Reflexivity and its Usefulness When Conducting a Secondary Analysis of Existing Data

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When conducting a secondary analysis of existing data the importance of reflexivity cannot be underestimated. Burr (1999) suggests that we are a product of our cultural and historical background and therefore we accept that we cannot remove this culture and history from ourselves, as this in part is what underpins our knowledge of the world. The reflexive process is particularly important when analysing secondary level data, as the researcher is faced with particular difficulties when trying to understand how the contextual setting may have impacted the original interview. Through working with a reflexive grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), the researcher allows the data to dictate the analysis and the development of the research, thereby promoting 'strong objectivity' (Harding 1992) through a rigorous reflexive stance.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how the use of a reflexive diary can significantly aid a secondary analysis of existing data. I will explore some of the dilemmas that I have faced during this research where the use of reflexivity has helped to make a decision. I will highlight how the process of reflexivity can effect change within the research process and therefore effectively alter the findings of research in the process. In order to fully illustrate this process a definition of the process of reflexivity is required. For the purposes of the research outlined in this article, I have used the following definition of reflexivity as proposed by Charmaz, reflexivity is,

> *the researchers scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions and interpretations in ways that bring the researcher into the process and allow the reader to assess how and to what extent the researcher's interest, position and assumptions influenced inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants and represents them in written reports (2006, p188-189).*

Attached to this definition is the challenge that reflexivity should be used as a springboard for greater insight (Finlay 2003). It is with this challenge in mind that I approach the process of reflexivity, in order to understand how both my contextual history and the contextual history of the data used affects any knowledge claims that I make regarding any findings.

The research project

In this research project I carried out a secondary analysis of an existing data set that was obtained from the data archive and was originally lodged by Rex (2001-2002). The original data set explored penal communication and the role of sentencing in the Magistrates Court. The original research employed a mixed methodology using both quantitative questionnaires and 66 qualitative interviews. The interviews were obtained from magistrates, probation officers, offenders and victims.

As I had not designed the original research project I had to make decisions regarding which section of the existing data I used and which I chose to ignore. Coupled with this, was the knowledge that the original research was intended for a specific purpose; a purpose that I did not wish to pursue without exploring other possibilities as well. The desire to explore what emerged from the data while not imposing any specific theories upon it, lead to the decision to embrace grounded theory.

Grounded theory

When using grounded theory as a methodology there are several versions available to the researcher, such as those proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1992) and Charmaz (2002, 2006). These various approaches of grounded theory share certain common features. There is the belief that any theory that is discovered or constructed must be fully grounded in data and analysis can occur in tandem with data collection. There is the belief that any data gathered must always dictate the way in which the research process moves forward, and it is therefore a bottom up approach rather than being driven by existing theory (Willig, 2001). However from this point onwards, many grounded theory researchers' part ways on a conceptual basis when concerned with the use of reflexivity.

In past years some would suggest that reflexivity should play no part in social research and certainly not when employing a grounded theory methodology (Glaser 2002). However this notion is highly debated among certain researchers (Bryant 2003; Charmaz 2000, 2002, 2006). Glaser (1992) would suggest that the theory is inherent within the data waiting to be discovered, as such he would not advocate the need for reflexivity. His concept of grounded theory assumes that "the reality of an external world, takes for granted a neutral observer and views categories as derived from data" (Bryant 2003, p1).

As opposed to the Glaser view, the constructivist concept of grounded theory suggests that the researcher accepts that all meaning making is in association with the data and is a combination of an interaction between the researcher and the data. Therefore all theory and analysis is a construction between the two (Charmaz 2006). The objects that already exist in our world are independent of us (Crotty 2003). Yet, our understanding and relationship with those objects is dependant upon a combination of our cultural and historical background, and the social context in which we find ourselves at the time (Burr 1999; Fish 1990;

Malin, 2003). It is through the combination of all these various factors that our knowledge of the world is underpinned and as such our approach to research is contextualised. Charmaz (2002) would suggest that our knowledge and understanding of our research is aided by the process of reflexivity. It allows us to scrutinize our decisions, our bias and as a result how we have affected our research process and inquiry and ultimately our findings.

Reflexivity in action

One of the initial dilemmas I faced was the decision over the number of transcripts to be included in my secondary analysis of this existing data set. This was in part decided through the nature of the research. In order for the research was to embrace a significant depth of analysis, the number of transcripts would need to be limited. Although I initially carried out a preliminary coding of all available transcripts for the purpose of aiding the choosing of the final transcripts, I had not originally intended to include the victims in the analysis. However through this preliminary analysis I became aware that victims were almost more victimised by the lack of involvement in the court process than by the original crime/s committed against them.

Below is a short extract that I feel typified what the victims felt in terms of their treatment by the courts.

"I think erm you could involve the victims in the process there should be a slot for the victim to, to say their side of the story I suppose, and to actually say what they would like to see happen and for the court to take that into consideration" (Stephen).

Stephen would seem to feel that he is not provided with the chance to tell his side of the story during the court process. Through my reflexive journal I realised that I too could be guilty of preventing Stephen and other victims from telling their stories. I found that I was biased in my treatment of victims. I viewed them as part of the process and therefore as evidence rather than as people. I suspected that this bias probably stems from my previous career as a police officer. It was not that I felt victims were unimportant or that I deliberately set out marginalise them. It was that their written statement was evidence of a crime. When you are 'on the job' ie as a police officer, you can not allow yourself to get involved with each new victim and their experience. In some ways my reflection allowed me to see that perhaps I was still predisposed to be 'on the job' even though I left the police force more than 10 years ago. For me the fact that the victims' data had already been gathered was a strength of this secondary analysis. Through the reflexive process I ensured that encountered the victims stories in a new light. They were not just evidence of a crime but their experiences were worthy of research. As a result I chose to include the victims' transcripts in this research project. The use of existing data forced me to analyse and reflect upon my own existing biases in ways that I may not have had a chance to in other circumstances. As such, this process of reflexivity played a significant part not only to inform me of my bias but also to effect change.

A further area of concern was the issue of context. Devault and McCoy (2002) suggests that the importance of the relationship occurring beyond the words of the interview can never be underestimated and the interaction that is created within the interview must be examined. In this particular research project there was no information provided regarding the context of the interview setting. It was not stated in any of the available literature/data set as to whether the interviews occurred at a court or in the homes of the participants. This information could be particularly relevant if there were several different settings used for the different participant roles (i.e. magistrates, victims or offenders). Equally there was very limited information regarding the interaction between the interviewer and participant. However, as there was no access to any field notes available, any possible relationship occurring beyond the words used was particularly difficult to assess. I was only provided with the copies of the transcribed interviews, and there was no access to either the original tapes or any field notes that may have been originally available. This sometimes presented difficult decisions regarding what or what not include in the analysis. One example of this difficulty presented itself in one of the magistrate's transcripts,

"I think if I'm honest I would go into the retiring room and I'd say to my colleagues well do you think he really understood and they say no he ain't got a bloody clue [laughs]" (George).

George is 53 years old and he has 19 years experience as a magistrate. This quote from George's transcript highlights a dilemma that I faced in several of the transcripts. Some of the participants were reported to be laughing or using other non verbal noises, such as snorts etc. In the quote highlighted above I could suggest that George's laugh was sarcastic and this suggestion could be contextualised through the language. However I was also very aware of my background as a police officer, as it is impossible to remove this influence from my experience and therefore there is the possibility that it could colour my understanding of what the laugh meant (Steier, 1991). As I was not present at the original interview, nor did I have access to the original tape recordings, I could not actually hear the laugh as it occurred. This resulted in the awareness that I needed to extremely careful about how I construed this verbal action. Below is an excerpt from my reflexive diary that highlights just how difficult I found this particular section of the analysis.

"I believe that George is laughing sarcastically in his quote... but I can't be sure, all I can do is ground my analysis on the words used, his tone suggests sarcasm, but I have no way of knowing, no tapes no nothing, I feel handicapped, a bit like the blind leading the blind. My experience of magistrates tells me I'm right in this belief, but is that what it is, just my belief" (My reflexive diary)

The excerpt from my diary reveals how I struggled not to allow my previous experience as a police officer to colour my analysis. However, I also recognise that my decision not to interpret this laugh was also effected by my background as a police officer. As a result of this reflection I decided to focus solely on the language used and omit any analysis concerning laughter or other prosodic

features. Charmaz (2002) advocates that it is only through strict adherence to line by line coding, followed by further focused coding, that researchers' are provided with the skills to prevent their own bias from dominating any analysis. I felt the decision to code only the language used and to omit other verbal sounds was justified. It is through the shared sphere of language that researchers are able to bridge the gap of understanding and meaning between individuals, as it language that is the common dominator (Kincaid 1996). While I have justified this decision to omit verbal sounds used when they do not constitute specific language words I still recognise that communication constitutes far more than just words (Hogg & Vaughan 2002).

As a psychology graduate I am aware that communication is more than just words. Communication "requires that people acquire a shared understanding of what particular sounds, words, signs, and gestures mean" (Hogg & Vaughan 2002, p. 568). I found that I struggled with only having access to words. My previous learning had furnished me with knowledge regarding various types of communication that were not just restricted to spoken words. The excerpt below highlights this issue.

"All I have is the words nothing else- but communication is more than this! The further I get into this the more I feel I am blinded – I miss not seeing what people are thinking and then asking questions related to both there answers and what I think may be hidden behind their answers" (My reflexive diary)

This excerpt from my reflexive diary typifies my struggle with only access to words while conducting a secondary analysis of existing data. I felt divorced from the people included as participants. They didn't have a face; they didn't have mannerisms that contributed to their personality. Equally I couldn't ask questions that arose as a result of what they had said and also by what they revealed through their body language. Not only did I feel handicapped by this, I also felt deprived, I missed not seeing and hearing the person as I read and analysed their transcripts. I couldn't do anything about asking questions or seeing their body language but could begin to see people.

I generated names for each participant rather than call them magistrate 1 or offender 2. They became a George and a Dominic. I chose the names to fit their chronological age. Slowly over time and through many readings of their transcripts they developed into real people, at least inside my head. This may be reminiscent of the process associated with other texts such as diary analysis. This wasn't a perfect solution and has quite possibly coloured the final analysis, but I decided that it was preferable to remaining at an impasse.

Conclusion

In conclusion the use of reflexivity has been central to my use of grounded theory with the secondary analysis of existing data. It has kept me focused on the job at hand while allowing me to find tools that enabled me to move forward at times when I had reached an impasse in the research. Reflexivity has in this way has also allowed me to further my knowledge of myself and my biases. This may

effect future research as well as this particular project. I would suggest that as researchers, it is through our shared language and communication that we can understand others (Kincaid 1996). It is on this assumption that through our combined understanding of the meanings underpinning words and language, that our analysis and knowledge is based and therefore from which secondary analysis can develop (Charmaz 2002). However, as humans we communicate through more than just words, any non-verbal behaviour and the context in which these words are uttered can often provide great insight into the messages being conveyed (DePaulo & Friedman 1998). With secondary analysis these behaviours and contexts are often absent. As there is only the written word, it would be very easy to read more into those words than what is actually there. This concern gives rise to a greater need for reflexivity to ensure that all analysis is fully transparent, and the acceptance that all knowledge claims are gained through the interaction between the researcher, the data and the social environment in which they exist.

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