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A Novel Method of Enhancing Grounded Theory Memos with Voice Recording

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In this article the authors present the recent discovery of a novel method of supplementing written grounded theory memos with voice recording, the combination of which may provide significant analytical advantages over solely the traditional written method. Memo writing is an essential component of a grounded theory study, however it is often difficult to capture thoughts, feelings, and emerging theorising using written methods after a research interview. I found that many of these potentially valuable ideas were lost or misunderstood upon reading my subsequent written memo, and the feelings and context which influenced the emerging theory were not always clear. I turned to voice recording to enhance my grounded theory memos and soon discovered substantial additional benefits upon listening back. This novel method, the cognitively different ways in which human brains process verbal and written information, and the ultimate benefits I have enjoyed by combining writing and voice recording memos are presented. Keywords: Grounded Theory, Memos, Voice Recording, Memory, Cognition, Research Context, Interpretivism

In this article the authors present research insights on extending the use of voice recording grounded theory based interviews, to supplement written memos with voice recording, and the additional layers of understanding and reflection that this method can provide.

Grounded theory (GT; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provides a framework for structuring the collection and analysis of qualitative data, underpinned by different elements of philosophical research paradigms such as pragmatism and interpretivism. The GT research procedure of memo writing in particular is deemed by many authors to be vital to constructing a GT (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and consists, quite literally, of writing a 'memo' to yourself about what you feel is happening in your data, reflections on your philosophical research position, issues, analytical decision making, and developing theory (amongst many other topics). In this way, memos can be a useful tool for exploring and challenging our underlying processes and assumptions embodied within our codes, in order to construct theory, raise theoretical sensitivity, and can be helpful to capture and illustrate the development of theory as data collection and analysis progresses. It is a "space and place for exploration and discovery"(Charmaz, 2006, p. 81). Memo writing can begin from the first conceptualisation of the study (Birks & Mills, 2011), between data collection and theory construction (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) or solely during analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Other qualitative methods such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis utilise a similar, less prescribed way of reflecting on data by advising researchers to compile a reflective research diary which can be used in the same way to understand findings, construct themes and categories, and bring data together (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003).

Whilst memo writing is traditionally positioned as the intermediate stage between coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2003), in my doctoral GT research, the concept and process of memo writing has been valuable even before formal data analysis began, and informed the iterative relationship between data collection, coding, and final stages of analysis. Charmaz

(2006) advises the GT researcher to construct memos as quickly and clearly as possible, the speed element fostering the development and preservation of the researcher's natural voice; written by a thinking, feeling, human being. Reflecting on research in this way has greatly assisted me to develop categories and theory, firmly grounded using the most basic element of the data; the spoken word and resulting in vivo codes.

An Accidental Discovery

A discovery I (Rachel Stocker, RS) made whilst conducting my research was to use the voice recorder I had been using to record interviews, for recording my emerging, uninhibited thoughts and theorising which would provide further clarity to my later, written memo. The thought came to me when driving away from an interview, and realising that I had so much valuable information in my mind resulting from the interaction with my participant that I wanted to "let it out" and get it recorded in any way possible ("stop and analyse your ideas about the codes in any – and every – way that occurs to you during the moment" [Charmaz, 2006, p. 72]) – quickly. I felt that these initial, grounded impressions ("what is actually happening in the data?" [Glaser, 1978, p. 57]) would be vital to constructing the eventual theory. I parked up round the corner, turned on the voice recorder and articulated my feelings into the microphone. I wanted to capture my thoughts at that point, whilst fresh in my mind straight after the interview. The recording consisted of my personal feelings about the interview, including the main points outlined by my participant, their body language, what was 'said but unsaid', and the chat after the voice recorder had been switched off, which contained information that illuminated and gave further context to other elements of the interview.

I soon came to realise that this contained many elements of a GT memo which could be useful in informing parts of my later, written memos. The major benefit of using this method to record thoughts and subsequently develop written memos and theory was illustrated shortly afterwards. When listening to my recording later during supervision, hearing my own voice immediately brought me back to that moment, the feelings I was experiencing, and the strands of thought and theorising which were filling my head at that time which may otherwise have been lost, misunderstood upon later recall, or affected by other later events. I found that using the voice recorder, especially straight after the interview and during precious moments of clarity shining through the data overload, allowed me to record my gut feelings about what was "going on" in my research.

Harnessing Researcher Cognition

Whilst voice recording my initial thoughts on the research interview and data collection was inherently valuable, memo writing in full sentences forced me to come to (at least preliminary) terms with my analytic idea. Voice recording, therefore, cannot and should not replace the traditional method of writing a memo, with writing as a practice going some way to organize the thought process in a proper and (more often than not) non-idiosyncratic fashion. However, flexibility in memo writing is deemed by many to be essential to the process (Birks & Mills, 2011), and researchers "should not be constrained by the normal conventions of writing and documentation" (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 43). Listening back to verbally recorded thoughts and theorising can spark recall of the situational aspects and overarching context which remain unsaid in the actual interview and perhaps could not be pinned down at that time by traditional written methods. At a basic level, the brain processes verbal information in a qualitatively different manner to written information. Listening to information has been shown, through functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), to

activate a different part of the brain in comparison with reading the same information (Michael, Keller, Carpenter, & Just, 2001) even at the conceptual level of understanding the meaning of a sentence, harnessing increased semantic processing and working memory. Memory is most effective when details of the context (such as environmental cues) are available at retrieval (Tulving & Thomson, 1973). Recording elements of research memos verbally would thus serve as an acoustic retrieval cue when listening back to the recording, to be used to complement the construction of the traditional written memo. Recalling as many details as possible is particularly important in GT studies in which sometimes huge amounts of data are collected and the researcher is required to move iteratively between data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

Whilst traditionally writing memos are the essential basis of memoing in a GT study, voice recording can provide grounded, 'gut feeling' insights to answer Glaser's (1978) question of what is actually happening in your data, with the spontaneity and creativity of certain elements that sometimes only a human voice can capture. Accordingly, it is suggested that researchers using GT and/or a reflective research diary, consider using voice recording equipment to record their thoughts, theories, and memos to supplement the process of memo writing. Through the use of this creative method, theorising and analysis could be enhanced by harnessing the phenomenon of acoustic cues to be 'transported', to an extent, back to the research context; something which would otherwise be unachievable, and of which we must hold on to as much as possible to stay grounded in the data. Further research is required, focussing on the extent of which recording, and other creative uses of voice recorders outside of the traditional interview/observation/focus group context, can assist the research process.

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