Doing Constructivist Grounded Theory Research

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Learning Goals

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand some of the basic elements of constructivist grounded theory methodology and how these relate to research design;
- Have an understanding of constructivist grounded theory's philosophical background and history;
- Understand how constructivist grounded theory can be used effectively in counselling and psychotherapy research;
- Consider some key issues when determining whether to use grounded theory as a research methodology.

Introduction

Grounded theory, with its background in sociology, many different iterations and attention to methodological detail, may not initially appeal to the beginning researcher. However, if one can move beyond these initial factors, it can provide an elegant and relatively straightforward approach to developing new understandings or theories about the psychological world. In this chapter, I will provide a simple and practical introduction to constructivist grounded theory (CGT) using my own research on the impact of peer-led Hearing Voices Network Groups (HVNGs) (Langley, 2020) to illustrate its use in counselling and psychotherapy research. I hope to take you hand in hand, navigating past some of the pitfalls and dead-ends that I encountered as a beginning researcher and pointing out some of the milestones and key features of the landscape to hold in mind when you (hopefully) conduct this journey on your own. Along the way, we will discuss questions that I imagine might come up for you. I hope that some of these questions will be answered by the time you finish this introductory tour of CGT, but it is likely that there will be many more to ponder on, especially in relation to your potential research. If so, you are on the right track, because as we will see, considering the use of CGT in your research is very much about framing the right questions. Some of the questions we will consider include when to use CGT, whether CGT produces the type of knowledge you are seeking to create, whether your epistemological and ontological position fits the methodology, what factors to consider when sampling, and how to build a theory that has explanatory value. The next sections of this chapter discuss these areas of enquiry, as well as outlining the process of CGT research itself.

Constructivist Grounded Theory in Context

Grounded theory developed from Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' frustration with the 'grand theories' tradition of social sciences research, which often seemed to fit poorly with research data and real-life situations. Instead, their aim was 'the discovery of theory from data' that 'fit the situation being researched, and worked when put to use' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, pp.1–3). Grounded theory is set apart

from other methodologies by this focus. Where quantitative research seeks to prove or disprove theories (hypotheses) and other qualitative approaches aim to describe or explore the essence of phenomena, grounded theory's goal is to generate theory through a comparative analysis of data and abductive reasoning, creating plausible explanations that can be expanded on and tested by future research. In the next sections we will look at the philosophical background of this approach and its utility in different research situations.

Epistemological and Ontological Foundations

In order to understand grounded theory, it helps to have some sense of the history of the methodology and its epistemological and ontological foundations. Otherwise, confusion can arise regarding which is the 'right' grounded theory. Grounded theory has undergone a number of different iterations following the divergence in thinking between its founders, who from the start came from different research traditions. Anselm Strauss' background was in the qualitative 'Chicago Tradition' while Barney Glaser first trained at Columbia University, which had a more quantitative approach. When they parted ways, Strauss (Strauss and Corbin, 1994; 1998) continued to embrace the constructed, positional nature of knowledge, while Glaser (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992) argued for a more realist epistemological positioning, leading to different versions of grounded theory methodology. As a newcomer, it can seem daunting and possibly lead you to think you may be 'doing it wrong' when confronted with multiple versions of grounded theory in multiple texts. In fact, it is much more important to know *which* grounded theory methodology you are using, and *why*, including an understanding of where you sit ontologically and epistemologically. There is no 'right' version, but there is the possibility for muddled thinking in this regard. Because of this, it is helpful to know where you position yourself ontologically and epistemologically before conducting your research. The position you take will have implications for how you do your research, the way you apply your methodology and the quality criteria you use.

► Example

In my research on the impact of peer-led Hearing Voices Network Groups (Langley 2020), I grouped myself with grounded theory researchers who acknowledge the methodology's roots in the Chicago School pragmatist philosophical tradition, and its links with symbolic interactionism (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Strübing, 2007; Strübing, 2019). Pragmatism considers that the ontological nature of what is being studied is known by its effects only, with facts and values seen as linked (Hookway, 2012). Grounded theory's focus on process and action stems from this way of thinking (Strübing, 2019). Rather than focus on the essence of a phenomena itself, it aims to build theory about the processes and actions that define an area of enquiry: what is happening on a practical level. Symbolic interactionism (which evolved from within the pragmatist paradigm) in par-

ticular focuses on understanding the basic social processes inherent in situations and the interplay between personal and societally held meanings in determining how people understand situations and what actions they take (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 2015). This philospohical approach fitted well with enquiry into the processes of change in HVNGs and in my research I acknowledged the link and the role that it played in the focus of my theory.

Epistemologically, I took a constructivist stance, which led me to use Kathy Charmaz's (Charmaz, 2014) version of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) from among the different grounded theory methodologies available. Constructivism (as opposed to social constructionism, discussed in ► Chap. 1) can be viewed as an epistemological position that focuses mainly on the co-constructed nature of knowledge. Constructivist grounded theory applies this position to grounded theory methodology, reflexively considering the role of the researcher in co-creating the knowledge produced during the research process, as opposed to assuming that researcher knowledge is value free (Charmaz, 2014). As such, CGT values and requires reflexivity about the particular values, experiences and knowledge of the researcher in relation to the theory constructed and the research process. I find that this focus on reflexive thinking has utility in relation to counselling and psychotherapy research, mirroring the respect for subjectivity and reflexivity that is embedded in the practice of these traditions. It also seemed especially important to be aware of my role as a non-voice hearing professional researching voice-hearer led groups, since the subjectivity and first person experience of voice-hearers has often been devalued in pursuit of professional explanation (Romme and Morris, 2007; Calton et al., 2009). By taking a constructivist stance, I chose to acknowledge and be reflexive about my role in creating a theory about (and with) voice-hearers, rather than assume an 'objective' position. I hoped that by being explicit about this left room for further clarification and refinement of my theory by voice-hearers and other professionals. ◄

Choosing when to Use Constructivist Grounded Theory

So what then is the purpose of constructivist grounded theory in psychological research? When should it be used? Let's explore some of the cases in which CGT may fit particular research situations and purposes, in order to find out when it might work for you.

Open and Collaborative Discovery of Theory

As discussed in ► Chap. 1, a good fit between the research question and methodology is essential. In order to address the question of when CGT is a good fit, one needs to consider what kind of knowledge CGT leads to. Grounded theory, as a research methodology, has an explicit aim of building theory. CGT produces pragmatic, practical and useful *concepts*: theories grounded in the data. Therefore it works well when there is a possibility for open enquiry. It is a useful methodology when the topic of enquiry is not well known, when existing theories do not fit the data, or when new knowledge is being sought (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In CGT the final research topic need not be fixed: your analysis and interpretation of the data guides you to the final destination. Many research proposals do not allow for a change in the research question, so it is important to consider carefully what one wants to study and how you word this, so as to allow yourself enough flexibility to follow where your analysis of the data leads. If you are required to be specific, initial or pilot research can reveal interesting concepts to explore. However, as a CGT researcher you can always go back later and explore concepts that do not fit the scope of your current research. In this sense, data is never lost or old in CGT.

Partly because of this flexibility, CGT also works well in situations where participants can be involved in meaningful and transparent ways. It is valid and encouraged to be collaborative in the process of theory development: going back to participants for more clarification and exploration and using member-checking to engage them in theory development can increase the quality of your research (Charmaz, 2014).

Informing Future Research

Constructivist grounded theory has the potential to bridge gaps between qualitative and quantitative research. CGT is fundamentally a process of theory building. Without bringing the process of theory creation into the field of published research and grounding it in data, there is a danger that our theorising (especially in quantitiative research) will be biased towards our own worldview and assumptions. In quantitative terms, poor hypotheses lead to poor answers, and poor hypotheses come from poor theorising. Specifically, CGT can help quantitative researchers ask the right questions, questions that are grounded in a reflexive process; that arise from a disciplined and documented process of engagement with data; and that focus on social action and process.

This bridging function is especially important for counselling and psychotherapy researchers. As a psychological practitioner in clinical practice, I see that my clients' interpretations of their reality become the way they see the world. These ways of knowing, influenced (consciously or not) by cultural norms, language, relationships, personal and societal history, and issues of power (race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, etc.), *are* reality for those experiencing them. Equally, as researchers and clinicians we have particular ways of seeing the world that may differ from those of the people we are researching. If we engage in research that asks questions from our point of view only, we may miss the point entirely. CGT makes the process of theorising explicit, while providing a structure that enables us to base our theorieson detailed engagement with the people we want to help.

Reflexive Enquiry

As discussed above, constructivist grounded theory is a methodology that is intimately involved in a reflexive way of viewing the world through its acknowledgement of the construction of meaning (Charmaz, 2014) and the 'situatedness' of knowledge. This is not just considered in relation to research participants, but also the researcher: CGT seeks to enable reflexivity about how our own assumptions, worldview and situated experience influence the research process, including the role that culture, race, socio-economic status, gender identity and personal experience may play in the creation of different narratives and discourses. CGT also acknowledges the 'rich data' to be found in examining the researcher—participant relationship (Charmaz, 2014). This includes an acknowledgement and examination of how the non-verbal, verbal and situational cues, as well the implicit and explicit relationship (including power dynamics) between researcher and participant, influence the unfolding of knowledge that is voiced between them. As such, it is a useful methodology when this sort of reflexive enquiry adds value to the research.

For Exploring the Social Processes Through Which Meanings are Constructed

Rather than trying to capture an experience via number of static themes, grounded theory focusses on process and social action. Because of this, it lends itself well to an analysis of interactions between people, as well as the ways in which people make sense of the world. CGT researchers such as Kathy Charmaz have focussed their interest especially on participants' sense of self and the link between this and the wider relational realm, drawing on grounded theory's roots in Symbolic Interactionism as a 'theory-methods package' through which to analyse data (Charmaz, 2014). However, CGT research could equally work with a number of different lenses. The important element as a researcher is to be explicit about the particular interests and ways of viewing the data that you are bringing to the research and how CGT as a methodology fits with your approach.

Personal fit

Finally, it is useful to consider the fit between your own values and framework as a researcher and/or clinician, in order to see whether it is the right methodology for you. Some comfort with not knowing the final outcome, being open to new ideas and valuing different ways of viewing the world are probably helpful in conducting CGT. One has to be open to publicly presenting ideas that, after long hours of comparing, contrasting and coding multiple data sets, are by the nature of the methodology provisional and open to testing. It is also helpful to be interested in and comfortable with sharing your own reflexive process in the research, since this is part of the quality criteria linked to CGT methodology.

► **Example**

I chose CGT as a methodology for my research on the impact of peer-led Hearing Voices Network Groups (HVNGs) for a number of the reasons discussed above. First, it is an area of enquiry where I felt an open and collaborative approach to discovering theory was appropriate. The Hearing Voices Movement can be characterised as an example of an area where many existing theories and assumptions are rejected and people are involved in a collaborative process of making sense of their experiences in new ways. HVNGs arose from the wider Hearing Voices Movement (Romme and Escher, 1993) with the aim of offering 'a safe haven where people who hear, see or sense things that other people don't, can feel accepted, valued and understood' (English Hearing Voices Network, 2018). The Hearing Voices Movement rejects the medical model and positivist assertions about mental wellbeing (Corstens et al., 2014; Dillon and Longden, 2012; Romme and Escher, 1993; Romme et al., 2009). It places itself within a broader political frame and sees itself as a 'social movement', specifically advocating for the rights of people who hear voices, have unusual beliefs and/or see visions (Longden et al., 2013; Slade, 2009). The Hearing Voices Movement rejects the validity of the term 'schizophrenia' (Romme and Morris, 2007), instead adopting the term 'voice-hearer' as a descriptive label (Dillon and Hornstein, 2013; Woods, 2013). From this stance, they position themselves firmly against the idea that voice-hearing needs be a signifier of mental 'illness', or distress at all (Romme et al., 1993; (Boyle, 2013; Johnstone, 2012)). Instead, they focus on helping people who hear voices to accept their voices (rather than try to get rid of them) and create meaning around the voice-hearing experience through formulation-based approaches (Johnstone et al., 2018; Romme and Escher, 2000) and through Hearing Voices Groups (Dillon and Hornstein, 2013).

Second, grounded theory's focus on social process and meaning (Charmaz, 2014; Strübing, 2019) also fit the topic of my research. My first contact with a hearing voices group was through feedback from voice-hearers who had attended a peer-led HVNG hosted in the building of a charity I was managing. After listening to the impact that the group had on people, I became interested in finding out more about the patterns of growth people were describing and what the processes of change in peer-led HVNGs might be. This looked like a gap in current theory within the Hearing Voices Movement, as previous research had focused on voice-hearers' individual recovery journey, rather than processes in HVNGs (Romme et al., 2009; Romme and Morris, 2013). Choosing grounded theory as a methodology enabled me to theorise about the relationship between the group and the individual in those processes, as experienced via the shared meanings created in the groups. This topic also seemed to have the potential to become the basis for prompting future research, since there had been calls from within the Hearing Voices Movement for research in this area (Corstens et al., 2014).

Having reviewed various iterations of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), I chose to follow Kathy Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory as my research methodology, since this approach best fit the nature of my research topic and my philosophical stance. Constructivism allowed me to consider both the various Hearing Voices Movement positions and diagnostic explanations of voice-hearing as constructed knowledge, with different individual and societal

impacts. In contrast to earlier conceptions of grounded theory, data in CGT is seen as an outcome of research activity, not an objective starting point (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Therefore, through a constructivist frame, it was also possible to explore and discuss my role in the research, how my own discourse creates meaning and how this influences the research process. I wanted my participants to be involved in my theory construction, and called them co-researchers (a term I will use for them here also) to acknowledge their active role in doing that. I felt that this was important given the nature of power dynamics inherent in research in this area (Johnstone, 2012) and because the dialogue around hearing voices often excludes voice-hearers' own experiences and explanations of voice-hearing (Calton et al., 2009; Coles, 2013).

Finally, in terms of my own stance as a researcher, I saw parallels between a constructivist position and my own professional values. This also fit with the Hearing Voices Movement's stance on subjective knowledge and respecting a plurality of explanations for people's voices. The willingness to meet someone where they are, on their own terms, is a value deeply rooted in my clinical work. As a counselling psychologist, the profession's focus on the value basis of practice and subjective meaning and experience, rather than a value-free 'objective' enquiry (Woolfe, 2012), fit with my constructivist worldview as a researcher. Strawbridge and Woolfe (2003) highlight the foundation of counselling psychology as being rooted in the values of engaging with subjectivity, empathically respecting people's experiences as valid on their own terms and negotiating between worldviews, without assuming that one way of experiencing, knowing or feeling is automatically more valid. Therefore, my values as a practitioner and researcher sat relatively easily in relation to both the Hearing Voices Movement ethos and the methodology I chose. ◄

Activity

- Consider the fit between constructivist grounded theory and the research you want to embark on:
  - What kind of knowledge do you want to create?
  - What ontological and epistemological position do you want to take? (Does it fit with constructivist grounded theory, or does another methodology fit better?)
  - How well does CGT fit with your own values and worldview?
  - How well does existing theory fit your field of enquiry? Is there a need for new theoretical insights?
  - Is prompting further research something you find important?
  - How interested are you in exploring social processes and the construction of meaning in your research?
  - How comfortable are you personally about presenting a theory, as opposed to 'proving' your findings?

Doing Constructivist Grounded Theory

At its heart grounded theory methodology is an iterative process of 1) collecting data and analysing it via increasingly abstract coding strategies and 2) using 'constant comparison' between each source of data at each step of the analysis, in order to 3) develop a meaningful theory about what is being researched (Charmaz, 2014). In grounded theory, the process of collecting data, coding it and comparing it with other data leads to emergent *categories*, the elements of concern and focus within the data. These categories are built upwards using coding that starts very close to the data (data near) and becomes progressively more analytic and abstract as codes between and within data sets are compared, reviewed and updated at each step of coding. What grounded theory researchers look for when reviewing their initial coding are codes with *explanatory power*: codes that encapsulate and elucidate what is found in the data (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher then pursues the ideas these codes represent, making choices about subsequent sampling and data collection that allow them to test the utility and scope of them, and refining and developing them through subsequent coding. From this purposeful sampling strategy (called *theoretical sampling*), not only do categories emerge, but also *properties* of categories. Properties provide context and dimensionality: the what, why, when, who and how of categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). They fill out and explain categories, helping to create meaningful 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973). Through this process, a theory that is grounded in data is developed. The next few sections of this chapter will take you through a step-by-step summary of how this is carried out.

Data Collection

In grounded theory, sources of data can be interviews, 'field research', group discussions, ethnographic data, body language, behaviour and interactions, or extant texts (Charmaz, 2014). In constructivist grounded theory, data is also considered a situated co-creation of knowledge between the researcher and subject. Not only do researchers bring their own ways of viewing the data to the research, based on many factors, but they are also acknowledged as active participants in the *creation* of data: the way they present themselves, the questions they ask (or don't ask), the smiles and encouragement given or not given all create moments where meanings can be shared, hidden, lost or discovered together. As practitioners in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, we already know from our clinical work the value of relationship in enquiry. It is not just that the relationship allows us to understand another, but also that relationships can allow individuals to understand, or discourage them from understanding, their own experience differently and express it in new ways. Constructivist grounded theory, with its roots in studying the relationships between meanings and social processes (Charmaz, 2014), allows for this knowledge and encourages reflexivity regarding the interpersonal, societal and intrapersonal aspects of the research process itself (see ► Chap. 1 for a detailed discussion of these areas of reflexive focus). In CGT, data is inherently linked to

the meanings people create and the way in which they act. The process of uncovering and recording this is relational and CGT acknowledges it as such.

This approach not only shapes the way data is used, but also the way data collection methods have developed within the methodology. For example, in CGT, 'intensive interviews' take the place semi-structured interviews often do in other research methodologies. Charmaz, (2014, p.56) calls the intensive inteview technique 'a gently guided, one sided conversation that explores a person's substantial experience with the research topic'. Intensive interviews do not follow set interview schedules; this allows the focus of the interview to change over time as required, as the researcher follows the emergent ideas of their analysis, to allow category development (Charmaz, 2014), as well as allowing more responsiveness in relation to the interviewee's interests and areas of concern.

► Example

In my research (Langley, 2020) I used a mixture of intensive interviews, taped group discussions and field observations of the groups as my primary data sources. I conducted nine intensive interviews, with most interviews lasting roughly one hour. I aimed to conduct interviews where people were most comfortable. Most interviews took place in private rooms I rented, local to my co-researchers. Where it was possible, I rented a room in the same building that groups took place. I also attended three peerled hearing voices groups, with a total of eight visits. This provided me with observational data to allow comparison with individual interviews. I obtained consent from the second group I observed to tape the discussion during part of two sessions. Through this ethnographic method, I was able to see the construction of social process in action in the group (Blumer, 1969). I felt that this was important in order to provide rich data that supplemented and helped me understand what I was hearing in interviews, therefore increasing my 'theoretical sensitivity' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.46). I was interested particularly in the correlation between what I understood people had said to me about hearing voices groups and my direct observations of the group process. Attending the groups allowed me to consider the underlying mechanisms of how groups worked directly (what people were doing and saying), as well as what voice hearers said about their experience of the groups. ◄

Data Analysis

Coding and Memo Writing

CGT employs an open coding strategy that moves from data near coding to the creation of more abstract and analytic codes (Belgrave and Seide, 2019). Gerunds (words ending in 'ing') are often used as a device to capture the active and process-driven elements of the data, reflecting grounded theory's emphasis on social action. At every stage of coding, each set of data is put through a process of 'constant comparison' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) with other data. Incidents within the data are compared with other incidents, interviews compared with other interviews and so on. Comparison also takes place *between* levels of data; for example, a code

generated during line-by-line coding might be considered in relation to its explanatory power in relation to a whole section of data. Through this process certain codes with explanatory power are 'elevated' to higher-level codes and refined, eventually becoming the categories and properties of a theory (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout coding, researchers write *memos*, mapping the process of coding and their reflections. Memos not only serve as a reflexive tool, but also as an aide-mémoire regarding thinking at each stage of comparison of data sets. They also provide a transparent way to record the process of your analysis. Memos often form the basis of theory construction and can take any shape or form that suits you (Charmaz, 2014).

Initial and Focused Coding

Different versions of grounded theory employ different specific coding strategies. Charmaz (2014) employs a flexible structure that may be of use to the beginning researcher in grounded theory, differentiating between *initial* codes and later *focused* codes. Your initial line-by-line analysis will probably provide you with hundreds of codes. Don't be dismayed. Through constant comparison, you will be able to see that many of them have a consistent theme, or flavour. One code may stand out as encapsulating a set of codes, or you may find that working through your thinking in memos allows you to capture the essence of what is being said in a different way. From this process your focused codes will emerge. Focused coding of your data using these codes then allows you to engage with it at a higher level, producing the categories and properties of your theory in the same way that comparing your initial coding built the foundation of your focused codes.

Theoretical Sampling

As each new piece of data is analysed and compared with previous sets of data, grounded theory researchers adapt their areas of focus and interest, as well as who they study, in order to pursue emergent/developing ideas. This purposeful and theory-led technique is called 'theoretical sampling' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This means that by following the ideas that seem to hold the most potential, the specifics of *who* and *what* is studied can change progressively over time. The aim of the process of collecting data is to create 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) that not only describe, but have the power to explain. Therefore, the direction of analysis, who is recruited and sample size are not fixed, but instead are in service to theory development. For example, if the initial data suggests that people's experience varies because of a specific factor, or particular element of what is being studied turns out to be central to understanding the focus of the research, both sampling and the focus of data collection can be adapted.

Charmaz (2014) suggests that in the initial stages of coding and analysis a *homogenous* sample group can maximise potential for meaningful categories to emerge. Focussing in on areas of specific interest within this sample, including going back to participants to ask more about emerging ideas, and updating interview questions to explore these areas are valid parts of the initial stages of a

theoretical sampling strategy. The properties of the categories that emerge from this process can be drawn out and made explicit by increasingly *heterogeneous* sampling. This can help to understand where categories endure, if they hold value, and how they change in relation to people with different experiences and in different situations. Gradually, following this process and the rules inherent in it, pursuing the ideas that arise from immersion in the data, a meaningful theory emerges.

Theoretical Saturation

Grounded theory researchers employ a criterion of 'theoretical saturation' in order to decide when to stop collecting and analysing data. Theoretical saturation means that the data is not yielding new information about the categories central to the theory being developed. It is important to understand that this does not mean that new data doesn't create new information (it always will), but rather that you have reached saturation regarding your categories when employing a heterogeneous sampling strategy, as described above (Charmaz, 2014). This means that new data has stopped providing more insight into the properties of your existing categories. Here, the matter of understanding the scope of your research comes into play. For example, what settings and population have you proposed to study? Are you aiming towards a 'substantive' theory with specific criteria relating to the area you have studied, or trying to establish a 'formal' theory of underlying mechanisms of social action, which can be applied in many settings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)? Most grounded theory research will lead to substantive theories, at least initially, as a theory would need to be tested in many situations before approaching formal theory (Urquhart, 2019).

Activity

- Your research design should allow your analysis to flow easily, following the basic steps of the methodology you choose. Consider the following elements before submitting a CGT research proposal:
  - How can you give yourself enough room to follow points of theoretical interest as they emerge and engage in theoretical sampling?
  - Are there multiple data sources you could use?
  - What chances will you have to go back to participants in order to clarify and expand on points of theoretical interest?
  - How else will you engage participants (including but not limited to member-checking)?
  - How will you engage in reflexive thinking about your role in the research?

► **Example**

Recruitment

In my research I chose my co-researchers based on a theoretical sampling strategy. I followed Glaser and Strauss' (1967) advice to use sampling homogeneity at the start of the research process in order to form and understand tentative categories and use sampling heterogeneity later in the process to test theoretical saturation and contextualise emergent theorising. This included considering diversity regarding a number of demographic factors, for example race, gender and age, but also length of time attending HVNGs and differences in the voice-hearing experience and the actual group attended.

My criteria for choosing co-researchers were that they identified as people who hear voices and had attended at least two sessions of a hearing voices group that was peer-led (facilitated by people with lived experience of hearing voices) and was affiliated with/listed by the English Hearing Voices Network. I did not apply any further selection criteria regarding diagnosis, history of using mental health services, positive/negative experiences with voices and so on, although I did include these questions in my interviews. This was because I wanted to be able to follow theoretical sampling across the full range of people who might attend peer-led HVNGs. I aimed to recruit participants in a variety of ways. I found, however, that all of my interviewees came forward following personal contact and my conversations with groups during my exploratory visits.

Initial coding

Initially, I coded line-by-line for the first four interviews and first group session transcript, in order to create initial codes (Charmaz, 2014). I also wrote memo-like notes next to my codes. I started this practice after reading Glaser and Strauss' (1967, p.108) recommendation to 'write memos on, as well as code, the copy of one's field notes'. Conducting initial coding in this way produced a lot of writing about the data and helped me to think about and develop my focused codes. At this stage I was not concerned with the large number of codes I generated. I was more concerned with coding for process and social action (Blumer, 1969) through use of gerunds, as per grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2007). I was interested in the change mechanisms and outcomes in peer-led HVNGs, as experienced by the groups' participants. Here is a section of an interview discussing one of my co-researcher's early experiences in the group she attended, along with my initial line-by-line coding (◘ Table 6.1).

During this stage in the analysis, I started writing memos regarding my coding and group observations, as well as keeping field notes on the observations that I did not tape. Memoing allowed me to keep a higher-level record of my thinking and advance my theorising. For example, a short memo on the section above highlighted my thinking on the experience of 'feeling normal' (which had already become a repeating theme in the data) and its relationship to the other codes from the section that represented core processes in the groups (◘ Figure 6.1):

At this point of coding the data, I was particularly interested in how the social processes impacted on the meanings that people in the group held about themselves, as well as the voice-hearing experience, as this seemed to be a major part of the impact of the group. It seemed like the actions of the group (opening up, sharing similar experiences) prompted different ways of viewing oneself both as a voice-hearer (feeling normal) and in relation to others (belonging, solidarity, etc.). This early theorising became the basis for developing some of my focused codes and elements of my final theory.

Table 6.1 Initial line-by-line coding

Interview text	Initial codes
I just felt - it was- it was a safe haven. I felt I belonged. I felt - I was sitting there and people was talking and I'd think, 'I get it, I get it, and these people are gonna get *me*'.	Feeling safe Belonging Feeling solidarity through sharing similar experiences
And, did that change the way you see yourself at all and understand yourself?	
Yeah, as I'm *normal* in it, this group. I'm normal in that group, yeah. I hate using that word because I don't think any of us are normal, but on entering that door, I'm no longer mad - or we're a mad bunch. It's either way you look at it is-, yeah - and that's what I like. Yeah.	Feeling normal Rejecting constrictive norms No longer feeling mad Identifying with others in the group Subjectivising 'madness'
Yeah, yeah, yeah.	
And, I've sat there, I've cried, I've screamed. I don't know, I've sobbed. I've opened my heart up. I've - yeah, it's - and there's always at least eight people, nine people to give me the advice, 'yeah, I've been there, I've done that. Let's try this. Let's try that'.	Expressing emotions Opening up Having a consistent source of support Sharing similar experiences Receiving advice

Memo: feeling normal (all interviews)
Feeling normal is a reoccurring and important theme (see memos on stigma, and other social impacts of the voice-hearing experience for context).
The link between *belonging, solidarity, opening up, sharing similar experiences* and feeling normal is clear. Is feeling normal the outcome of these?
Feeling normal seems to be the internal perception of self that is changed by the social interaction in the group. The *social* element of identity is solidarity/be*longing*. The external *actions are sharing similar experiences* and opening up emotionally.
Subjectivising 'madness' is part of feeling normal. It's rejecting that the label 'mad' is objective

Fig. 6.1 Memo on the intial code 'feeling normal'

Focused coding

As my coding advanced I used incident coding (generating codes for whole sections of data dealing with a specific incident) as well as line-by-line coding. I developed my codes through constant comparison of different sections of the data, slowly refining the line-by-line codes and incident codes I had developed in different sections of interviews and group sessions. Through this ongoing, iterative and gradual process, which I recorded and aided via extensive memo writing, I was able to increase the level of abstraction and analytic power of my codes over time in order to develop a set of focused codes. I then re-coded my data using the focused codes I had developed, continuing to refine

these codes into the *categories* and *properties* of my theory through ongoing constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014).

To illustrate part of this process, I provide some examples below of sections of transcripts from a number of interviews that helped me during the process of comparing my incident coding to develop the focused code 'making links', which I used as a code for the meaningful links people made about their voices as a result of attending HVNGs. These included understanding that their voices did not have physical bodies, that their voices spoke in metaphors, that voices related to the past, and other personally meaningful understandings:

Interview 2

I've understood that the voices aren't real. Like although I believe them and they feel real, I've realised that they're not real. They can't hurt me unless I hurt myself. So they have no body – they're just a voice.

Interview 4

A: You sit down [in the group] and listen - and they listen to me and I listen to them. And this time I understood the meaning of voices - [that they are] not real!

B: So before you came to the group -.

A: - I thought they were real people.

B: You thought they were real people?

A: Yeah. Yeah. I thought they were real people. I thought they were very, very real people.

Interview 6

A: I often get told by my voices a lot to kill myself, go and harm myself, and I'm not worthy, but [group facilitator] has turned around and said, 'Turn that negative into the positive and look at it. When they're telling you to kill yourself, no; it's time to change. Change something about yourself. Look at something different. Go and have a haircut. Go and do something different!'

B: A symbolic death?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interview 8

You can develop insight in yourself, and sometimes, you can instil it in other people as well... Because I think [the voices] are, um, metaphorical and symbolic in, in, some senses. But I feel it's the mind protecting itself, by throwing up these voices which you listen to, and in that way, you're not listening to the pain that's in your heart.

If you're under stress, the triggers come out, and [the voices] will instigate hell with you, absolute hell, but I take that back to my past where I was in a hellish family. So, to me, it was - it was at the age of 22, 23 - it was quite clear to me that my upbringing was responsible for the way I feel now. And, I don't think I would have got that without the hearing voices group.

While each of these sections of transcript had a number of codes attributed to it from my initial coding at earlier stages (often describing the type of insights people related as a result of the groups), I was primarily interested at this point in identifying the key mechanisms of change in the group. Therefore, I developed 'making links' as a high-level focused code that could describe the *process* of change, regardless of the content of what was understood. Coding for process in this way helped me uncover the key elements of my final theory about the impact of the groups. ◄

Theory creation

Grounded theory studies in psychological research often present more than one category or main idea, while in other fields one category can take central importance. Whatever shape your theory takes, it should offer meaningful explanations that provide useful insight into the subject and fit the situation being researched (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The main body of your findings should include a detailed exploration of the categories and properties that make up the theory being presented. This presentation should illustrate how the theory is grounded in the data, with relevant examples. Relationships between categories should be examined. The scope of the theory, including whether it is a 'substantive' theory or 'formal' theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) should also be mentioned. In the discussion section, your thinking around the theory should be made clear, as well as it's implications in relation to other research and the wider field of enquiry.

A theory of course, is more than a series of codes, categories and properties. It should aim towards explanatory power. In order to make this step, a final process of 'theoretical sorting' is helpful (Charmaz, 2014). This is a process of thinking about how the categories of your analysis fit together and reviewing your memos, in order to refine and develop your theory. Diagramming can also be helpful at this stage of theory construction and a graphical representation of relationships between categories and properties can clarify the key processes in your theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Considering the situatedness of researcher knowledge (Mruk and Mey, 2019), engaging participants in this process of theory construction (as well as at all stages) increases the trustworthiness of your research and is a common strategy employed to meet quality criteria in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014).This can be a natural extension of discussions that took place during data collection, or could take the form of feedback on the initial versions of your theory. This kind of member checking (discussing emergent analysis with people who have taken part in the research) helps to ensure that people who took part have had their views accurately reflected in the final product, as well as have some ownership of the research (Charmaz, 2014). In research, the power differentials between the voice of the professional and those of the participats can be significant, so there is often an ethical, as well as methodological reason for this strategy.

► Example

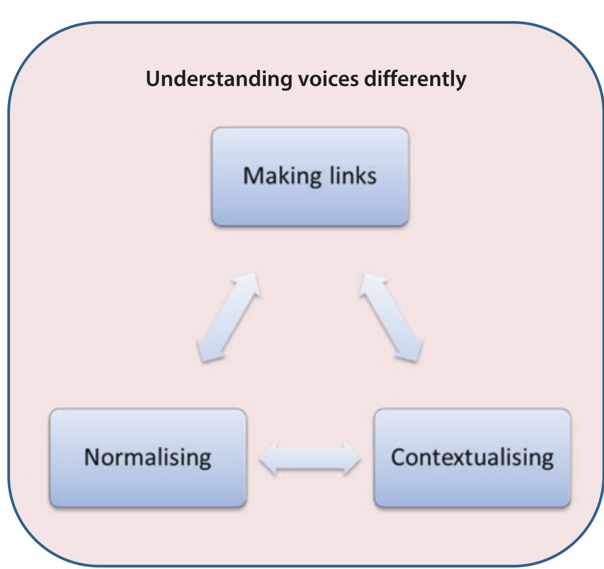
Theory construction and member checking

After the coding described above, I went through a final stage of theoretical sorting and diagramming to determine the relationship between the final properties and categories of my theory. The categories of my theory were the broad outcomes that people spoke about as a result of being in the group. For the purposes of my theory, the core properties that I highlighted were the change mechanisms that led to these outcomes. In terms of the examples above, I theorised that the properties 'making

links', 'normalising' (a later version of my initial code 'feeling normal') and 'contextualisation' (the process of contextualising one's own voice-hearing experiences in relation to those of others in the group) were all core processes of growth and emancipation in peer-led HVNGs that led to a fundamental shift in the way that voice-hearers understood their voices and the voice-hearing experience (my category 'understanding voices differently'). ◘ Figure 6.2 shows the mutual relationship between these processes.

During these final stages I also engaged in member-checking, going back to my co-researchers in the HVNGs to refine theoretical points and ensure that my interpretation of the data fit their lived experience. I felt that it was important to allow people as much input as they wanted, not just in co-creating the initial data and knowledge with me, but also the final product. In this sense, I viewed my member-checking as an emancipatory strategy, as well as a way to increase the credibility of my research (Harper and Cole, 2012).

◘ Figure 6.3 shows one of the final graphical representations I presented to illustrate my theory, outlining the relationship between the outcomes of attending the peer-led HVNGs I studied (my main categories from the analysis) and properties of these categories (processes and mechanisms of change that lead to these outcomes). In this diagram 'understanding voices differently' and the properties I have discussed are placed within the larger picture of outcomes and change processes that emerged from the data. In the findings and discussion sections of my research, I discussed the relationship between these processes and their link to existing theory. In this way I presented a theory that encompasses meaningful predictions and ideas about the impact of peer-led HVNGs, grounded in the data that emerged from my discussions with voice-hearers about their own experience and my direct observation of the groups in action. ◄



◘ **Fig. 6.2** 'Making links' etc. as a property of the category 'understanding voices differently'

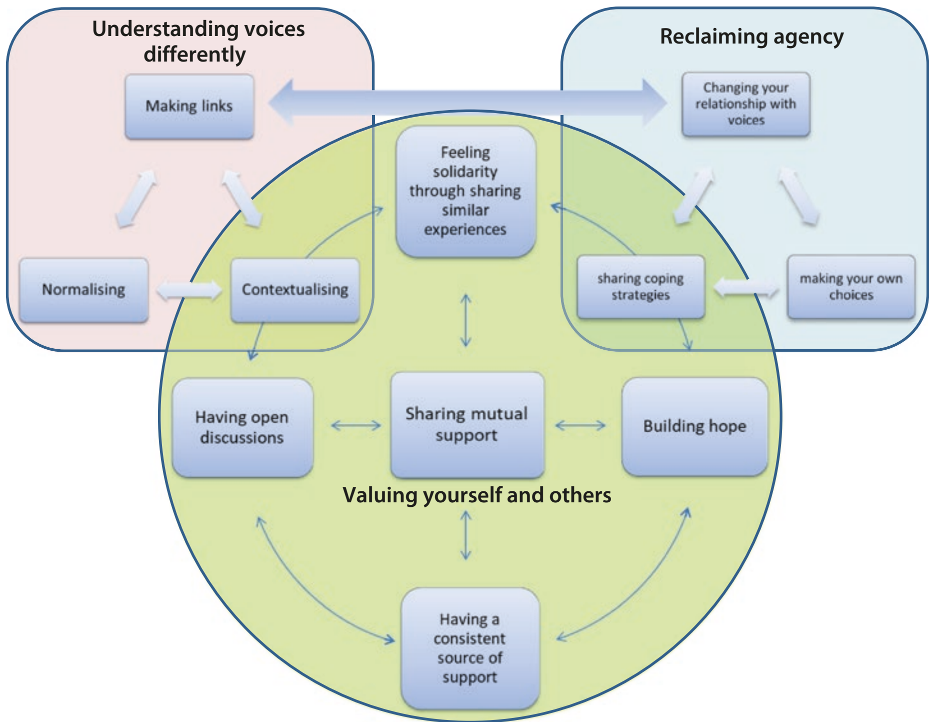


Fig. 6.3 A graphical representation of change processes in peer-led HVNGs

Summary

In this ▶ chapter I have provided a short introduction to some of the main points of CGT, including some of its philosophical background and history, the basic elements of CGT data collection and analysis, and its role in qualitative research. In counselling and psychotherapy research, the worldview, meanings and actions of the people we study are of central concern. CGT provides a methodology for placing these elements at the forefront of theory development while presenting a clear and detailed approach to creating theory that is grounded in data. CGT also encourages reflexivity in relation to the person of the researcher and the co-constructed nature of research. These are elegant and useful elements of the methodology in a field where theory is so central to practice and yet where the process of its creation is often left implicit. I hope that this chapter will prompt you to read more and consider using CGT to develop theories of your own.

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