* is a key reading for any researcher wanting to use this method. The original approach has been developed since the late 1960s, and a number of publications have become available in recent years that help new researchers utilize this method. Two of these publications are suggested below in the “Further Reading” section of this case study.

The service user group that is the focus of this research experienced a range of pressures that may have implications for their health and wellbeing. Some of these potential difficulties are outlined here. The case study will start by describing the processes used during the recruitment stage of my research and will consider the potential benefits of building relationships with research participants. This case study will then highlight some of the challenging circumstances a number of the research participants experienced during the data-gathering phase of the project. This will help you to understand some of the obstacles and ethical dilemmas I experienced during my research and how I dealt with them.

There are several key stages involved in developing a grounded theory (data collection, coding, memo writing, developing categories, and theoretical sampling). These stages will all be described. Although presented in a linear fashion here, sometimes it is appropriate to move back and forth between the stages. An important feature within grounded theory is the constant comparative method that involves analyzing data as they are being collected. A two-stage data collection strategy was designed for this study so that this technique could be fully utilized. After the methods have been outlined, this case study will consider the importance of reflexivity, the process of thinking about your approaches to your research throughout the project.

Section 1—How to Find and Recruit Research Participants

The participants in this research were purposefully chosen. Purposefully chosen here means the participants were selected with the needs of the research in mind (Coyne, 1997). Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research demands that the social scientist search for participants with relevant experience of the phenomenon being investigated (Morse, 2007).

Support Meetings

The participants in this research were recruited through a charity that advertised one of its services as supporting parents and carers of problematic drug users. This organization was selected as a good source of potential participants as it had a long-standing presence in the area in which it was located. Contact was made with the Chief Executive of this organization, and after meeting with him and outlining the research proposal, it was agreed that I could attend a support meeting in each of the locations the charity operated from. The purpose of attending these meetings was so that I could meet the parents and carers the charity offered support to and explain the proposed study. In total, four of these support meetings were attended during the whole of the data-gathering phase of the research. The purpose of the support meetings that were convened by the charity was to provide an environment where parents and carers could offer each other mutual support and seek advice and assistance for particular difficulties they were experiencing.

The charity organized their support meetings at its own premises in the city where the research was conducted and hired a range of meeting rooms in the market towns in the surrounding area to provide support to parents who lived in more rural locations. The charity offered its services to any parent or carer affected by the drug and/or alcohol use of a family member. When I attended the group meetings, hand-written notes were taken as not all participants at these meetings wanted to be interviewed individually for this research but they all consented to notes being taken during the meetings. However, when interviewing participants individually, the meetings were digitally recorded.

Developing a Rapport

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The recruitment process that was utilized for this study enabled a rapport to develop with the participant group that was drawn upon during subsequent data-gathering activities such as one-to-one interviews. For example, by attending the support meetings, I was able to engage in some of the social aspects of the group such as making tea and coffee and sharing (with what at the time were *potential* participants) some of my own personal history and the reasons for my academic interest in researching this area. By developing relationships with potential participants at this early stage in the fieldwork, the support group attendees who became participants talked more openly about their experiences and offered highly personal accounts of what were often described by the participants as private family matters. After presenting my research proposal to prospective participants at the support meetings, the support workers who worked for the charity (and organized the meetings and offered one-to-one support to members of the groups) agreed to participate in the research and also agreed to collate the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of individuals who expressed an interest in taking part in the study.

Section 2—Working Sensitively With Vulnerable Research

Participants

Significant Life Events and Vulnerability

During the course of the data-gathering phase of the research, some significant and life-changing events were experienced by some of the research participants. These events affected how and when data were gathered. For example, one participant was admitted to hospital suffering from extreme stress that she was experiencing as a consequence of her offspring's problematic drug-taking behavior. As a result of the mental distress this participant experienced, it was decided not

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to follow this potential participant up as it was felt that this might have further damaged her mental health. Another participant, following the first interview with her in the summer, accompanied her son to court just before Christmas in the same year where he was sentenced to 2 years imprisonment for aggravated burglary. For the research, this presented an opportunity for me to gather data about how she felt about the custodial sentence while the experience was still fresh. However, it was also necessary to respect the participant's need for some time to reflect on what had happened and to adjust to her new reality. I did interview this participant for a second time and met with her just 3 months after her son had been sent to prison. Another of the participant's offspring overdosed and died during the fieldwork stage of the study. Again, I did go on to meet with this participant but only after liaising with her support worker to make sure that it was appropriate for me to do so.

These events serve to demonstrate how difficult day-to-day life can be for parents of long-term problematic drug users. Moreover, they also highlight the on-going and difficult ethical decisions that were made during the data-gathering phase of the research. These parents at times were very vulnerable, and it was necessary to account for this vulnerability when arranging meetings and also during interviews. Another method used to account for the potential vulnerability of the participants was to change the topic of conversation if it became apparent the area being talked about was causing emotional distress. As the matters discussed when data were being collated were sometimes highly emotive, it was important to finish interviews with the participants on a positive note, thereby making sure that the participants were not left in a distressed state.

Section 3—Methods

Constant Comparative Method

A central feature within grounded theory is the application of a constant comparative method. Analysis of data begins as soon as the collection of data commences. As data are gathered, the process of data collection is refined (Charmaz, 2014). It is clear that data collection is approached in a particular way when using grounded theory methods. In this research, as participants were interviewed their responses were used to inform later interview questions and the areas discussed with the participants (the interview strategy is outlined in more detail later in this case study). This constant comparison is also described as theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The methods applied during the analysis of the data (the coding process and so on) will be outlined later in this case study. What will be described next are the methods used for data collection.

Data Collection

To promote the collection of rich data that captured the lived reality of the participants, a technique described by Charmaz (2014, p. 56) as “intensive interviewing” was employed. The use of intensive interviewing within a grounded theory project supports a detailed investigation of the social situation being researched. Using this method enabled research participants to describe their experience in great detail. The detail was then analyzed to develop a grounded substantive theory.

Charmaz (2014) suggests intensive interviewing is “a gently-guided, one sided conversation that explores a person’s substantial experience with the research topic” (p. 56).

The use of intensive interviewing during this research facilitated

- Full exploration of the experiences described by the participants
- The ability to ask for greater detail or further clarification
- The investigation of participants' actions, feelings and thoughts
- The use of social skills to promote detailed conversations

(Charmaz, 2014, p. 69)

This was important as the research aims and objectives demanded that the way the participants' experiences changed and altered over time was captured within the analysis of these data. Problematic drug use changes over time, partly as a consequence of societal attitudes developing, with societal views often being influenced by a government's response to drug use.

Each interview began with gathering descriptive data. For example, each participant was asked how their family was constituted, how many children they had, their age and where they lived, and so on. This opening question was sufficient for some of the participants who went on to provide a full and detailed account of their experiences since their offspring started using drugs up to the present time. Most participants, though, needed several follow-up questions such as "tell me about how you first became aware that your son/daughter was using drugs?" This strategy allowed in-depth explorations with each participant about their lived experiences. It also enabled the participants to move at a pace they were comfortable with. It is suggested that

[t]hinking qualitatively means rejecting the idea of a research design as a single document which is an entire advance blueprint for a piece of research . . . This is because qualitative research is characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive. (Mason, 2002, p. 24)

The interviews that were undertaken during this study, as described above, were fluid. However, what was decided before the data gathering began was that there was to be more than one meeting with each participant where possible. It was therefore essential that the participants felt comfortable with the research process.

This two-meeting interview schedule was used to try and account for and mitigate bias from the participants (e.g., saying what they thought I wanted to hear). The interview timetable provided a period of 6 months between each interview. The period between the first and second interviews was used to complete analysis of the initial data. The second set of interviews was then used to enable the confirmation of some data and also to facilitate the collection of information by way of more targeted questioning following the initial analysis of the data. This approach supported the simultaneous collection and analysis of data. Not only were data analyzed following each individual interview, but also the period of time between the first and second interviews with each participant allowed analysis of the initial data to be completed before the second round of meetings began. The analysis was then used to inform the second set of interviews.

Data Analysis

As already described above, the constant comparison method allowed me to develop the process of data collection throughout the research. As data were collected, they were also analyzed. This data analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation is achieved in grounded theory research when new data fail to offer or reveal fresh insight into the specific area being researched (Charmaz, 2014). Before theoretical saturation is attained, there

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are key stages in the analytical process and these will be described next and the approaches adopted during this research will be highlighted.

Coding

Initial Coding

The central analytical device in grounded theory method is coding. A number of terms have been used in the literature to describe the coding process in grounded theory. Initial coding will be used here to describe the procedure used to break the data down into incidents. Initial coding is the term used by Charmaz (2014) and involved interrogating the data and considering questions such as the following:

- What is the data suggesting?
- What is being investigated?
- What perspectives are data being analysed from?
- What is happening in the data?

(Charmaz, 2014, p. 116)

This early analytical phase was used to break the data down to uncover actions in each piece of information. During initial coding, data were reviewed and analyzed over and over again. The constant interaction between the researcher and the data enabled new directions to be revealed that went beyond what may have initially been seen or even anticipated. Language and the way participants articulated their experiences played a critical role in the way initial codes were recorded (Charmaz, 2014). However, the codes that were developed during this research

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reflected both the language of the participants and that of the researcher: “the analyst will discover two kinds [of code]: those that he has constructed himself . . . and those that have been abstracted from the language of the research situation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 107).

Analytical Matrix

The first attempt at coding started by designing and utilizing what I called an analytical matrix. Microsoft Excel was used to create the matrix that was designed to list the codes as they emerged from the data. By representing the codes within the matrix, a visual representation of the data was created. This tool helped reveal key themes across the data without relying on my own (perhaps faulty) memory. A section taken from the analytical matrix is shown in Table 1 to illustrate how this device was used and what it looked like in practice.

Table 1.

Caption: Example section taken from my analytical matrix.

Code: Theft from the family home	Code: Threats to the family from associates	Code: Attending treatment sessions with the offspring	Code: Managing treatment— parental involvement
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<p>Yes—“just about everything we own has been stolen to feed his habits”</p>	<p>Yes—“so called mates threatening to bomb our house . . . we have been threatened cos he owed them money and stuff”</p>	<p>“I’ve gone with him and they won’t tell me anything . . . you know when you say I know that he is using on top of his script and yet they won’t listen to me saying that even though that can be so harmful for him but they went o no it’s confidential . . . there’s like this big wall put up”</p>	
<p>Yes “obviously all my jewellery went”</p>	<p>Yes—“just as he pulled up [in the car] he pulled a knife on us, well me”</p>		<p>“I’d frantically look for different places to hide it . . . and every day I gave him his methadone”</p>
<p>Yes “she would wait till I was at work”</p>	<p>Yes—“to the point where I daren’t even go out with the dog at like 10 o’clock at night”</p>	<p>“her dad went with her for the appointment but was not allowed into the consultation”</p>	<p>“I did in the beginning get her an appointment with somebody”</p>

Line-by-Line Coding

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The next stage required more detailed scrutiny of the data; therefore, line-by-line coding was used to build upon the work started with the analytical matrix. This very detailed approach (line-by-line coding) helped inform later interviews and subsequent data collection. Furthermore, this tactic helped with the identification of more subtle themes. The line-by-line coding supported the “prolonged and intense engagement with the data” which in turn led to a deeper level of analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 97). It also helped me to become closer to the data and become fully immersed in the process.

Focused Coding and Categories

The initial use of the analytical matrix followed by line-by-line coding supported the development of what Charmaz (2014) describes as “focused codes” (p. 138). Focused coding was the phase of analysis when the most frequent and significant codes were identified. During this phase of the analysis, “groups of codes [were] collapsed into categories” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 94). It was during this stage in the analysis that conceptual patterns began to emerge from the data. Once categories began to emerge from the codes, it became necessary to write memos to develop them further.

From Codes to Memos

The writing of memos further supports the researcher with the move toward translating data into theory. Memos helped to conceptualize the data, making it more abstract and less descriptive (Lempert, 2007). The writing of memos during the analysis helped to capture a complex mix of what had happened both in the data and ideas about what it meant or represented (Birks & Mills, 2001). As the analysis undertaken during this research was an interpretation of the data, the use

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of memos enabled questions to be asked of the interpretations made and moved the analytical process toward developing a substantive theory (Birks & Mills, 2001). The memo as a device was used to develop ideas and was essentially an analytical conversation about the research data that allowed a full exploration of the data (Lempert, 2007). The procedures employed in this grounded theory were not used in a linear fashion. Rather, there was a process of moving back and forth between phases. This was particularly the case with memo writing. As the coding process developed, ideas also started to surface. This approach to memo writing helped to develop my reflexivity (see Section 4 below) and the ability to think critically about any assumptions made and the patterns initially seen in the data (Saldana, 2009).

Secondary Data Collection and Advanced Coding

This last type of coding is “advanced coding” (Birks & Mills, p. 116). As already described in this case study, the approach taken during this research was to include a second round of interviews with the research participants. This second set of interviews enabled me to be more focused in my data collection. Having created several categories from groups of codes, the second set of interviews was used to develop these categories further.

Half of the participants were interviewed for a second time. When I began gathering data from individual interviews, I had anticipated a need to interview all the participants twice. However, once the second meetings started to take place, it soon became apparent that new properties were not emerging from the data. The interviews that were carried out supported saturation of the categories that had been identified after the first set of data had been collected and analyzed. During the second round of interviews, it was possible to gather “statements, events, [and] cases that illuminate[d] the categories” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 200).

As with the first set of interviews, as data were collected they were simultaneously coded and analyzed. The analysis from each interview was used to further inform subsequent meetings with participants. This enhanced questioning also highlighted issues that required the patterns that were originally identified to be reconsidered, with this leading to further analysis of the data (Coyne, 1997). As the secondary interview process progressed, the newly acquired data were used to test the emergent theory. During this final stage in the coding procedure, data were then integrated into the developing theory. By revisiting the earlier stages of coding, it was possible to make sure the developing theoretical understandings were fully grounded in the data (Kelle, 2007). The final stage in the process adopted here to develop a grounded theory further highlights the way data collection and analyses are not completed sequentially. As the research developed and theory emerged from the data, it became increasingly necessary to move back and forth between stages to test and recheck the theory being created from the research data. Having saturated the categories and tested the emergent themes, the data-gathering phase of the research stopped. The newly collated data were then fully integrated into the coding schema and the core themes were then theorized and developed.

Section 4—Reflexivity

The final section of this case study is reflexive:

Reflexivity is a process by which the researcher continually reflects on his or her participation in the process of knowledge production. (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004, p. 76)

A range of decisions that are made (starting with the research topic and continuing through until research findings are disseminated) influence research outcomes. These decisions shape the character of the knowledge that is articulated. For this reason, it is important to be transparent, to describe and more crucially *evaluate* the decisions that were made during the research to enable readers of the outputs to be able to assess the validity of the claims made (Davies & Francis, 2011). Reflexivity then can be seen to be a critical aspect of the research endeavor.

The first key point to be evaluated for the purpose of this case study is that this research began with some existing knowledge about the various ways that problematic drug use affects families. The decision to research the topic under investigation here was influenced by existing knowledge about the way problematic drug use impacts on family life. However, the range of experiences that were described, and how candid the participants were about their lives, was entirely unexpected. This was partly due to the approach taken to the interviewing process particularly in the early stages of data collection (see above under the heading developing a rapport).

By adopting grounded theory methods, the research outcomes were shaped by the themes that emerged from the participants and the insights they offered. So although existing knowledge about the way this participant group experienced their offspring's problematic drug use was held by the researcher and brought to the research endeavor, the actual findings—while being informed by this knowledge—were established by following the data such that

[t]he theory that emerges from the researcher's collection and analysis of qualitative data is in one sense equivalent to what he *knows systematically* about

his own data . . . They are his perceptions, his personal experiences, and his own hard-won analyses. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 225; emphasis in original)

In addition to the driving forces that led to this research being undertaken, it is also of importance to acknowledge and evaluate what motivated the participants to become involved in the process. What became evident from the data collected during the research is that the participants were keen for the research to be used to shed light on the lived reality of the families of problematic drug users and improve the support provided to this service user group. The participants frequently articulated their belief that more funding should be provided by central government to support families in this situation. This was the impetus for many of the participants to become involved in this study. The desire to improve the recognition that this participant group receives and to expand the type of support provided encouraged many of the participants to be very open and provide very detailed accounts of what can be thought of as being very sensitive and at times very personal pieces of information. The strong desire shown by many of the participants to be involved in this research played a significant part in supporting my ability to gather very detailed and rich data.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What potential benefits can building a rapport with your research participants bring to your research endeavor? What risks/problems could this create?
2. Describe the possible disadvantages of purposefully selecting your research participants.
3. Describe the stages used during the *data analysis* phase of the research outlined in this case study.

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4. In groups, discuss the *initial coding* stage of data analysis. How could my “analytical matrix” be adapted or improved?
5. What are the potential benefits of interviewing research participants more than once?
6. Why is reflexivity important for qualitative researchers?

Further Reading

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