Grounded Theory - Selective Coding

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So after open coding and after axial coding, we have a third stage in Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory and that is selective coding. And the idea here is to try to select, identify particular categories or codes that form some kind of core, some kind of essential activity, essential kind of concept which has the power to elucidate lots of different aspects of the setting you're looking at, the situation you're looking at, so you can construct a story around it and actually talk about this idea of a storyline around the core category. And it might be a very simple idea, back to the Morrow & Smith example, the idea of women who've been sexually abused.

The core idea here might be simply dealing with their own feelings, you know dealing with the situation at the time when they were young was one thing, but later on, 10 years later maybe the core is about dealing with feelings and that might be the core category around which you can then build a storyline that involves things like their strategies for doing that, how they dealt with other family members, how they dealt with the memories and so on and so forth, all related to dealing with feelings as a core category. So there's a core around which a wider story is then built.

And they talk about selective coding, selectively relating the categories you've got, the codes you've got, to other categories and then refining them in a way I've just illustrated I guess from the Morrow & Smith study. So at this stage, it's trying to pick some core categories and that is actually quite hard to do, to get people to do that at the late stage is quite hard.

The most normal situation here is either people will say, oh, I've got about ten things that I think are core here, it's all so complicated, there are ten things going on here that I want to talk about, or I can't think of anything, there's nothing here, there's no core at all, it's all so different.

Well, I think the latter example is also different, there's no core, you need to think harder about it. There will be core things. Actually, if you sit back and think about it, maybe put the stuff aside for a week and come back to it and look at it again, almost the brain will process it, and there will be things in there. Having too many is perhaps more of an issue.

Strauss & Corbyn suggest one thing. That's very much Glaser & Strauss' idea as well, one thing here and sometimes that's hard to do, sometimes it's hard to settle on one single thing. I mean I

was just thinking on the Morrow & Smith thing. You might say that the strategies are perhaps, there are two cores here. One is keeping from being overwhelmed,
you know, fighting the whole process of being overwhelmed by one's feelings about what happened to one. And the other thing is managing helplessness, powerlessness and so on, that kind of sense as well. So maybe there are two cores here.

I must admit, I don't have a problem with having two cores. The idea is to try to reduce it to as much as you can. But I think the idea that there may be two or three things around which you build your story doesn't frighten me. I think that's perfectly acceptable in the end. If you want to be a pure grounded theorist, then keep it down to one, but I think in reality, we can often manage with more than one center to our narrative.

But of course, the key thing about this is building the story. This narrative, this storyline is the way in which we explain how our theory is actually explaining what's happening in this particular setting. And you could say that is the thesis, that is the paper you're going to write up about it.

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