

Qualitative Research Approach for The Conceptual Understanding of Spirituality for Healthcare Service Users: A Methodological Guide

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ABSTRACT

This is a methodological paper which addresses the need to conceptualize the characteristics of spirituality from the perspective of healthcare service users by using qualitative approach. The need to provide a conception of spirituality as derived from empirical data lead to the justification of choice for the constructivist grounded theory over other qualitative methodologies. This paper highlights the subjective nature of spirituality that suits with the symbolic interactionist and interpretivist as philosophical paradigm underpin such approach in qualitative inquiry. The implication of applying qualitative approach and constructivist grounded theory is that the empirical work may portray the contextual nature of spirituality for the population of interest, especially when it is arguable non-applicable to global context.

Keywords: Conceptual, Grounded Theory, Qualitative, Spiritual

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality may have multiple defining characteristics which are associated with personalised meaning (1,2), or referred to the personal and subjective side of a religious experience (3). Spirituality may also have different meanings to particular religious faith groups (4), as the communities or ethnic groups play a role in shaping the meaning of spirituality, and the role of religions to the faith members (5). Given the subjectivity nature, the focus on the conceptual characteristics of spirituality from the laypeople through empirical work remains scarce. One such example, is a grounded theory study conducted by McSherry (2006) which revealed the following six principal components related to the experience of 53 service users: individuality, inclusivity, integrated, inter-/intra-disciplinary, innate and

institution. It is noteworthy that this study revealed only the components to be considered in the formulation of spiritual care services within the healthcare system (6). Thus, the understanding of spirituality in McSherry's (2006) study is limited to the context of recovery within the healthcare system.

It is deemed that the lack of precision in the concept of spirituality has acted to hinder researchers in coming up with a measurement of spirituality (8). It has been highlighted by some scholars that the measures of religion/spirituality and mental well-being consist of overlapping constructs (8-12). Moreover, there is almost no distinction when the indicators of both, ie., religion and spirituality, include psychological traits (13). These measurements were found to produce a complicated interpretation of the findings (14), and were found to not be sufficiently convincing to predict mental well-being (10). Hence, it is argued that while many previous studies have used the measurement of 'religion', they have also gone on to make nebulous claims regarding the concept of 'spirituality' and its impact on health (15).

Quantitative measures for spirituality are not always relevant to non-Western society (16). This is due to the fact that they reflect a Western secular

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context in assuming the spiritual in material terms and the psychological in expansive terms (17). In this vein, scholars with a non-Western world view, such as Ahmad and Khan (2015) and Ho and Ho (2007), suggest that the dominant Western literature in spirituality may not directly apply to other contexts (18,19). For instance, Ho and Ho (2007) raised serious doubts as to whether such measures are capable of reflecting the richness and complexity of spirituality (19). Moreover, scarce literature was found on other religious world views, such as Middle Eastern and Eastern (19). Some scholars, such as Ammerman (2013), Fallot (2007) and Swinton (2010), have proposed that researchers should consider the conceptualisation of spirituality from the participants themselves in such a way that also includes culture, religion, race, ethnicity and other social factors (20–22).

Prior to embark into the qualitative study of spirituality, the research should bear in mind that spiritual constructs are derived from subjective knowledge (i.e. meanings) of the participants (23). This general idea is capable of informing the researcher of the 'research paradigm'; defined as the types of beliefs widely held by individual researchers (24). Thus, the researcher needs to subscribe to the ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpin the research (25). Annells (1996) pointed out that the researcher chooses the ontology with which they are personally comfortable and which fits with the nature of the investigation (26). The chosen epistemology then responds to the ontological assumptions by which it is concerned with how meaning can be acquired through the choice of methodology and data-related methods (26–28).

Ontological and epistemological perspective: The symbolic interactionist view and interpretivist

The symbolic interactionist view rose to prominence via the influence of George Herbert Mead (1934), through his theory about the relationship between self and society (29). However, it was Herbert Blumer who first attempted to explain Mead's theory in terms of its methodological implications for research (29). Specifically, Blumer (1969) further elaborated on the theory of symbolic interactionism and explained how subjective meanings are derived by individuals (30), noting the following in particular:

- The individual interacts with objects (i.e. physical, social and situations). Interaction takes place within a particular socio-cultural context.
- Meanings are acquired from social interactions. Individuals define and

categorise physical, social objects and situations in line with their meaning.

- Meanings are continuously recreated and involve interpretative processes in the course of social interactions.

The core task of symbolic interactionist researchers, therefore, is to identify the meaning associated with various symbols from the individuals' subjective accounts (30). Aldiabat (2011), claimed that symbolic interactionists hold the interpretivist tradition (31). By adopting the symbolic interactionist view as the theoretical orientation at the beginning of the study, the qualitative researcher adheres to the belief that the meanings related to spirituality arise from social interactions. Thus, the findings, for example, religious symbols and practices, may reflect the socio-cultural context of the study participants. In support of this choice, O'Byrne (2011) and Crotty (1998) stated that the generation of meaning is always socially constructed and thus, meaning may not be isolated from the world (32,33). In line with this, the role of the qualitative researcher is thus underpinned by the epistemological stance of interpretivism; that is, to interpret the meaning.

Choosing methodological approach that fits the researcher's belief

In relation to the adoption of an interpretivist stance, any qualitative researcher may consider two methodologies that hold the interpretivist tradition, namely phenomenology and narrative inquiry. It is however important to reiterate the gap identified which on the lack precision in the conceptual understanding of spirituality from the contextual perspective of service users. This paper will then provide justification on Charmazian grounded theory that fits with the nature of inquiry.

Phenomenology describes phenomena as '*it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experienter*' (34, p.4). It is considered fundamental to phenomenology to recognise subjectivity by means of the perception of the experienter through a close examination of individual experiences (34,35). One potential counterargument against phenomenology is that it is normally presented in the form of thematic descriptions of meaning or in relation to the essence of an experience (35).

Narrative inquiry can be seen as a representation of an experience so as to provide an understanding of people's experiences and to bring to light the subjectivity and identity of the individuals involved (36). Analysis of the

narrative begins with the act of a subject telling a story, resulting in a synthesis and the creation of a 'plot' of interview text (36,37). As mentioned above, critiques of both methodologies largely cite the limitations posed by the descriptive presentation of the findings (38).

Subscribing to symbolic interactionism from the outset brings a social perspective (29), particularly with regard to the researcher's belief about the nature of meanings derived from social interactions. Grounded theory is inspired by the symbolic interactionist view of the assumption as to how meaning is socially constructed (39). The major strength of grounded theory is its ability to move data from the descriptive to the conceptual level (40). However, the researcher needs to choose three different school of thought in grounded theory that most fit with the nature of inquiry.

The traditional grounded theory research conducted by Glaser and Strauss in 1964 is one of the examples which is informed by symbolic interactionism (29). Glaserian grounded theory, as advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena in relatively unexplored areas (41). Glaser (1978) put the main emphasis on analysing action and process rather than only subjectivity (42). Another form of grounded theory to have evolved is Straussian grounded theory, as pioneered by Strauss and Corbin (1990) (43). Strauss, despite having worked with Glaser on the traditional grounded theory, proceeded to take on a more deductive approach that allows for early verification with the literature review in conceptualising the data (44,45). Glaser (1992) criticised the Straussian approach by contending that it is not an inductive but rather a deductive approach (46).

Constructivist grounded theory is a re-modelled version of the traditional one, developed by Cathy Charmaz along with the current popularity of constructivism within social research (47). The principal aim is to assist the researcher in synthesising the data, by acknowledging the researcher as a co-constructor of the meaning (45,47,48). Charmaz (1990) provided an example of being the co-constructor of meaning in her early work, where her prior experience as an occupational therapist brought with it the assumption that people with chronic illnesses are suffering (49). This is by which the researcher uses preconceived concepts to commence the data collection (50).

It is deemed that the choice for obtaining the conceptual understanding in the context of spirituality is in favour of Constructivist grounded

theory by Charmaz, or conceivably the Glaserian grounded theoretical approach. Glaser (2002) made a strong case that the use of only interview data is contradicted by traditional grounded theory - this methodological approach prefers observation for actions and practice and should take only a small amount of interview data (51). Constructivist grounded theory make its way to the qualitative study of spirituality as it places great emphasis on the conceptual understanding of social behaviour through the interpretive understanding of the participants' meaning (47). However, it is impossible to avoid preconceptions or the incorporating of something of the researcher themselves in the interpretation of meaning (50). Constructivist grounded theory is in favor of subjective data with the use of the semi-structured interview as its guide which brings in researchers' preconception before the data collection. Despite such preconceptions, it is arguable that the hallmark of grounded theory is to inductively derive categories directly from the data (52).

A GUIDE TO CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY AS THE METHODOLOGY AND METHODS OF CHOICE

This section guides the process of data gathering and theorizing with the constructivist grounded theory package.

Collecting data

The researcher, as the interviewer, is there to listen, and the participant will do most of the talking while further clarification is sought by the researcher as the interview session proceeds. This is why Charmaz (2006) explained that the researcher only brings her preconception for sensitizing concepts prior to starting the data collection but not in relation to the outcome, thus, the interview guide is open-ended and meant for exploring the topic of interest (53). The researcher then develops specific concepts as they study their data throughout the research process (52).

Coding the data with constant comparative analysis

Despite the identical use of a semi-structured interview guide in constructivist grounded theory, the basic tenet is for simultaneous data collection and analysis using the coding approach is also followed. Charmaz (1996, 2006) uses four phases of coding according to the progress of conceptual development in (52,53). The codings are as follows:

- Initial coding: The researcher needs to examine each line of data (i.e. the interview

transcript) and define the actions or events that they see as occurring in it or as represented by it.

- **Focus coding:** This is a selective phase whereby the researcher creates categories (or themes) from the initial codes that occur most frequently. The researcher then needs to sort and integrate these codes into relevant categories. By creating the categories, the codes are raised to the conceptual level of interpretation.

In carrying out the focus coding, Charmaz (1996, p. 42) guides the researcher to use constant comparative analysis (52). The steps are as follows: 1) comparing different people (such as their beliefs, situations, actions, accounts or experiences); 2) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time; and (3) comparing categories in the data with other categories.

- **Axial coding:** This is another phase of coding that follows the categorical development. The researcher can create subcategories and make links between them within the same category. In this way, the researcher is able to obtain a theoretical sense of the data (53).
- **Theoretical coding:** Theoretical codes are integrated codes and are built through the substantive analysis, i.e. the initial, focus and axial coding. Theoretical coding is the phase in which the researcher engages in producing an analytic story in a coherent way and it reflects the theoretical direction of the data.

Memo writing

Memo writing is a crucial method in which the researcher brings the analytical idea from the raw data into a form of writing that allows him or her to focus on theoretical development (53). The process of writing memos should ideally begin during the phase of category development. The researcher can bring raw data in the form of verbatim accounts from different sources or participants to ensure the conceptual analysis is grounded and ready for precise comparisons. As the researcher has some ideas on categories, he or she may then proceed to further theoretical sampling, aiming for saturation of the categories.

Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation

As coding and constant comparative analysis continue in joining the data collected, the researcher goes for further sampling, referred to as

theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is sampling for richer data as informed by the tentative categories obtained through the previous analysis (53). Theoretical sampling seeks to verify and saturate the emerging categories (54). Through theoretical sampling, the researcher may not focus on individuals per se, but rather on certain experiences, events or issues (52).

Theoretical development and reviewing the literature

Constructivist grounded theory is not a fixed package to understand the subjective data without reviewing the literature. Charmaz (2006) invites the researchers to view constructivist grounded theory partly as a method for opening theoretical ideas, and encourages them to gain theoretical perspectives from classical sociological theory and cultural studies (53). For the grounded theorists, this is how they think sociologically before they can bring out the theoretical perspectives from the data (42). However, bear in mind that theoretical perspectives are not only developed through intensive reading in sociology and other fields, but may also be influenced by the researcher's preconception and background (42).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH IN SPIRITUALITY

It is deemed that the study of spirituality fits with qualitative investigation that able to provide rich content, together with a detailed contextual explanation (4). This may then contribute to more sensitive and socio-culturally contextualised approaches to theory development (55). Moreover, the problematic study measurement in the field of spirituality bring two reasons for this problem. Firstly, the overlapping construct in the measurement of spirituality and mental well-being, and secondly, doubt as to whether a study on the measurement of spirituality is applicable to globally, especially to a non-Western context.

On top of that, extending the concept to the cultural context of a particular society may reduce the problems with the concept of spirituality in the literature. This further confirms the need for this study to explore spirituality from the perspective of service users and thus explains the need to provide a conception of spirituality as derived from empirical data.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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