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Sweeping into the Interpretive Turn: Theory and Practice Expansion in Situational Analysis

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Abstract

Between Adele Clarke's 2005 ground-breaking book, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*, and its second edition due for release next year under an expanded authorship and title, comes this effective practice-based taster. Here SA is situated within the interpretive turn, rather than the postmodern as previously, in a shift that might subtly be taking back some of the ground formerly given to Foucault at the expense of Strauss. Exemplars of SA studies, each with a reflective postscript by their authors, provide rich details on methods from a community of scholars, who along with the book's editors, reproduce the spirit of Strauss' data analysis group to "turn up the volume" on less heard voices and diverse practices in the situation of SA.

Keywords

Situational Analysis, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Interpretive Turn, Epistemic Diversity

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Sweeping into the Interpretive Turn: Theory and Practice Expansion in Situational Analysis

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*Between Adele Clarke's 2005 ground-breaking book, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*, and its second edition due for release next year under an expanded authorship and title, comes this effective practice-based taster. Here SA is situated within the interpretive turn, rather than the postmodern as previously, in a shift that might subtly be taking back some of the ground formerly given to Foucault at the expense of Strauss. Exemplars of SA studies, each with a reflective postscript by their authors, provide rich details on methods from a community of scholars, who along with the book's editors, reproduce the spirit of Strauss' data analysis group to "turn up the volume" on less heard voices and diverse practices in the situation of SA. Keywords: Situational Analysis, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Interpretive Turn, Epistemic Diversity*

“We believe both engagement without domination and cooperation without consensus are becoming increasingly important as the transnationalisation of qualitative inquiry – and most everything else – continues.”

(Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2015, p. 49)

For readers familiar with Clarke's 2005 ground-breaking, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*, your first question might be, what has Clarke done with Situational Analysis (SA) during the past decade? This 2015 release suggests she has been broadening its epistemology beyond postmodernism, retracing her mentor's footsteps to Germany sociology, and “*creating a community of scholars interested in learning about and developing techniques for Situational Analysis*” (French & Miller, 2015, p. 320), to name a few advancements.

But first, for those of you reading about SA for the first time; a brief recap. Clarke proposes SA as an extension of Grounded Theory (GT: Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to address contested (Glaser, 2002; Martin, 2006) shortcomings she perceives in the latter (Clarke, 2005, pp. 11-16). “*In SA, the situation of inquiry itself broadly conceived becomes the key unit of analysis*” (p. 12)¹ and includes all human actors, nonhuman actants, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural, political and other elements contained therein; with data potentially drawn from interviewing, historical accounts, document analysis, media, and/or ethnographic observations. Three analytical maps (situational, social worlds/arenas, and positional maps) are utilised to stimulate data analysis beyond GT coding and categorising. Their purpose is to provoke and emphasise complexities and diversities, especially at the margins of a situation, in ways that upset or displace known or tacit power hierarchies. This mapping is far more than a brainstorming exercise; it is integral to engaging researchers to ‘see’ heterogeneous data in unexpected ways (*Ibid.*).

¹ Citations showing a page number only refer to Clarke et al. (2015)

The effect is to promote epistemic diversity, which the 2015 authors describe as “*an enhanced understanding of the varied perspectives present in the situation that are often rooted in different assumptions about epistemology*” (p. 16). This term is one of several broadenings by Clarke and her co-authors that conceptualise SA up; shattering any perception that a ‘glass ceiling’ might be limiting SA to postmodernism or Foucault, which were such dominant voices in Clarke’s 2005 book. This broadening is evident throughout Part One where, through an informative brief history of qualitative inquiry, the authors situate SA within the interpretive turn, rather than the postmodern as previously, because in today’s “*vocabulary of inquiry ... ‘interpretive’ is the broader term, encapsulating constructionism, critical, poststructural and postmodern approaches, and therefore travels more widely*” (p. 29). It subsequently emerges that the 2nd edition of Clarke’s 2005 book will be released in 2017 under a new title; *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Interpretive Turn* (p. 42).

Perhaps choosing *interpretive* from among the postmodern, poststructural and interpretive turns, in some way decentres SA’s treatment of discourse from a primary linkage to postmodernism through Foucault. If so, this shift might be subtly taking back some of the ground formerly given to Foucault by Clarke at the expense of Strauss. Her theoretical genealogy and ‘familial loyalty’ lies unashamedly with Strauss, and her taking SA to Germany in recent years through Reiner Keller (Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Keller, 2014) continues the influence of Strauss on German sociology following his strong connections there in the 1970s. One critic of Clarke’s move to discourse through Foucault in 2005 claimed it was ‘*discourse analysis light*’ (Diaz-Bone, 2013, p. 5) and perhaps a case of “*premature Foucault ‘hugging’*” (*Ibid.*, p. 6). In their 2015 book, the authors affirm that “*Foucaultian attention to (narrative, historical and visual) discourses is central to positional maps*” (p. 45), which are maps of positions articulated in the discourse on their own terms, rather than representations of individuals, groups, or institutions. They note this as a challenge to Foucault’s analysis of power, “*which follows the powerful*” (p. 52), by favouring their own analytic aims to “*show up muted and silenced positions in situations that spark new lines of inquiry*” (p. 177).

Part Two of the book discusses four root facets of SA, namely, Strauss’ social worlds/arenas theory, moving beyond the “knowing subject” through discourse analysis, explicit inclusion of non-human actants as co-constitutive with and of humans, and the issue of implicated actors and actants in situations. Two additional practice notes have been amplified since 2005, firstly, that situational maps (and some would add social worlds/arenas maps here too; see Strong, Ross, Chondros, & Sesma-Vazquez, 2015, pp. 245-247) are excellent research design tools for laying out all that might be relevant to a project, what data might be gathered, and for planning literature reviews; and secondly, that the ordered situational map categories suggested by Clarke (after Strauss) are not to be “slavishly” adhered to as this would violate fundamental assumptions about SA, GT and abductive reasoning (pp. 100-103). The remainder of Part Two comprises a paper each on SA’s fit for feminist and minority culture research respectively, before Part Three presents five excellent exemplars, each with a reflective postscript by their authors about their use of SA.

Clarke recalls how Strauss, her beloved teacher, “*was very supportive and asked wonderful questions but would never do the analysis for you ... the great gift given is that you really learn to do your own research*” (p. 109) and perhaps true to his modelling, she shies away from giving nitty-gritty details about doing SA herself; in contrast, say, to her methodological “sister,” Kathy Charmaz (2014), who often walks readers through method, line by line. This may simply reflect a lack of orthodoxies in SA (T. Strong,² personal communication, October 22, 2015); nonetheless, the rich details on methods contained in the

² Tom Strong, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Part Three exemplars and their commentaries were, for this SA beginner, a source of comfort and inspiration. Among other particulars, they offer explicit descriptions on how to create the analytical maps including those solely with discourse data, the constancy of researcher reflexivity, variations on coding and theoretical sampling, “turning up the volume” on lesser discourses, and moving from mapping analysis to writing up. This community of exemplar scholars and the tripartite of book editors reproduce together the spirit of Strauss’ data analysis group (p. 126) to “turn up the volume” on less heard voices and diverse practices in the situation of SA. This makes for an effective taster to what is now a much anticipated main-course in 2017 with the impending release of the 2nd edition of the principal SA text.

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