Critical Approach to Reflexivity in Grounded Theory

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Abstract

A problem with the popular desire to legitimate one's research through the inclusion of reflexivity is its increasingly uncritical adoption and practice, with most researchers failing to define their understandings, specific positions, and approaches. Considering the relative recentness with which reflexivity has been explicitly described in the context of grounded theory, guidance for incorporating it within this research approach is currently in the early stages. In this article, we illustrate a three-stage approach used in a grounded theory study of how parents of children with autism navigate intervention. Within this approach, different understandings of reflexivity are first explored and mapped, a methodologically consistent position that includes the aspects of reflexivity one will address is specified, and reflexivity-related observations are generated and ultimately reported. According to the position specified, we reflexively account for multiple researcher influences, including on methodological decisions, participant interactions and data collection, analysis, writing, and influence of the research on the researcher. We hope this illustrated approach may serve both as a potential model for how researchers can critically design and implement their own context-specific approach to reflexivity, and as a stimulus for further methodological discussion of how to incorporate reflexivity into grounded theory research.

Keywords

Reflexivity, Grounded Theory, Methodological Congruence, Theoretical Sensitivity, Participant Disclosure, Autism, Service Navigation, Parenting

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A problem with the popular desire to legitimate one's research through the inclusion of reflexivity is its increasingly uncritical adoption and practice, with most researchers failing to define their understandings, specific positions, and approaches. Considering the relative recentness with which reflexivity has been explicitly described in the context of grounded theory, guidance for incorporating it within this research approach is currently in the early stages. In this article, we illustrate a three-stage approach used in a grounded theory study of how parents of children with autism navigate intervention. Within this approach, different understandings of reflexivity are first explored and mapped, a methodologically consistent position that includes the aspects of reflexivity one will address is specified, and reflexivity-related observations are generated and ultimately reported. According to the position specified, we reflexively account for multiple researcher influences, including on methodological decisions, participant interactions and data collection, analysis, writing, and influence of the research on the researcher. We hope this illustrated approach may serve both as a potential model for how researchers can critically design and implement their own context-specific approach to reflexivity, and as a stimulus for further methodological discussion of how to incorporate reflexivity into grounded theory research. Keywords: Reflexivity, Grounded Theory, Methodological Congruence, Theoretical Sensitivity, Participant Disclosure, Autism, Service Navigation, Parenting

Reflexivity in qualitative research has been conceptualized and defined in multiple ways (Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Pillow, 2003). It often refers to the generalized practice in which researchers strive to make their influence on the research explicit—to themselves, and often to their audience. Methodological motives aside, a pragmatic reason for attending to reflexivity in any qualitative study is that it is a key requirement in quality appraisal or evaluation criteria, and research reporting guidelines for qualitative research (see Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). While there are several valid and convincing arguments against the appropriateness and utility of standardized criteria in qualitative research (e.g., Dixon-Woods, 2004; Koch & Harrington, 1998), such criteria are nevertheless used by many granting agencies, peer reviewers, editors, and developers of qualitative literature syntheses at least in health to filter and select research proposals, manuscripts, and publications. Thus the practice and reporting of reflexivity has become almost an expectation (Koch & Harrington, 1998). Consequently, greater numbers of grounded theory researchers are incorporating the practice and making explicit reference to it in published study reports. A problem with the popular desire to legitimate qualitative

research through reflexivity (whether to funders, thesis committees, journal editors, or readers of final publications) is the increasingly uncritical adoption of it, with most researchers failing to specify their understandings, positions, and approaches, ignoring how widely reflexivity has been conceptualized and the divergent ways it can be practiced (Pillow, 2003). Just as the authors who have written about reflexivity and grounded theory represent multiple disciplines and countries, readers can interpret these statements and the following discussion to apply across many fields and jurisdictions.

Considering the relative recentness with which reflexivity has been described explicitly in the context of grounded theory (Mruck & Mey, 2007), the available guidance for how it might be approached critically within this research method is still in the early stages. Original published examples that illustrate thoughtful incorporation of reflexivity into specific research projects have potential value in this context, serving as non-prescriptive tentative models for other researchers and as sources for further methodological discussion. In this article, we illustrate a three-stage approach used in a doctoral candidate's grounded theory study in which the different understandings of reflexivity are first explored and mapped, a methodologically consistent position that includes the aspects of reflexivity one will address is then specified, and reflexivity-related observations are generated and ultimately reported. In describing how this approach can be implemented, we aim to contribute to the greater conversation regarding reflexivity in grounded theory by proposing that researchers attend more closely to specifying their own context-appropriate approach for each study.

In this grounded theory study I, the doctoral candidate (SJG), set out to define and explain how parents of children with autism pursue intervention for any of the multiple concerns related to their child's disorder. Dissertation committee members (KAM, SJ, DBN) provided extensive support and guidance through the process of defining a suitable approach to reflexivity. Because I was conducting this research to fulfill the requirements for a doctoral dissertation, however, most of the responsibility for methodological decisions rested with me. As such, the first person singular (I) is used hereafter to reflect primary agency of the investigator; the first person plural (we) is used when the other authors shared an important role in specific decisions or thinking. Importantly, as the reciprocal influence between the primary researcher and committee members is challenging to delineate, the distinction between *I* and *we* may not be as separate and precise as it is presented here.

In the following sections, we first lay out some of the important characteristics of reflexivity both to establish its broad scope, and to lay out the considerations that might be relevant to a methodologically consistent approach. In doing so we draw on a dozen articles purposefully selected for their high level of influence (as judged by cross-referencing among authors) either generally (Chesney, 2001; Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Koch & Harrington, 1998; Pillow, 2003; Walsh, 2003), or specifically for their relevance to grounded theory (Breuer, 2000; Hall & Callery, 2001; Mallory, 2001; McGhee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Neill, 2006; Sword, 1999). Next, we specify a position on reflexivity that was adopted for the study, outlining the justifications and decisions for how to engage in and report on reflexivity throughout the research. Finally, we summarize the reflexive observations and considerations developed over the course of the research project; these reflexive findings were written in a manner intended to provide insight into how the substantive findings were constructed. We hope that elements from this account will resonate and be helpful to researchers struggling with the decisional process of defining a methodologically consistent approach to reflexivity within their unique grounded theory studies.

Mapping the Scope of Reflexivity

Although the origins of reflexivity in qualitative research are fragmented and contradictory (Finlay, 2002), one explanation slightly dominates based on its repetition by multiple authors: The idea of reflexivity within the qualitative research paradigm has evolved largely from influential (i.e., more likely noticed because they are frequently referenced) methodological critiques regarding problems of representation in research, such as claims of objectivity and questions about researcher power (Koch & Harrington, 1998; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Pillow, 2003). The essential problem stems from the fact "that qualitative research reports are not so straightforward as their authors represent them to be" (Charmaz, 2003, pp. 268-269). Specifically, researchers' roles and influence in shaping the representations of participant experiences are never completely accounted for or addressed, and sometimes they are not even acknowledged. A common position is that the researcher and the researched should be seen as occupying the same world and mutually influencing (see Cutcliffe, 2003). Thus one can conceive of research as a social rather than one-sided process (see Mallory, 2001). The concept of reflexivity, however, has grown to encompass different meanings among the research traditions that helped advance it— including ethnography, hermeneutic phenomenology, and participatory and feminist research. Consequently, various authors have published a multiplicity of definitions (see Neill, 2006) and typologies (see Mruck & Mey, 2007). I considered breadth and scope of the concept, including the range of possible objectives and practices, after reviewing a selection of literature to decide how to approach reflexivity in my dissertation research (Breuer, 2000; Chesney, 2001; Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Hall & Callery, 2001; Koch & Harrington, 1998; Mallory, 2001; McGhee et al., 2007; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Neill, 2006; Pillow, 2003; Sword, 1999; Walsh, 2003).

Most of the authors reviewed described how the general objective of reflexivity is to increase transparency and trustworthiness of the research report. At a more specific level, I conceived the meanings and possible aims for reflexivity as varying according to several characteristics. First, reflexivity may involve attention to *varying types of researcher interactions*: researcher influence on participants during data collection, participant influence on the researcher, researcher influence via decisions affecting research processes, researcher influence on interpretation or analysis, and influence of the research on the researcher. Second, one can apply reflexivity to consider and address presence of researcher interactions *at different stages of the research process*: during topic selection or question formulation, throughout the ongoing process of research design, while interviewing or other forms of data collection, during analysis and interpretation, or during writing. Third, researchers may employ reflexivity to *handle researcher influence in different ways*: to neutralize researcher influence, to acknowledge researcher influence, to explain researcher influence, or to facilitate and capitalize on researcher influence. Finally, *one can view researcher effects differently*, either as problematic (e.g., referring to it undesirably as "bias") or as advantageous (i.e., constructivist views).

Authors in the literature have described several criticisms of reflexivity. On the one hand, numerous authors review concerns regarding the dangers of excessive reflexivity (Chesney, 2001; Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Hall & Callery, 2001; Pillow, 2003). Particularly, by increasing focus on the researcher to the point of self-indulgence one risks shifting emphasis of the research and "blocking out the participant's voice" (Finlay, 2002, p. 541). Some authors have challenged usefulness of the practice, questioning whether it really produces better research (Kemmis, 1995; Patai, 1994; see Pillow, 2003). Others have suggested that it potentially inhibits free interpretive processes that enable more creative and valuable insights (Cutcliffe, 2003). In other words, reflexivity involves opportunity costs

because it may distract the researcher from engaging in a more intuitive selfless analysis. I would go further and say that the trade-off, because a researcher's time is finite, is that it may reduce researchers' capacity for engaging with as much participant data as they otherwise would. Researchers can ask themselves stark questions along these lines: Would it be better to conduct and analyze one more interview, or allocate the same time to reflexivity? In what pragmatic ways will reflexivity improve research quality? Which aspects of reflexivity have most benefit for my particular research process and research product?

In contrast to the warnings against excessive reflexivity, other criticisms argue that efforts to be reflexive are always inadequate because one can only ever provide a partial accounting of the effects of researcher interactions (Finlay, 2002). My own position is that there is value in sharing one's awareness about the situations in which researcher interactions may be consequential with one's audience, without necessarily proposing explanations to account for how these interactions might be consequential. This makes it possible for a balance to be reached in which reflexivity is employed conservatively and only as far as it serves the purposes that the researcher sets for it. The trade-off questions above helped me select which procedures or aspects of reflexivity to include and which to discard in defining my own balanced approach. Before further outlining the specific position and approach used in my study, I review how reflexivity has been discussed and practiced in the context of grounded theory, focusing particularly on ideas that inspired the adopted approach.

Reflexivity in Grounded Theory

It is only in recent literature (since 2000) that reflexivity has received explicit attention in the context of grounded theory, and this has especially been within the constructivist framework (Mruck & Mey, 2007). Charmaz, the founder of constructivist grounded theory, refers explicitly to reflexivity in the second edition book (2014), whereas her treatment of reflexivity (aside from a glossary definition) was more implicit in the first edition (2006). Corbin, meanwhile, dedicates three paragraphs to reflexivity in the third edition *Basics of qualitative research* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 31-32), although she mostly cites others' ideas that apply to qualitative research generically (Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002) rather than presenting an analysis of how the practice fits uniquely with grounded theory. Although Glaser's declared position on reflexivity appears ambiguous (as interpreted by some authors, see Mruck and Mey, 2007), contemporary Glaserian grounded theorists tend to view reflexivity as an appropriate part of the research process (e.g., Neill, 2006). It therefore appears that reflexivity is becoming progressively more accepted by the main traditions within contemporary grounded theory.

Hall and Callery (2001), provide one of the first proposals for explicitly incorporating reflexivity within grounded theory. They view reflexivity narrowly, however, only as "attending to the effects of researcher-participant interactions on the construction of data" (p. 257). They reason that their approach is consistent with the methodological position of symbolic interactionism on which grounded theory is based. From this position, interview data are logically understood as constructed from a process of interaction between the researcher and participant. The process of constructing data involves participants interpreting and ascribing meanings to questions and other researcher gestures, to which participants then respond. Likewise, researchers carefully monitor participant responses on many levels, subsequently responding according to their own interpretations of what is going on in the interview. Hall and Callery ultimately propose using reflexivity during the data collection step as a means of filling a quality gap in grounded theory. Importantly, they also suggest that reflexivity already exists in grounded theory since "theoretical sensitivity emphasizes the reflexive use of self in the processes of developing research questions and doing analysis"

(Hall & Callery, 2001, p. 263). I agree and expand on this within my reflexive analysis below (see *Researcher influence on the analysis*).

Other authors also highlight the congruence of reflexivity with symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, and ways in which aspects of reflexivity are already inherent in grounded theory, especially according to constructivist approaches (Mallory, 2001; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Neill, 2006). Like Hall and Callery (2001), Mallory (2001) focuses on the researcher-participant relationship, but her version of reflexivity also applies to the effects of this interaction on analysis, rather than just data collection. She proposes specific procedures for an "analysis of difference" (p. 85) that are aimed at understanding the symbolic interaction processes (i.e., meaning-making, interpretation, and responding) from both the researcher's and participant's perspectives.

Mruck and Mey (2007) consider reflexivity in all stages of the research process. But their comments regarding reflexivity during writing are perhaps most interesting and useful. Specifically, they describe how researchers' concerns for their potential audience can influence the research product. In addition to catering to supervisors or journal requirements, concerns for participants' reactions can influence this final analytic phase of the research, "as some interpretations may be avoided or are shaded with the respective recipients in mind" (p. 527). It may be important to expose these forms of self-censorship since "they lead researchers to eliminate possible pointers to the communicative and contextual character of their research" (p. 527).

Specifying a Personal Position and Approach

My position on reflexivity is both that it is a broad multi-dimensional practice that has many uses and should take many forms within a grounded theory research project, and that the extent of its reporting should be limited to serve only those purposes the researcher justifies as worthwhile—usually consistent with the research objectives. Thus, I believe reflexivity should be used

1) to account for the range of possible researcher interactions described in the reflexivity literature (see bulleted list below);
2) to consider broadly the various phases of the research process where researcher interactions can have influence; and
3) to respond primarily by acknowledging *where* researcher interactions have importantly influenced research processes, while any analysis one may decide to provide about *how* these interactions may have benefited or undermined the research does not need to be exhaustive and should never be excessive.

Reflexive Observations from the Study at Hand

We now describe how and where the specific reflexive observations and considerations from the grounded theory study of parents of children with autism were made and recorded. The original aim of this reflexive account was to provide insight into how the substantive findings were constructed. We organize this description according to the following types of researcher interactions in turn:

- Researcher influence on research design and decisions (e.g., revising the research question)
- Researcher-participant interactional influences during data collection

- Researcher influence on the analysis
- Researcher influence on the writing
- Influence of the research on the researcher

Researcher Influence on Research Design and Methodological Decisions

If one purpose of reflexivity is to account for the researcher's influence on the research process, a direct approach is to explicitly disclose one's "methodological decisions and accompanying rationales" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). I strived to report, at least to some extent, my personal influence and justifications for important procedural decisions as they were present at all phases of the research process, from initial topic selection to final analysis and writing. I chose to record how reflexive aspects influenced my *a priori* decisions (i.e., those made at the proposal stage before data collection) in early chapters of my dissertation. Thus, in the first chapter I reported how personal interest and background led to selection of the research topic and initial research question. In the methods chapter, I reflexively considered the "role of the researcher," explaining my rationale for the specific grounded theory approach I selected, and justifying initial sampling and data collection decisions.

Numerous important or potentially controversial methodological decisions, however, were made as the research was ongoing—often in the later research phases. Thus, I dedicated later sections of my dissertation to providing rationales for the most contentious methods issues I felt warranted extensive justification. For this study, these methods issues included specific approaches to reflexivity, revising the research question, identifying the central category, and incorporating analysis of context.

Committee members had both explicit and implicit influence on the many methodological decisions throughout the research process. Numerous concrete influences were described in methodological memos, the most consequential of which were acknowledged in the dissertation.

Researcher-Participant Interactional Influences during Data Collection

Researcher-participant interactional influences comprise observations and reflections on my influence on interview participants including efforts to manage their perceptions, the influence of their responses on the data collected, and the influence of a co-constructive interactional process on the research process and product. These and other related topics are discussed in turn.

Researcher influence on participant perceptions

My interactions with research participants, from pre-recruitment to interview completion, all played some role in their perceptions of me and the research, and ultimately the data they provided. Participants in the study included 32 mothers of children with autism (3 of these were mother-father dyads), and 8 professionals with expertise supporting such parents. Participants' perceptions were first formed through email, phone, and postal mail contact when I shared information about the study and provided consent materials. All participants learned I was a PhD candidate conducting the study for doctoral requirements.

Participating parents' subsequent contact with me consisted of a pre-interview phone survey. In most surveys, parents volunteered substantially more detail than was required by the structured questionnaire (in each case I was careful to balance the parent's enthusiasm with my wish to respect their time). As well as providing valuable extra background, this generally allowed time for meaningful interaction. Phone surveys were therefore an important

opportunity to develop rapport prior to the recorded primary interview, and I felt it was worthwhile including this extra step as a novice researcher. Information collected also allowed me to develop outlines of participant stories and tailor individualized questions before the full interview. Toward the end of the study, however, I found I was able to combine the survey and interview in one interaction for the sake of efficiency. By this point I felt confident to develop rapport much more quickly due to increased knowledge and empathy towards parents' situations.

In preparation for interactions with parents during interviews, I reflected on personal biases, specifically ones that might interfere with my ability to respond with sensitivity and openness. Notably, I was aware of the hostile relationship between the anti-vaccine or biomedical therapy movements within autism on the one hand and the conventional scientific community on the other. The biomedical therapy movement has historically tended to reject traditional standards for scientific evidence because these represent a threat to the claims of effectiveness and safety promoted for some of their more controversial therapies (Offit, 2008). Effectiveness claims tend to be justified based on indirect deductive biological rationales rather than direct epidemiological evidence. In an early journal reflection on my background and training in health research methodology, I concluded that my belief in traditional standards for research evidence threatened to cut me off from appreciating alternative views and approaches that different parents might use in appraising health information. To avoid imposing this bias on the analysis, I committed myself to openly learning how different parents justified their alternative understandings, particularly by those who saw value in biomedical therapy. I also felt the need to avoid any biasing aspect of my background from influencing data collection because I knew that parents embracing a biomedical approach could feel pre-judged if they perceived my training as underlying a critical stance during interviewing. Thus, in interview discussions with parents who had used biomedical options, I focused initial topic-related questions only on how such interventions were experienced as helpful, and later explored their views about biomedical information, which revealed complex and subtle positions regarding its credibility. In committing to appreciating alternative views, a potentially problematic aspect of my background became unimportant to our interactions and, I believe, to the analysis. Many parents who valued biomedical therapies had logically consistent justifications for using some while avoiding others, an insight that may have gone unnoticed if I remained closed to the possibility.

Gender

Gender is one of various sources of social difference—such as socioeconomic background, cultural ethnicity, and religion—with the potential to influence researcher-participant interactions. Indeed, I did experience (and reflexively analyzed in memos) differences in cultural ethnicity that led to delays in developing a highly trusting rapport with 2 of the 32 mothers who volunteered. I chose not to report on these further, however, because they resulted in delayed disclosure for only two interviews and had little affect the overall findings of the study (privacy was also a consideration). By contrast, since I had chosen to interview mothers, gender represented a social difference that applied to all interviews and had greater potential to influence the study as a whole. I therefore felt that consumers of this research deserved a considered answer to the question of whether gender was an issue in this research—although I ultimately did not perceive it as problematic.

In examining this issue, I turned to some of the literature on gender difference in interviewing. Reinharz and Chase (2002) have discussed some considerations with respect to the situation of men interviewing women. In one qualitative study they discuss, Padfield and Procter (1996), a man-woman research team with otherwise similar feminist backgrounds

each interviewed separate halves of their all-woman sample. While no difference was observed in women's willingness to share attitudes even on sensitive topics including abortion, women appeared by several indicators more willing to share the fact that they had undergone abortion with the female interviewer. While abortion was not relevant to the focus of my study, it is not inconceivable there were other sensitive gendered experiences that mothers chose not to disclose because I was male. Reinharz and Chase, however, go on to highlight that the influence of gender is not fixed, being dependent on participating women's different perceived sense of skill dealing with men, while this source of difference can be minimized if the male interviewer downplays his gender. In the current study, aspects of interview encounters likely minimized gender influence, for example by offering a choice of three interview options in non-threatening environments. More importantly, according to the "researcher persona" I envisioned for myself (described below), I emphasized warm and supportive human interaction in which gender was demoted.

Initial "researcher persona"

Chesney (2001) describes the concept of a "researcher persona" (p.129) by referring to Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) discussion of impression management and their call for researchers to attend to their identity as part of the fieldwork. The persona one projects in turn influences what participants decide to share and the data that are constructed. In describing how she sought to construct an appropriate and successful ethnographic self-identity in her cross-cultural research setting, Chesney refers to struggling with the guidance of various ethnographic "gurus," which she felt required maintaining a falsely constructed self to maintain distance and prevent "going native." By contrast, my source for constructing a "researcher persona" was to draw on pre-existing aspects of my character that I felt would promote comfort in the research process and reduce distance. In my case, as a novice researcher with little prior interviewing experience beyond pilot interviews, using past experience served to increase confidence and focus in early interviews. The personal experience I drew on was 10 years of teaching nordic skiing to adult men and women. By visualizing myself in a similar guiding role, I aimed to use familiar interpersonal skills to create a safe, empathic, and sharing environment for participants to respond to during interviews. Perhaps as a result, nearly all participant interactions were warm and mutually trusting, with many parents and professionals volunteering that they enjoyed the interview experience. I interpret this as a sign that effects of gender difference on disclosure were likely minimized by fostering a persona that reduced distance.

Outsider position

An important source of difference prevented me from fully understanding the situations of parent participants throughout the research. This was the simple fact that although I was the researcher I did not have a child with autism myself. As noted, the majority of interview interactions were warm, and I drew on various strategies and experiences to bring myself closer to participants. For example, when appropriate I would share my own experience as a parent as a gesture of reciprocity. But I always did so humbly, acknowledging that my experiences might only partially compare with theirs. Fortunately, parents appreciated my comparisons to parenting a typically developing child as a means to develop personal understanding, and some even encouraged me to use knowledge of the typical parent's experience of having to shift attention and energy away from oneself in adjusting to meeting the needs of a first child—more than one parent suggested I imagine how this could be at least an order of magnitude more challenging if I was adjusting to having a child with autism.

Parent participants provided numerous indicators, however, of how outsiders could never hope to have complete empathy for their situation. For example, multiple participants shared one mother's blunt assessment of professionals' capacity to truly empathize: "You have these therapists, and these workers, and these doctors saying this: 'And I know what you're going through.' Unless you lived it, no you don't." Parents' strong sense of an insider-outsider divide was reinforced by the many descriptions of the unique rapport and irreplaceable level of understanding that fellow parents of children with autism share with each other. As one woman put it, "I have my autism mommies and then I have my neurotypical mommies, which were my friends, right. And it's just not the same." Ultimately, however, this form of difference did not reduce rapport or willingness to disclose to a genuinely interested outsider; rather, it seemed to increase parents' motivation to make their story known.

Sensitive topics

Indeed, resistance to sharing was rare in interviews. At the extreme end there were participants who offered generously that, "I have nothing to hide," or "I'm an open book, ask me anything you want." These comments usually arose in the context of my careful entry into sensitive topics such as personal mental health problems such as anxiety or depression. Aware of the increased rates of mental health problems among mothers of children with autism (Gray & Holden, 1992; O'Brien, 2007), after the first seven interviews I began probing for evidence that the process of navigating intervention might contribute to participants' emotional burdens without asking about depression directly. After one parent spontaneously started discussing her own mental health, I learned that this was not a taboo subject and indeed one that was very relevant to the research because it was another autism-related problem for which parents struggled to find intervention. After thus discovering such topics were not always off-limits, I began listing mental health and marital problems as potential topics for discussion at the beginning of interviews, and otherwise reminding participants about the option of discussing these issues at relevant points during the interview. With this advance warning and extra time to consider what to disclose, at least half a dozen additional participants volunteered to share information regarding depression or anxiety, while some others I suspect chose to focus on one of the many other topics that were available for discussion. Overall, the participants who did agree to share their experience regarding sensitive topics were reflective enough that their contributions provided sufficient data to adequately develop these concepts and the relationships between them.

Evolving "researcher persona" and co-constructive interaction

As described above, the initial identity I envisioned for myself in interview interactions was drawn from pre-research experience. This was due to both a lack of research interview experience and of familiarity with parents' situations. But my *researcher persona* and relationship with participants was not static. It evolved with successive interviews. This evolving position has parallels with Breuer's (2000) analogy of *cabinet perception*, an astrophysics concept in which the scientific observer does not remain in an absolute or fixed position, but rather "is moved" as is the object of study. Breuer applied this as a metaphor to interview research, in which both the interviewer and participant can be conceived as part of a greater system. In grounded theory the *movement* referred to might be analogous to the shifting or evolution of a researcher's theoretical sensitivity (researcher position), and also of successive researcher-participant relationships and gestures (i.e., positions with respect to one another) over the course of a study. Indeed this happened in the current study, as mutual

interactions with later research participants and the level of conceptual discussion in their interviews were often noticeably different compared to earlier ones. This change arose from my own shifting perspective and approach to interviewing, described next.

Early interviews featured participants providing simple factual information in response to questions I asked from my interview guide. This descriptive knowledge was more educational than theoretical, but it soon put me in a position to ask more psychological questions, which in turn brought more understanding and some ability to empathize with participants. Interviews slowly became more collaborative in terms of how understandings were mutually shared and interactively constructed. For example, I was able to raise an idea or concept based on knowledge from prior interviews and ask for parent participants to share their experience or perspectives in order to develop a better understanding of that idea—often this was a deliberate form of theoretical sampling. Overall, interviews shifted from being less descriptive to more conceptual, and even theoretical as linkages between concepts came to be discussed, although the exact mix depended on the participant. As the research progressed I would occasionally respond to participant contributions by speaking aloud my interpretations, partly so that this *in situ* form of analysis would be recorded and later transcribed, and partly to stimulate more reflective ideas from the participant. When this interpretation resonated, or a participant particularly enjoyed the conceptual exercise, there was sometimes a palpable sense of synergism as we cooperatively developed concepts, with enthusiastic back-and-forth exchanges of anecdotes and experiential knowledge. In this sense my persona evolved from one of distance to being much closer to parents' situation in terms of my conceptual understanding and the valuable interactional relationships that were achieved in interviews. I suspect the experience of building synergy is an implicit natural occurrence for numerous researchers engaged in interview-based grounded theory studies. The transition from distant to close positions may have allowed for partial benefit of both the *etic* (outsider) to *emic* (insider) perspectives known in ethnography (Headland, Pike, Harris, & American Anthropological Association Meeting, 1990)—seeking greater elaboration on presupposed concepts while distant and achieving more intimate knowledge and insight while close (Mruck & Mey, 2007, p. 527).

Researcher Influence on the Analysis

Theoretical sensitivity as a form of reflexivity

As Hall and Callery (2001) suggest, grounded theory methods already achieve reflexivity by means of theoretical sensitivity—the grounded theory practice of bringing one's background to bear on the study. Indeed, provided the researcher strives to be transparent about the major ways his or her background has influenced the analysis in the form of theoretical sensitivity, I believe one of the most relevant aspects of reflexivity (i.e., awareness of researcher influence on the analysis) can be achieved largely within the grounded theory method itself.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe how personal experience is brought into the analysis in a way that maintains primacy of the empirical data. The most instructive example of this is the analytic practice of *theoretical comparison*, where incidents from the researcher's experience are compared to incidents in the data to bring out properties and dimensions of the concept of which both incidents are examples. The incidents from personal experience are not used as data, but rather only to help the researcher see ways the conceptual phenomenon in question can vary. The properties and dimensions revealed through such comparisons "give us ideas of what to look for in the data, making us sensitive to things we might have overlooked before" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 76).

Whenever theoretical comparisons to personally experienced incidents were used in the current study I made every effort to record them in memos. In most cases where they led to important developments in the analysis, the comparative incident from personal experience was described alongside the relevant finding in the dissertation. Thus, there were two concrete modes through which the influence of personal experience on the analysis was made explicit—one available by audit and the other apparent in the report. An example is the comparative use of my experience with a near car crash to bring out properties and dimensions of parents *responding to urgency*—a code used to characterize the emotion and action of parents of children with autism as they responded to the various conditions that rendered their situation highly urgent. The comparison allowed important development of this concept.

Researcher Influence on the Writing

Mruck and Mey (2007) suggest that reflexive concerns for one's audience in writing up the research can lead to forms of self-censorship. Following their suggestion, I disclose explicitly my own concerns and how these affect the final report.

During the interview process numerous participants expressed a keen interest in reading the findings, and I think some will want to read beyond the brief summary I provide, and request to read the full dissertation. Thus, I am conscious of the potential reactions of individual participants because it is conceivable that any may read it. In addition, because the autism parent group is so involved and proactive compared to most patient or caregiver groups, it is also possible that some non-participating parents of children with autism may obtain and read parts of the dissertation if they become aware of it. Some of these parents may personally know participating parents or professionals who have contributed to the study. In response to these possibilities and my commitment to confidentiality, I have strived to ensure data and representations of individual participants are in most cases sufficiently anonymous as to be unrecognizable even to those parents or professionals to which they correspond. I see this as especially important where sensitive topics are involved. This anonymization is a difficult task, however, as it is balanced with the need to provide sufficient information, which requires sometimes-arbitrary decisions about how much detail to provide. On the other hand, this form of self-censorship has may have blunted the richness of some of the accounts provided. Similarly, the ethical commitment to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of local support agencies, schools, and school boards led to the elimination of sometimes-valuable sources of contextual detail.

Influence of the Research on the Researcher

In my opinion, there is a risk of appearing narcissistic or self-indulgent in describing influence of the research on oneself, so I will aim to be brief. I have described above how the interview process changed my researcher persona—the specific aspect of my identity involved in interactions with participants in this particular study. Over the course of the research I thus moved from early reliance on personal pre-research history to guide my interactions with parents, to using more specific experience and knowledge of parents as this progressively developed over the course of the research. I experienced this positively as a transition from being what I considered was a good listener, to a much more empathic and effective interviewer—to a point where I was sometimes capable of anticipating aspects of participants' stories and spontaneously formulating theory-relevant questions that fit naturally with the flow of conversation. Such successes contributed to my sense of expertise and identity as a grounded theory researcher.

In addition to this specific evolution of my researcher persona, I experienced changes to my broader identity in terms of the *personally relevant* understandings gained through the interviews. These new understandings, which relate to my roles as a parent (of neurotypical children), husband, citizen, and researcher, can be surmised by reading the dissertation findings. Those roles and the relationships they involve, because they were areas of personal growth, should therefore be interpreted as sub-interests of the research that may have subtly influenced aspects of the data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

The foregoing account represents one of the few published examples to illustrate the process of thoughtfully incorporating reflexivity into a grounded theory project. Considering the relative recentness with which the practice has received explicit attention within grounded theory, this paper contributes in several ways to the ongoing conversation regarding how to approach reflexivity in a methodologically consistent manner. First, we illustrate how much broader this concept is than many researchers have come to assume. This, in turn, implies the need for considered decision-making about what aspects of reflexivity to adopt within the context of one's research approach. Moreover, the dimensional approach used to map the scope of this concept is unique, differing from previous approaches of summarizing the multiple definitions (e.g., Neill, 2006) or multiple typologies (e.g., Mruck & Mey, 2007) in order to portray the varied reflexivities. As with those approaches, ours is based on an incomplete, albeit purposeful, consideration of the reflexivity literature. We therefore anticipate and encourage continued efforts to define reflexivity within the context of grounded theory, perhaps expanding the scope we have laid out.

Second, we specify a consistent position and approach to reflexivity that we feel was appropriate for the study at hand. The different elements of this position—such as which of the different possible bi-directional researcher interactions (e.g., involving participants, research design, analysis) should be accounted for, which phases of the research to consider, and how extensively to describe specific researcher interactions—may stimulate further discussion regarding which aspects of reflexivity are consistent, or not, with grounded theory and symbolic interactionism.

Finally, the account of reflexive observations from the study at hand may resonate with other researchers' experiences, providing a model of one researcher's act of attending to researcher interactions. In this sense, our paper adds to existing reflexive accounts in the literature that have usefully highlighted the individual value of reporting aspects of reflexivity (e.g., Sword, 1999). We hope this example will serve both as a tentative, yet useful, model for researchers seeking to define their own context-specific approach to reflexivity, and to advance methodological discussion of how to incorporate reflexivity into grounded theory research.

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