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Research/Therapy: A Review of Adele Clarke's Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn

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Abstract

Situational Analysis presents an iteration of Grounded Theory that incorporates the construction of a series of illustrative maps, conceptualizes a situation as inclusive of what usually has been considered context, and explicitly and systematically includes missing or otherwise silenced data. This review comments on how these attributes of situational analysis can also effectively inform the practice of family therapy. The potential of a research book to inform a clinical practice is an exciting development in advancing interdisciplinary studies and its related applications in the world.

Keywords

Situational Analysis, Grounded Theory, Family Therapy, Mapping

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“Research/Therapy”: A Review of Adele Clarke’s Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn

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Situational Analysis presents an iteration of Grounded Theory that incorporates the construction of a series of illustrative maps, conceptualizes a situation as inclusive of what usually has been considered context, and explicitly and systematically includes missing or otherwise silenced data. This review comments on how these attributes of situational analysis can also effectively inform the practice of family therapy. The potential of a research book to inform a clinical practice is an exciting development in advancing interdisciplinary studies and its related applications in the world. Key Words: Situational Analysis, Grounded Theory, Family Therapy, and Mapping

Every once in a while, I read a book that invites me to make immediate, clear and useful connections to my world of therapeutic practice—but rarely is it a book on research. I found Adele Clarke’s *Situational Analysis* to be just such a book. It is stunning that a book dedicated to Grounded Theory “after the postmodern turn” can be so readily applied to another discipline (in particular, family therapy). Throughout my multiple readings of this book, I fully expected Clarke to (somewhere in the book) make this link explicit. But it never came. In my review of this enormously valuable book, I will highlight some of these connections to family therapy that jumped off the page to me.

While I will explicitly make connections to family therapy, I think it would be safe to say these points of intersection would also apply to social workers and other therapists. Given that my observations of connection to this point are mine, and not Clarke’s, let me describe some of the key components of *Situational Analysis*.

Clarke identifies the following aim in this book: “to regenerate a very popular and epistemologically sound approach to qualitative analysis called ‘grounded theory’” (p. xxi). *Situational Analysis* uses maps to (1) “lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of inquiry and provoke analysis of relations among them” (p. xxii, situational maps), (2) “lay out the collective actors, key nonhuman elements, and the arena(s) of commitment and discourse within which they are engaged in ongoing negotiations—meso-level interpretations of the situation” (p. xxii, social worlds/arenas maps), and (3) “lay out the major positions taken, and not taken, in the data vis-à-vis particular axes of difference, concern, and controversy around issues in the situation of inquiry” (p. xxii, positional maps).

These maps serve as useful constructions to present “the social” in compelling and complex ways that can invite an appreciation of “complications, messiness, and denseness of actual situations and differences” (p. xxviii). In any given situation, what we typically construe as context or “environmental factors” are brought in by Clarke to be

considered constitutive of the situation. In this sense there is no context—there is the situation with all its complexity. Another value of the maps (in particular, the positional map), is its ability to graphically illustrate places of silence in the data—places where data could be, but are not. This map provides us with a device to see that which we do not see—a way to make an absence visible.

Clarke uses maps to increase the visibility of complexity. Visual depictions oftentimes can reveal complex interconnections in ways that narratives cannot. She provides guidance on how to create and use maps while at the same time avoiding the reification that can come along with discrete constructions. These maps are not Truths in some universal or ultimate sense—they are heuristic devices with which to envision relationships and potential relationships. Clarke’s explicit inclusion of societal discourses and nonhuman elements as “players” in relationships is another insightful contribution of Situational Analysis.

As I studied these ways of constructing maps of relationships, I kept envisioning how Clarke’s ideas could be applied to family relationships, their larger contexts, and the silenced voices/ideas within families. All of the components she described for use in Grounded Theory were valued ideas that I privileged in my family therapy practice.

The pervasive crisscrossing of the research discourse with the therapeutic discourse is noticed in quotes like the following: “How can we develop data-gathering strategies that will enable us analytically to better get at silences, at tacit knowledges and practices, at sites of the heretofore inchoate?” (p. 75).

As a family therapist, information (data) is gathered in order to compose a picture of what is going on. Key in the process is getting at that which is not said, beliefs that are simply “understood” but not articulated. Here is another: “As a researcher, you need to think through what kinds of data you want, what you can realistically obtain, and, eventually, the adequacy and trustworthiness of the materials gathered and analyzed” (p. 113).

As a family therapist, you also need to closely examine what kinds of information you want to collect, what is actually available to you, and the accuracy or legitimacy of what you choose to collect and organize.

Clarke comes amazingly close to describing “narrative therapy” with the following quote:

the major means of avoiding the present as “a necessary outcome” is problematizing how we have arrived at the present moment, seeking out those elements that each and all had to be in place for this present to “happen,” and “how things could have been otherwise.” (p. 263)

Narrative therapists (White & Epston, 1990) ask questions about how the current (problematic) situation came to be, what the contributing elements and discourses were, and what alternative stories or strategies might have been possible (or are possible).

In the field of family therapy, there is a continuing and growing interest in seeing the family as intimately connected to its larger surround, to see the “micro” level along with the “macro” level (Efron, 1983; Rojano, 2004; Waldegrave, 2000). Taking Clarke’s lead to bring the context in as constitutive, family therapists are beginning to consider what conceptualizing and working with a family would look like if the social arena,

inclusive of societal discourses, was considered with the family as the situation of interest?

Here is the meso level of social action—not an aggregate level of individuals, but where individuals become social beings again and again through their actions of commitment to social worlds and their participation in those worlds’ activities, simultaneously creating and being constituted through discourses. (p. 110)

Seeing the situation more broadly defined (rather than punctuating at the level of the nuclear family unit) could be an important device/approach to better understand how to help individuals and families with a variety of presenting problems. In its inception, family therapy pioneered the notion that an individual’s family may be a better site of intervention to help the individual than the individual him/herself (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In a similar systemic way, perhaps the conceptual devices in Situational Analysis may be a next logical step to relevantly include the broader social worlds in understanding and intervening in clinical situations.

The importance of helping people develop more self-agency in their lives as opposed to diagnosing or assessing them accurately is eloquently stated by Clarke in the research context “. . . the goal is not so much to represent the researched better as to explore how researchers can “be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (p. 125). Rather than represent the “truth” of the situation, the aim is to align the researcher (or family therapist) with the people’s efforts to self-define.

Towards the end of the book, Clarke says “[t]he reasons for doing research are often to decide how to intervene in a particular situation to improve conditions of some kind” (p. 302). This comes very close to making the link to practice itself. Recognizing the differential purposes of traditional research (to come to know something) as compared to practice (to do something to change the world), I see this book helping us to see the “messiness” and “complicatedness” of this demarcation. Good therapeutic practice includes situational analysis.

I heartily recommend this book to qualitative researchers, family therapists, and social workers—there is plenty there for everyone. With such an outstanding exemplar of a research book having a significant relevance and impact on the practice arena, I can only hope to one day run across a practice book (family therapy or social work) that can offer as much to researchers in return. But, maybe even better yet, perhaps the two disciplines will see fit at some point to join in a transdisciplinary moment to extinguish their mutually held distinction.

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