



From a Trickle to Torrents: The Lived Experience of Grounded Theory in Research on Undergraduate Student Mothers

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the success and usefulness of using grounded theory methodology in qualitative research. It is intended for scholars and researchers using qualitative methods, especially supervisors who are apprehensive over issues of validity in grounded theory approaches in researching lived experience. The study sought to fulfil the objectives: To explore the emergence of Grounded Theory in research on lived experience; To identify the challenges of using grounded theory researching lived experience, and; To highlight successful use of grounded theory in the lived experience of undergraduate student mother research. Through descriptive phenomenology, this paper illustrates such dynamics of research in Grounded Theory as a method in data collection in lived experience of undergraduate student mothers. The blueprint of Grounded Theory is traced through the research process in a mixture of content analysis of the research outcome and the lived experience narrative approach adopted by the researcher. Findings, brought out as lived experience of the research reveal that Grounded Theory procedures are thorough while its results are apt and resourceful in bringing out the often elusive data about which assumptions dominate. It delves into the unknown, giving voice to the voiceless. Though various researchers qualify its tedious procedures, Grounded Theory as a method was found appropriate, effective and highly resourceful in accessing data in the study on lived experience; that of the undergraduate student mothers. The paper recommends Grounded Theory be demystified by adopting it in relevant research as commitment in the management of data and the research process. The nature of research and the social cultural context should be a guiding factor in successful Grounded Theory methodology.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, social context, lived experience

INTRODUCTION

Basically, it is inevitable that in the background of paradigm shift, research methods are bound to be dynamic in order to fit the social context of research, the research participants and the nature of the research. The impact of such paradigmatic change may inevitably imply new methods coming up in data collection and analysis to fit such dynamics. Despite being in existence for half a century, Grounded Theory has not been popular as a method in research. Often, apprehension by some members of the Boards of Examiners at university, over validity of grounded theory may cause uncertainty for both students and supervisors during the research process and difficulties during thesis defences in postgraduate studies. This paper, founded on some Doctoral research experience in the lived experience of undergraduate student-mothers illustrates a lived experience; a journey of success with grounded theory methodology that was used both as a theory and a method in data collection. The process revealed that if the cultural context is effectively managed, grounded theory is the way to go in research in lived experience.

Essentially the title, *'from a trickle to torrents...'* is a subtle illustration of the methodological scenario created by Grounded Theory. In the research endeavour in the lived experience of undergraduate student mothers, Grounded Theory methodology despite encountered challenges yields great contribution in data collection. As advocated by various scholars (Bryant, 2018; Charmaz, 2014, Chong & Yeo, 2015 and Creswell, 2014), Grounded Theory has enormous contribution in the nature of data collected, its quality and its ability to delve deep into participant experience in individuals' feelings, opinion, insight and perception of phenomena under investigation. This paper therefore, is a representation of the journey travelled through a Doctoral study on undergraduate student mothers, as a research experience with Grounded Theory methodology. Though celebrating the benefits of Grounded Theory in the research endeavour, and as predicted by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the social-cultural difficulties implied by Barney Glaser regarding its use turned out a challenge in the research process. Grounded Theory procedures as Glaser explains, especially in the non-English speaking nations outside the United States and the United Kingdom, actually turned out a reality in this research. Done in Kenya, in an African setting, it is seen as posing challenges not only with language, but also with cultural traditions regarding 'my world' and how much a participant can trust, can connect and can share that world; their world. It will also depend upon whom they can talk to about their world. Once handled properly though, Grounded Theory is a great experience in research.

Grounded Theory can be traced to the 1950s but it gained focus in the Chicago school in the 1960s with great scholars Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Their emancipation of Grounded Theory, its contribution to inquiry, its relevance in sound research methodology and its application in lived experience, was picked up by their students and generated further (Charmaz, 2014). Asserting its place in qualitative enquiry, Glaser and Strauss (1967) initiated a paradigm shift through *'Discovering Grounded Theory'* towards recognition of Grounded Theory in qualitative methods. They explored and advocated for the recognition, validity and acceptability of qualitative designs alongside the dominant scientific inquiry in the prior positivist traditions. Though, not devoid of challenges, Grounded Theory can be viewed as a theory and a method of data collection (Creswell, 2014), that enhances in-depth inquiry. In the research on lived experience of undergraduate student mothers it is engaged as a method of data collection within the descriptive phenomenological research design.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is designed along Riessman's narrative method of collection of data from stories that people tell; stories of their lives, their experience of social phenomena. This comes out in the background of the historical 'narrative turn' where Riessman (2008) sees research designs as inevitably deviating from the positivists' rigid scientific traditions, to accommodate innovation in research through the study of social phenomena. Such innovation comes out in research in human experience as presented in the Husserlian and Straussian traditions of lived experience (Glaser & Strauss, 2015). Presented in narrative form the paper presents the journey travelled in the research experience with the use of grounded theory as a preferred method in collecting data. This paper therefore presents stories of the research encounter derived from the personal journal kept during the three years of the research process. The paper is therefore a narrative of the research experience in data collection. The narrative choice is aligned to John Dewey's pragmatic theory that

portrays the world as being known best by people in real life experience. He sees the world as understood best through the 'knower of the world'.

Grounding Grounded Theory

At the onset of the research and at the proposal level, university guidelines laid down for research undertaking involved the usual exploration of possibilities in relevant methodology to be adopted for the research to ensure validity in the research. Once approved by faculty, the collection of data began and proceeded in the procedures and timelines of a research development framework that guided not only the data collection but also the data analysis. In this case, despite the apt framework set for the research, a process meant to take a few months ended up taking triple the time allocated. The proposal structure was scanty with little literature regarding undergraduate student mothers and a notable absence of a sound theoretical background made the planning hard, despite many theories seemingly touching on the topic. All the same, the feminist theory seemed the ideal in the background of motherhood and the experience of the triple role. It aligned study to marginalization that feminism addresses in such circumstances (Patton, 2002; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). As a result, simple open ended questions on the interview schedule initially gave direction towards lived experience of the undergraduate student mothers, as students and as mothers.

It was noted however, that as the research process picked up, ideas and concepts that were not predetermined began to crop up and grow in number. A new issue would emerge with a participant that would necessitate further search of relevant literature and the trickle to torrents scenario would be enacted. Dealing with lived experience, the mass of information was not easy to control and more often, the prior insight in the construction of the research questions would be found somehow skewed. Engaging the participants led to new questions, new data and even new participants just as Creswell, (2014) and Bryant (2018) illustrate with regard to Grounded Theory methods. Having targeted the undergraduate student mothers only, later development deemed necessary the inclusion of Deans of Schools into the list of participants to complete the phenomena surrounding these student mothers. Seemingly, the grounding in Grounded Theory was taking shape, unobtrusively in the ambience of the oral interviews. Like Glaser would put it, I was "discovering Grounded Theory" not just as a research method but also as a participant in the lived experience of the young undergraduate mothers. This discovery again demanded a review of literature related to Grounded Theory and the need to restructure the theoretical framework to align the research process to Grounded Theory, a mark of back and forth phenomenon in Grounded Theory. I was building the experience from a mere trickle to torrents.

The research analysis that runs concurrently with data collection unearthed themes whose number and depth also grew torrential by the first and second participant, moving towards saturation by the fourth undergraduate student mother participant. The saturation, which triggers the end to engagement of new participants in qualitative approaches of lived experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), marks the onset of the scrutiny for emergent theories. The experience was that even as numbers of new themes emerged with each of the participants, the new content of each identified theme dwindled by the third participant and the process thereafter trickled off into the identification of a theory; in this case; resilience theory. This emergent theory aptly defined the phenomena under study, the force behind undergraduate student mother retention in the face of adversity (Creswell, 2018). The threat of dropping out of campus has been highlighted by various researchers in student mother issues, reflecting the challenging triple role as a major undoing in studies, a kind of threat to

progression and completion of studies (Mahugu, 2014; Shemjor, 2015; Rowe, 2017, and Rico, 2017). Resilience for the undergraduate student mothers reflects the strong will power they display in the face of multiple vulnerability that surrounds them at university. They are hardly out of adolescence with little motherhood skills and yet on their own away from supportive relations. Often, they face financial difficulties that push many of them out of the system. Tight and highly demanding academic schedules lead to fatigue and often depression sets in when such struggle comes in the background of rejection by fathers of their babies or abuse from male rogues at their unprotected areas of residence. Grounded in the Grounded Theory, resilience as the emerging theory is seen in the undergraduate student mothers who have prevailed such adversity to remain at university and complete their studies. All this happens in the background of inadequate structures, and lack of effective student mother policies or even supportive mechanisms at university. This scenario is what makes grounded theory a beautiful experience; going out there with an open mind to listen to narratives that you the researcher and the subject come to experience; a kind of joint venture to identify the looming shadows in human experience and together create meaning out of them in the research experience.

Grounded Theory and the Social Context of Lived Experience

When carrying out this research, especially at the proposal level, the proposal had indicated focus on collection of data in the lived experience of undergraduate girls as mothers, at university to address issues of women in the triple role of parenting and in schooling. The background experience with students' mothers in the teaching career tended to inhibit into the research process rendering the researcher as part and parcel of the research. As Charmaz (2014) puts it, the social context of the research affects data collection and it cannot wholly be detached from the researcher's prior knowledge of such phenomena. For instance, the experience a teacher has of school encounters cannot be wholly ignored in spite of the 'bracketing' that scholars prescribe for researchers in such research surroundings. The experience presents the phenomenon of the past informing the future. As would be the case with the undergraduate student-mothers, the experience with them at university was a reality that the researcher as an individual could not deny because the daily encounter with students of that nature at university and yet they were the subjects of the research. Such a scenario is presented by Moghandam *et al.*, (2017) in the presentation of the social context of student mothers concealing their identity where the social environment is not friendly to them. For a researcher, knowledge of the social context will guide not only the research tools use but also the contextual arrangement of the meetings (Montoya, 2016).

The strength of grounded theory is seen emerging from working within familiar surroundings of a doctoral student who has been dealing career wise with student mothers. This presents the researcher in sight that is considered useful rather than harmful to the research process (Creswell, 2014; Fahad, 2018). The vivid picture of them on campus requires less of input into a research encounter, from such clients for the already familiarized researcher to perceive the described phenomena unlike those researchers who have had no encounter with them at all prior to the research (Mukami, 2016; Majid, 2016). The research process where researchers already have insight becomes an eye opener, removing any hazy or ambiguous areas in the social context as part of reliving what they have seen but not necessarily experienced (Fahad, 2018). Grounded theory therefore eliminates misrepresentation of ideas and enhances reliability of the research findings as it adds to the researchers' world of experience.

As a departmental mandate and a significant contextual issue too, and as earlier noted in proposal writing, this work had initially been presented in the foundations of feminist theory, whose concepts seemed distinctly aligned to the mother-schooling enter-twined triple role of an undergraduate student mother. Incidentally, as the nature of grounded theory would have it, researching lived experience had nothing to do with prior preconceived ideas on the applicability of the feminist theory. A peculiar observation was made; that Grounded Theory asserts itself in the research if people are not too blind to see it. Just as scholars in qualitative research observe, data tends to be massive, unsystematic, varied and not standardised (Creswell, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) while new theories emerge from the prevailing shared experience. At the first interview, new questions already began to emerge, raising the need to urgently fit in more questions and alter others to suit the unfolding story and shield research from 'researcher bias'. It is this spectacle that made the researchers aware that they were doing Grounded Theory and in their rigidity, an injustice was being done to good research, as Corbin and Strauss (2015) put it;

'The researcher [in Grounded Theory] does not begin the research with a predetermined list of concepts. Concepts are derived from data during analysis. Analysis begins with those first pieces of data... concepts drawn from initial analysis guide collection of subsequent data. Each data collection is followed by analysis. This process of data collection followed by analysis continues until the researcher constructs well integrated and dense theory.' (pp.15)

In this case, a break of the data collection process was made to engage a thorough investigation of the nature and principles of Grounded Theory as part of the literature review in order to articulate it to the research process in grounding the Grounded Theory into the research, as illustrated by scholars in grounded theory (Creswell, 2014, 2017; Bryant, 2017 & Charmaz, 2014). Guided by literature from these renowned scholars in Grounded Theory like Creswell (2007, 2014 & 2017), Corbin and Strauss (2011 & 2015), Tarrozi (2013), Bryant, (2017) and Chong, and Yeo, (2015) who delve into Grounded Theory designs in educational research, it became necessary to analyse each set of data from each of the participants, right from the first undergraduate student mothers to the last. This analysis generated more and new themes as it progressed. During the research, another aspect of Grounded Theory cropped up. Some questions regarding the place of undergraduate student mothers at university pointed at critical input from the Deans of Schools in order to get a coherent insight into the world of lived experience. This necessitated the inclusion of the Deans not on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of the undergraduate student mothers, to help fill in the gaps in understanding the phenomena surrounding the lived experience of the young mothers. Deans are directly answerable to students' welfare and academic wellbeing and the frequency of interacting with them is high. The result of such participant addition made a great difference. The thematic scope and depth increased with the engagement of these new participants. Gaps regarding their place at university were compensated by the presence of the Deans who expounded on the mechanisms of intervention into the challenges raised by the student mothers. In the face of trustworthiness in qualitative research, the complementary evidence from the Deans validated the participant narratives contribution by the undergraduate student mothers.

Further review of literature revealed that the study was aligned along the constructivist Grounded Theory that is widely recognized for capturing the lived experience of individuals in certain phenomenon like motherhood (Van Manen, 2018). It involves looking at how

individuals view or construct their world and experiences. The title ‘lived experience’ in this case implies that it is not just any encounters of life with the undergraduate student-mothers, for they can be encountered, can be seen, can be talked to, people can share their ideas but certainly no one can live their lives. People can attempt to imagine, to assume or to guess what they go through, but it is only them who feel, act and live their lives and so it is about their lives, their encounters and activities, their daily engagement; their lived experience; no one can ontologically put it better in words and reality except them. This scenario in research is best captured through Grounded Theory. It presents a powerful method of obtaining data that is validly true to their lives. To echo John Dewey’s pragmatic Theory, they are the ‘knowers’ of their situation. As the title of this paper suggests, grounded theory presents that personal encounter and the life journey of a student whose place among other students is unique in the background of being a mother (parenting and schooling – role orientation). Therefore, reflections on individual narratives- the torrents of narratives that bring out the lived experience become the major focus in grounded theory, making the research process a success.

Another feature of grounded theory is successful data analysis. All through the data collection, regular back and forth journeys were made between the methods, across the literature review through to the findings, and again back to the theories and moderation of the research instruments, a process that created not only torrents of activities but also generated lots of data. The initial data, that was a mere trickle of a narrative from an undergraduate student mother was added to others from the rest of the participants to generate torrential data from the range of interviews for the undergraduate student mothers and the Deans, to the voluntary phone calls on clarification of issues raised earlier during interview sessions. This was the kind of data that Bryant (2018) and Corbin and Strauss (2015) call bulky and one just has to be careful as to when and where to stop with data collection.

During the data collection, the process was informed by Grounded Theory procedures prescribed by Creswell, (2014) and Corbin and Strauss (2015) on the appropriate and effective ways of employing Grounded Theory with interviews according to the Glasserian social constructivist view (Fahad, 2018). After initial interviews, there were follow-ups on the participants (participant check) to either beef up information from earlier recordings or to read through the transcribed data and point out areas that may have been misconstrued or given inappropriate interpretation or context. Such encounter, often done through spontaneous phone calls from research participants ended up as torrential with forthcoming illustrations and lots of top up material to the bargain; material that is neither irrelevant nor useless in Grounded Theory, but one that builds up on the research process (Charmaz, 2014 & Tarozzi, 2013).

Challenges of Transcription

While richness of data was enhanced by Grounded Theory, and the initial lack of sound theoretical underpinnings of the research well solved through Grounded Theory as a method of data collection, new challenges set in. The process of containing the torrential data; the process of data reduction into descriptive themes was there to contend with. Language and the art of transcribing have been indicated as being a drawback especially if the interview is not in a convenient language with qualitative data management software. Though recorded in English and therefore in a position to be transcribed with a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) software, the draft was a strange distortion of a document in the

English language. Heavy mother tongue influence on the English spoken by the participants rendered the document incoherent, and this rendered the analysis non functional and the process was abandoned altogether. A word for word transcription was thereafter engaged to create a hard copy of the transcribed data. As a result, what started as a simple 30 minutes recording ended up a six-hour word for word print. As observed by Tarozzi (2013), cross-cultural impact is a reality when it comes to language in research. Tarozzi claims that “*the meaning of a word or proposition is not only a linguistic construction; it is also pragmatic, historical, semiotic and in broader sense, cultural*”. The influence of the local Swahili language, spoken as a first language in the Kenyan multi-ethnic context was also felt in the interviews that were in English as a second language with regards to the participants. Apart from the obvious mother tongue influence on their pronunciation, there was also slang to contend with. A locally coined version; a mixture of swahili and local dialects (sheng) reflects language used basically by the younger generation or the urbanites in Kenya. For example, the meaning of such a word in Kenyan sheng as ‘hustle’ was later established to have multiple meanings in the contextually diverse and unpredictable context with some participants talking of “side hustles” to indicate part-time economic engagement to make ends meet, appearing ever so often. Contextually the term implies struggle to eke a living especially by the poor while in the given explanation, it had nothing to do with poverty. Such statements necessitated seeking immediate clarification of meaning and implications, making the interviews longer and the data bulky, a feature highlighted as common with the use of Grounded Theory (Fahad, 2018; Creswell, 2014). Despite such challenges, the beauty and originality of the data from familiar African setting was understood perfectly well through researcher-participant interaction.

Maintaining Researcher Distance in Grounded Theory

This research distance is alluded as crucial in data collection in qualitative inquiry through the exercise of reflexivity (Mauthner & Dacot, 2003; Maxwell, 2018). At the level of participant involvement, initial sittings would be rather strained and sometimes tense. Responses would be a bare trickle and at a bare minimum of the requirements of a question from the interview schedule. Later, through unrecorded talk, such clients would be bumbling with details of what they forgot to say, had feared to say or even what they had observed with other undergraduate student mothers. This would happen when a transcript was sent for participant check. This exercise would lead to torrents of even unsolicited information that could not be recorded as it was both unexpected and would be unethical if recorded without consent. In such a case, only notes could help to capture the torrential flow of narratives of experience in the free self-directed response as one participant explained regarding so much of the information she had earlier withheld:

“...you see, it is not easy to say sensitive things about yourself especially if you meet for the first time with somebody, especially in official settings like on campus, but when I came home, you see... you were like a friend and I felt at ease, like I knew you as a friend...that is why I called you...” (participant 1)

The scenario reflects what Creswell (2007, 2014, 2017) refers to as the inevitable dynamics of research in lived experience. He claims that the initial set up of the research process or plan cannot be strictly prescribed. At one time or the other, one thing or the other may change while forms of data collection may shift. Visited sites may also be varied. Creswell observes that, despite such contextual diversity, so long as the key issues or the major research focus in data collection are not lost, it should not be an issue. In actual facts,

success is achieved when the inhibited atmosphere surrounding initial contacts is conquered through gradual interaction like sitting over a cup of tea to give an overview of my research and explain carefully how the participant role was crucial to the intended information, and explain the 'informed consent' procedures. The participant would be allowed to choose the venue where they felt at ease, either on the campus, their house, or a convenient venue. Like Creswell (2017), one would sound the same note and add that, lived experience research should be done in a socially free atmosphere when the researcher feels the client is at ease. There is nothing that interferes with data when client and researcher are at ease (Fahad, 2018; Mauthner & Daucet, 2003). The ambience, characteristic of trustful friendship of researcher and participants is crucial for the torrents of information that flow unheeded in such circumstances.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from this research that Grounded Theory is the way to go in social sciences research especially in research in lived experience. It derives detailed information whose trustworthiness is unquestionable because it comes from direct experience; no second or third person reports that may be altered. Any possible alteration of data by the researcher is also ruled out and or done away with by participant check procedures and only facts are recorded or published with confirmation by the source participant. For this process to succeed, there is need to do transcription early enough before one loses the vivid mental picture of the interview so as to effectively capture the records of non-verbal cues and visual or aural presentation of participants; the type that notes and audios may fail to capture, yet have a great contribution in getting to know the feelings and attitudes of participants. This might be related to how they construct their own world; their attitude towards whom and what they discuss or describe; their perception of themselves and what they go through in life. Prompt follow ups after each interview are also necessary before the aroused connection with the past fades away again for the interviewees. Reflections that are evoked by the interview process are also a resource when the interview revisit is done in good time unlike when it is delayed.

In the lived experience, participants share a part of their lives with researchers. Though bracketing is temporarily employed in the realms of reflexivity during interviews, the whole of the shared experience is experienced by both the researcher and the researched. They momentarily belong to the same world. One can hardly detach oneself from feelings as one listens to the life stories while participants get to be familiar with the researcher and future link ups become a possibility. The dialogue, the shared thoughts, pain or insights create a mutual interaction, a thriving relationship; for the real lived experience is grounded in Grounded Theory experience and in such relationships. It is good that supervisors guide postgraduate researchers in embracing grounded theory in qualitative research in phenomena that requires in-depth inquiry in lived experience.

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