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Reflecting on my reflexivity within a constructivist grounded theory study on team coaching: A short report

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Abstract: This short report shares my experiences as a doctoral student when engaging reflexivity in my research and, in particular, when grappling with constructivist grounded theory methodology and carrying out data generation. It sets out my philosophical paradigm, the context for the research, my understanding of the term “reflexivity” and the different lenses through which I am being reflexive in my thesis.

Keywords: Reflexivity; Reflexive practice; Constructivist grounded theory; Memoing

This short report sets out my thoughts on how my developing understanding of reflexive practice is influencing research I am undertaking using constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology (Charmaz, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2021) for my doctoral study on team coaching. My research focuses on how team coaching is perceived to be productive and what influences those perceptions; very little theoretical or practitioner research in this discipline exists, so it is a situation where grounded theory is indicated. The aim is to produce a framework which offers useful guidance to team coaches and team members alike on how to make the most of their team coaching engagement. Writing this report now, having largely completed my data generation, affords an opportunity to reflect on my reflexive practice so far.

Reflexive thoughts: What is my motive for writing this article? Have I been honest with myself in writing about reflexivity in a largely theoretical way: is it because – finding reflexivity difficult – I am hiding behind all this theory as it’s easier for me to engage with the literature, rather than considering my role and impact in my research project? I am reminded of Gentles et al. (2014) who caution against excessive reflexivity as it might lead to overly focusing on the researcher themselves, rather than the participants.

Having posed that question ahead of my interviews, I find myself reflecting on a number of points:

- On balance, the difficulties and doubts I experience are a natural part of the reflexive process;
- Writing about reflexivity in a theoretical way helped clarify for me what my preferred way of engaging with participants is, and what that means for the interview process;
- As I have found throughout my research, trusting the process works!
- In answer to Gentles et al (2014): I don’t think I have come anywhere near excessive reflexivity. If anything I could spend more time being reflexive.

Context

Even though I practice as a coach and have a master’s degree, my understanding of what being reflexive really requires only began when getting to grips with my philosophical paradigm and methodology for my doctorate.

I see meaning as co-constructed by individuals, influenced by their background, experience and social context. For my research, this meant using a research methodology which was consistent with a social constructivist epistemology. With a paucity of studies in the field of team coaching, grounded theory seemed the most appropriate way to address the research question and contribute to team coaching practice. Further examination of the literature suggested that CGT was most congruent. CGT is a research methodology which enables a theory to emerge from the data generated with interview participants from the ground (Birks & Mills, 2015). Data is simultaneously generated, analysed and coded, allowing for more complex categories to emerge from the detailed analysis. From these categories, a final theory is generated which, for my research, I consider to be “interpretive-perspectival”: it aims to generate a new theoretical perspective on otherwise neglected topics and requires a high degree of reflexivity (Cornelissen et al., 2021). A key feature of CGT is the emphasis on the reflexive element of the methodology (Charmaz, 2021); reflexivity is thus central to producing a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

social world.” She further challenges those carrying out research to examine what purpose their reflexivity serves. This accords with Gentles et al. (2014) who highlight an issue with the increasing use of reflexivity to legitimise qualitative research without critical consideration of its applicability and appropriateness for a particular research project.

Finlay (2012, p. 318), distinguishes five different types of reflexivity for researchers (see Table 1).

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| (1) Strategic reflexivity | Examines my paradigm, aims, methods and methodology |
| (2) Contextual-discursive reflexivity | Considers my background, experiences and perspectives in the context of situational and sociocultural elements |
| (3) Embodied reflexivity; | Requires me to notice my somatic experience during interviews and to use the noticing to raise my awareness of what is happening between the participant and me |
| (4) Relational reflexivity | Seeks to recognise the relationship which exists between me and the participants in co-creating meaning |
| (5) Ethical reflexivity | Monitors power and process dynamics, allowing ethical dilemmas to be addressed |

Table 1: Five reflexive approaches (adapted from Finlay, 2012, p. 318)

Reflexive thoughts: How does my own background, experience and the context of why I am undertaking this research affect the way I interact with participants? What does CGT’s western-based epistemology mean for the way I am conducting my interviews, for example?

Post-interview Memo 16 23/02/23 I am noticing I was impacted by his story: he came out badly from the coaching (because of the actions of the Team Leader) and I sense carries some bitterness about this. Whilst he was open about his experiences and seemingly very happy to talk about the positives as well as the negatives, I am wondering whether I adequately acknowledged the situation he found himself in, and what impact that may have had on our relationship and the way the interview transpired? I feel a relationship was established, but what was missing?

A further thought is on the power dynamics existing in the interviews. I have tried very hard not to set myself up as the “expert” and, as far as possible, ensure we hold equal power.

I have used this typology as a basis for my own reflexive practice exploring the way that I incorporate all the elements. I am a relative late comer to coaching and, having a background from a white, middle-class, academically and systemically privileged background, found the reflexive part of my practice particularly difficult at first because, frankly, I did not have to think about it until forced to do so. Nonetheless, the more I begin to understand what being reflexive actually means, the more I find myself questioning the way I see things and how I act and impact others. In particular, I am struck by the power dynamics that exist in every interaction and how this has impacted the interviews.

What do I understand by the term “reflexivity”?

Birks and Mills (2015, p. 52) define it simply as “as an active process of systematically developing insight into your work as a researcher to guide your future actions”. I find Thornton (2019 p. 325), quoting from Ralph Stacey, offers a more useful interpretation. She observed that reflexivity shows the impossibility of standing outside and witnessing our experiences and must involve reflecting on how we interact with others. However, these descriptions seem somehow incomplete, and I was drawn to Finlay’s (2017, p. 120) work. She defines reflexivity in research as “the use of a critical, self-aware lens to interrogate both the research process and our interpretation or representation of participants’ lives in our

How do I view the role of reflexivity in CGT?

When following CGT, the reflexive memos are the key vehicle for examining my thoughts and actions (Levitt, 2021). According to Birks and Mills (2015, p. 52) - quoting from Lofland & Lofland (1995) – writing and analysis of the writing within my research philosophy requires the making of “meaningful linkages between the personal and emotional on the one hand, and the stringent intellectual operations to come to the other.” It is these memos, writing them as I go through the research process, which allow me to acknowledge and develop my awareness around each of the typologies.

Reflexive thoughts: Having come across some really interesting articles in the literature on my research topic which resonate with my own experiences of team coaching, is there a danger I will be focusing on what I want to hear, rather than paying attention to what I'm not drawn to in the data? How will that impact the way I interact with participants to make meaning of the data generated and decisions I take in analysis and coding?

Having nearly completed my interviews I am happy that the emerging theory has come from the data. My evidence for this is that yes, a few of the preconceptions I had and assumptions made have been validated to a certain extent, however, the questionnaire has evolved significantly and the last iteration in particular reflects quite different questions to where I started. The categories which have emerged have connected quite disparate concepts which I had been aware of, but had not understood their relationship.

It seems to me that within much of the literature on research and reflexivity, the primary focus is on strategic, contextual-discursive and ethical versions. Yet, I suggest that in coaching (as perhaps in therapy), it is embodied and relational reflexivity which are crucial to understanding the impact I have as a researcher (and coach) on participants, and vice versa. I also propose there may be an additional form of reflexivity which might be termed “systemic”: a meta perspective which locates my actions within the wider ecosystem. For example, what impact are the current global crises having on me, and the way that influences my decisions, choices and interactions with my research? An image forms for me around how I picture the different typologies (see figure 1):

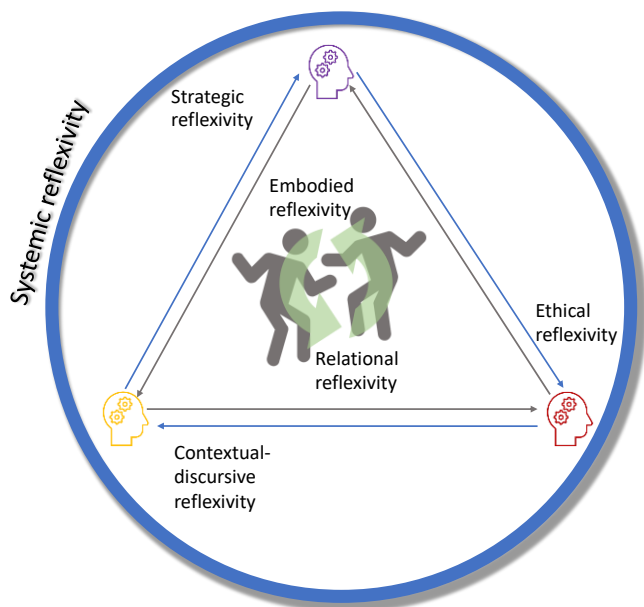


Figure 1: A representation of how I perceive different reflexive versions (adapted from Finlay, 2012, p. 318)

Fuji (2018) refers to the importance of reflexivity in relational approaches to interviewing, without referring to the somatic noticing which plays a critical part of creating awareness (Siminovitch & Eron, 2008). These elements – the embodied and relational reflexivity and understanding how those interplay with the way meaning is co-constructed - are, I believe, an essential part of CGT.

Conclusion

My awareness of the need for reflexivity has developed relatively recently. However, as I go through the doctoral journey, I find I am starting to hone my reflexive practice, enhancing both my academic work and my coaching practice. I recognise I am particularly drawn to the embodied and relational reflexivities which, in itself, means I need to ensure I pay sufficient attention to the other versions. I am curious to see how my appreciation and use of reflexivity evolve.

Reflexive thoughts: Writing this article on reflexivity has raised some questions in my mind. Am I being naïve in my assumptions and approach? Can I really contribute to a field where I am a newcomer with little experience? Whilst I felt comfortable addressing reflexivity within my thesis, this feels like an altogether more challenging environment in which to write. What impact will I have on readers? What meaning will they make of my writing?

I have a sense that what I have written is of interest to others and – whilst I may still be relatively naïve in my reflexive practice – I have more confidence in my writing. I asked myself what impact I would have on readers but, in truth, I should also have asked what impact would the readers have on me? As I reflect on the process of writing, receiving feedback and amending this report, I feel encouraged by the reviewers' comments and struck in particular by their comments about bringing my own voice more into this report.

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