

11-20-2018

## Multi-Site Bilingual Team-Based Grounded Theory Research: A Retrospective Methodological Review

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### Recommended APA Citation

Pullen Sansfaçon, A., Fulton, A. E., Brown, M., Graham, J. R., & Ethier, S. (2018). Multi-Site Bilingual Team-Based Grounded Theory Research: A Retrospective Methodological Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(11), 2817-2834. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3362>

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## Multi-Site Bilingual Team-Based Grounded Theory Research: A Retrospective Methodological Review

### Abstract

Successful management of a multi-site bilingual team-based grounded theory study requires overcoming key challenges associated with implementation of a large-scale, multi-faceted project. This article retrospectively reviews the methodological strategies employed during a multi-site bilingual team-based grounded theory study that investigated the professional adaptation experiences of migrant social workers in Canada. The article presents the strategies that the research team engaged to overcome numerous challenges and successfully work together across a variety of contexts and systems, including (a) provincial contexts, (b) languages, (c) university systems, (d) virtual spaces, and (e) epistemological perspectives. The findings highlight the importance of leadership and teamwork as central to successful project completion.

### Keywords

Grounded Theory, Team-Based Research, Bilingual Research, Multi-Site Research

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### Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the migrant social workers who participated in the study. They also wish to thank those who helped with the recruitment of participants, including the ACSW, NSASW, and the OTSTCFQ. The research presented in this article was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada / Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines (SSHRC/CRSH Grant number 435-2012-0391).

## **Multi-Site Bilingual Team-Based Grounded Theory Research: A Retrospective Methodological Review**

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*Successful management of a multi-site bilingual team-based grounded theory study requires overcoming key challenges associated with implementation of a large-scale, multi-faceted project. This article retrospectively reviews the methodological strategies employed during a multi-site bilingual team-based grounded theory study that investigated the professional adaptation experiences of migrant social workers in Canada. The article presents the strategies that the research team engaged to overcome numerous challenges and successfully work together across a variety of contexts and systems, including (a) provincial contexts, (b) languages, (c) university systems, (d) virtual spaces, and (e) epistemological perspectives. The findings highlight the importance of leadership and teamwork as central to successful project completion. Keywords: Grounded Theory, Team-Based Research, Bilingual Research, Multi-Site Research*

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Proposing a team-based research project is a common part of academic life. As an academic, inviting co-researchers and colleagues to join you in developing a new project is often exciting, allowing for a complementarity of expertise, stimulating conversation and support. However, working within a team context can also lead to misunderstandings, disagreements and unequal distributions of the tasks and power, making project management and teamwork challenging. This article provides an overview of our team's approach to completing a multi-site bilingual qualitative research project and discusses our successes and challenges along the way. Strategies for effective teamwork based on our lessons learned are also provided.

Team-based approaches to qualitative research can enhance the overall quality and rigour of the research design and outcomes through promoting high level conceptual, theoretical and creative thinking leading to rich analyses and interpretations of data informed by diverse perspectives (Barry, Bitten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999; Leavy, 2014). Additionally, participation in team-based qualitative research can be a rewarding experience that leads to increased job satisfaction among team members (Barry et al., 1999). At the same

time many challenges, including division of labour (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008), communication, timelines, and adherence to complex protocols across researchers and contexts may be encountered (MacQueen & Guest, 2008). Teams may also encounter practical and logistical issues (Mack, Bunce, & Akumatey, 2008), including the need for multiple institutional ethics reviews, which may pose barriers to consistent implementation of the research design across sites (MacQueen, 2008). Furthermore, both the skill set and “mindset” required for effectively engaging in team-based research may be “alien to many trained qualitative researchers” (MacQueen & Guest, 2008, p. 3).

Mauthner and Doucet (2008) stated that “there is a critical gap in our understanding of academic collaborative processes, making it difficult to ascertain exactly what goes on in practice within teams” (p. 973) and further, that “collaborative processes and practices require greater reflexive attention from team researchers” (p. 974). This article contributes to addressing this gap by presenting a retrospective methodological review of the processes and experiences of the members of a multi-site bilingual research team that employed grounded theory to investigate the professional adaptation of migrant social workers in Canada as they gained experience in new professional practice contexts.

Literature regarding team-based and multi-site grounded theory research is limited though emerging (Conlon, Carney, Timonen, & Scharf, 2015; Fernald & Duclos, 2005; Kinzie et al., 2007; Levitt, Kannan, & Ippolito, 2013; Mauthner & Doucet, 2008; Olson, McAllister, Grinnell, Walters, & Appunn, 2016). For example, Wiener’s (2007) chapter in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) provided us with useful insights around team structure and application of grounded theory methods throughout iterative data collection and data analysis processes. However, literature remains relatively scarce regarding analysis of research team members’ experiences of engaging in multi-site team-based grounded theory research specifically. This article contributes to addressing this limitation by exploring the case of a multi-site, bilingual, team-based grounded theory project. The article describes the challenges that emerged during the research process and highlights the strategies to successfully manage potential roadblocks. Leadership and teamwork are identified as being central to successful management and completion of the project. Application of key principles associated with teamwork and leadership in the context of team-based grounded theory are discussed.

The research team consisted of a principal investigator, two co-investigators and graduate student research assistants (Ras) (one or two Ras per site). The team conducted a bilingual grounded theory study over a period of four years (2011-2015) at three sites of data collection across Canada (within the provinces of Alberta, Quebec, and Nova Scotia).

All of the team members were social workers in addition to being either academics or graduate students. There were varying levels of bilingual proficiency in English and French among the team members. Overall, English was the language of greatest proficiency for the team members from Alberta and Nova Scotia, while French was the language of greatest proficiency for the team members from Quebec.

While all of the team members were born in Canada, many of the team members had firsthand experience of living and working abroad. Based on these personal experiences they were curious about the reverse experience—what were the lived experiences of social workers from abroad who migrate to Canada? The research project came about to better understand the lived experiences of migrant social workers in the Canadian context with particular interest on their professional adaptation (Fulton, Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, Ethier, & Graham, 2016).

Two of the co-investigators had previously collaborated on research projects including a pilot study of migrant social worker adaptation in Canada and an international project with colleagues in England and South Africa focusing on social worker mobility. Through these experiences, they had already developed a strong working relationship based on mutual

understandings of the context and issues surrounding social workers' mobility and migration. A third co-investigator was invited to join the team because he was located in western Canada, and he had research experiences that added to the expertise of the team based on his earlier work on labour market integration. By forming a team and conducting the study bilingually across multiple sites in western, central and eastern Canada, the researchers were able to attend to many linguistic, geographic, regional and culturally based considerations. Ensuring that these contextual nuances were attended to within the scope of a national study allowed for the team to draw out pan-Canadian implications for research and policy related to professional migration and labour market integration for migrant social workers.

### The Study

To begin the inquiry, we ensured that we were investigating a novel topic, by completing a cursory review of the literature. Through this process we determined that little had been published about the lived experiences of professional adaptation of migrant social workers despite transnational labour mobility of social workers becoming an increasingly important phenomenon worldwide (Beddoe & Fouche, 2014; Beddoe, Fouche, Bartley, & Harington, 2012; Beecher, Reeves, Eggertsen, & Furuto, 2010; Fouche, Beddoe, Bartley, & de Haan, 2014; Hussein, 2014; Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2009; Hussein, Stevens, Manthorpe, & Moriarty, 2011; Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, & Graham, 2012a; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007).

The team then designed a qualitative study with the aim of inductively answering the following questions: What are the experiences of migrant social workers who practice social work in a country different to which they undertook their education? What changes, regarding their professional identity, and what are they experiencing? How do these changes affect their perceptions of social work practice and their interventions with service users? And, how do stakeholders perceive their contribution to social care services?

The timing of the study was appropriate, given the steady flow of migrant social workers moving into Canada (Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2009; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010) and the growing interest in development of policies and frameworks to reduce migration barriers and promote cross-border professional relocation (Internal Trade Secretariat, 2009).

### Research Design

Grounded theory was selected as the research methodology because it is a widely utilized systematic and inductive approach to "building theoretical understanding of complex social processes" (Whiteside, Mills, & McCalman, 2012, p. 504), such as professional migration and adaptation. Specifically, the objective of grounded theory research is to develop "middle-range theories" that are "'grounded' in participants' experiences" (Whiteside et al., 2012, p. 505). As research on the professional adaptation of internationally educated social workers was limited at the time that the study was first proposed, the selection of grounded theory methodology to investigate the professional adaptation experiences of migrant social workers in Canada was justified (Dey, 1999).

**Objectives.** The study had three objectives: (1) to examine how social work experience and education in one country affects perspectives on social work practice in Canada; (2) to develop knowledge about social workers' experiences and processes of professional adaptation to their new social work practice contexts; and (3) to understand the specific challenges and benefits perceived by stakeholders such as service users, employers and policy makers with regard to the integration of migrant social workers and the perception of their impact on the

social care context and service delivery. The findings related to each of these objectives are presented elsewhere in the literature (Brown, Pullen-Sansfaçon, Ethier, & Fulton, 2015; Fulton et al., 2016).

**Sensitizing Concepts.** Grounded theory methodology generally opposes reliance on prior knowledge, extant theory, or substantial initial literature review (McGhee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007), instead preferring to consider sensitizing concepts that may be more broadly suggestive of perspectives and directions along which to base lines of inquiry (Van den Hoonaard, 1997). Consistent with this approach three sensitizing concepts guided the study: (1) professional identity; (2) symbolic interaction; and (3) professional acculturation (for a fuller discussion, please see Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012a). Together, these sensitizing concepts provided a starting point for developing a semi-structured interview guide to inform data collection (Bowen, 2006).

**Study Site Selection.** Using more than one study site in grounded theory is recognized as being a productive method of discovering varied social realities (Stebbins, 2006). The three sites for the project (the provinces of Alberta, Quebec and Nova Scotia) provided a variety of geographical locations and regional socio-political and linguistic contexts across Canada, with each location presenting research participants with different post-migration settlement realities.

**Phases.** The research was actualized through four iterative and integrative phases of data collection and data analysis (McGhee et al., 2007). Phases one through three involved three successive rounds of semi-structured interviews with internationally educated social workers that migrated to Canada ( $n = 66$ ) (Fulton et al., 2016). These first three phases of data collection allowed for refinement of interview questions and concurrent data analysis, as well as a prolonged period of theoretical sampling and building of initial theoretical premises (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliott, & Nicol, 2009). Phase four entailed hosting two multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange where the findings were presented and validated (Fulton et al., 2016). Together, these four phases of data collection and data analysis formed the complete research process leading to mid-range theory generation (Whiteside et al., 2012). This article focuses on discussion of the team processes employed in phases one through three of the project in order to focus in on the multi-site and bilingual teamwork aspects of the project.

**Sampling.** The sample for the first three phases of the study included 66 participants, from 22 countries (Fulton et al., 2016). The sample was comprised of social workers that had completed at least an undergraduate degree in social work outside of Canada and had subsequently settled in Canada within the last ten years. Participants were recruited at each site via advertisement in the relevant provincial social work profession regulators' newsletters and through snowball sampling.

## **Findings**

As our team experienced, many challenges can emerge when working on a team-based, multi-site, bilingual grounded theory research project. While some of challenges inherent to such a project have been identified previously (Kinzie et al., 2007), this manuscript contributes to addressing a gap in the literature regarding bilingual qualitative team-based research practices (Kinzie et al., 2007; Mauthner & Doucet, 2008) and offers specific insights into how our team negotiated our way through specific challenges. Several strategies facilitated the team's ability to work together collaboratively and efficiently within a positive work climate

Below, are some of the strategies we have used to successfully complete our grounded theory project.

### **Multi-Site Team-Based Research Strategies**

The team overcame numerous challenges to work together successfully across a variety of contexts and systems, including (a) provincial contexts; (b) languages; (c) university systems; (d) virtual spaces; and (e) epistemological perspectives. Working across diverse contextual realities meant that the team members had to attend to the fact that they were based in diverse “contexts of knowing” which required being intentionally reflexive about how we were engaging in multi-site bilingual research. This shaped the team’s, “groups of labour,” “micropolitics” and processes of “inter-subjective construction of knowledge” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008, pp. 980-981). A unique model for research team functioning emerged as the team developed strategies to address emergent challenges. This model, including a discussion of the team’s structure and strategies for working together effectively, is presented below.

**Team Structure.** The co-researchers made up the core research team that provided management and oversight of the project as a whole. The principal investigator served as the leader of the core team and also managed one of the provincial sites (Quebec). Each of the co-researchers acted as a “site leader” within their province and supervised the work of their Ras. This way each co-researcher managed his or her own site-based research team and process, including hiring and paying Ras, engaging in institutional ethics board reviews and ensuring smooth participant recruitment, data collection and transcription of the audio-recorded interviews for analysis. The work also required co-researcher collaboration including the development and revision of the interview guide, theoretical coding, knowledge mobilization and dissemination of the findings.

**Leadership.** Leadership is key to facilitating effective research team functioning (Fernald & Duclos, 2005), especially when working in a team using grounded theory methodology, where the ability of the team members to work together well can potentially enhance the research outcome (Wiener, 2007). A crucial element to the successful implementation of the team-based research model described here was strong leadership from the principal investigator. While typologies of leadership are numerous, the PI adopted a style that attempted to strike a balance between affective leadership and task leadership, providing the research team members with space to socialize and get to know each other on a personal level at the same time keeping the group on task to ensure that the work was completed efficiently.

**Teamwork.** The core team met virtually, using no-cost web-conferencing software (Skype or Google Hangouts), on a monthly basis, or more frequently when emergent issues arose. Ras would sometimes be asked to join in the core team meetings to provide input into decisions and processes. Team supervision meetings focused on supporting the work of the Ras were also held monthly by web-conferencing. These meetings and discussions significantly fostered “cross-fertilization of ideas” (Conlon et al., 2015, p. 52) and allowed the team to develop close working relationships, despite geographic distance.

In order to attend to both the socio-affective and the task dimensions of the group (Toseland & Rivas, 2005), yearly face-to-face meetings of the entire research team were held. The yearly team meetings were usually held in conjunction with an annual national social work conference where the entire research team would assemble for two days of collaborative work

on the study while also capitalizing on the opportunity to disseminate emerging research findings at a conference.

Drawing parallels with the social work group work literature, research teams may experience numerous social dynamics that may vary depending on the size of the group and the context in which the research happens (Kinzie et al., 2007; MacQueen & Guest, 2008). The team borrowed from the concept of *team-group* (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Ward, 2014) whereby the focus of the teamwork was not solely based on accomplishing a task but also on bringing forward the underlying values and processes embedded in the discourses of the team's work (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Ward, 2014). Hence, following this model of group work, the PI ensured that the team was not only focused on the tasks to be achieved, but also that the process was guided by social work group work concepts, skills and dynamics, such as having specific roles within the group, being informed by knowledge of the stages of group development, and engaging conflict resolution skills to facilitate meetings and provide overall direction to the project.

Selection, orientation and integration of team members, particularly Ras, was determined to be a critical factor in team functioning. Ras were recruited based on demonstrated interest in the topic under study and level of qualitative research skill. To recruit Ras, the researchers posted advertisements within our departments or contacted students that we knew had some prior research project experience and discussed the project and Ra tasks with them, as well as the possible gains that working for the project would provide them in their academic careers (i.e., research training, publications, etc.).

Group size is an important consideration in team-based research because it is a factor that is known to have an effect on the experiences of team members and the team leader (Lindsay & Orton, 2008). As such, a factor that facilitated effective teamwork in our experience was "rightsizing" the team. According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, Tucker, and Icenogle (2014), teams should not be "too large" and should include members with various knowledge bases and skillsets to draw on for the overall benefit of the team's work. Closed groups of five to seven members are considered to be the most effective size for project work, providing a balance between cohesiveness and efficacy (Steinberg, 2014). A group consisting of seven team members is considered optimal for developing group cohesion (Olmstead, 2002), an important aspect of the concept of *team-group* (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Ward, 2014). Based on this knowledge, we believe that the size of the team (one co-researcher and one or two Ras at each of the three sites, totalling seven team members) was appropriate and effectively ensured smooth communications among sites and team members.

Ensuring adequate training of team members and enhancing their expertise and experience in research has also been identified as an important foundation for establishing positive team dynamics and facilitating successful teamwork on research projects (Mack et al., 2008). Once hired, Ras received mentorship and instruction on research ethics and protocols, semi-structured interviewing, grounded theory methodology, coding data using NVivo 9 software and knowledge mobilization. Ras were encouraged to meet together independently of the core team in order to build rapport and determine the co-working arrangements that worked best for their schedules.

### **Working across Provincial Contexts**

Canada is organized into ten provinces and three territories that are spread over a total area (land and freshwater) of 9,984,670 square kilometers (3,855, 102 square miles) (Natural Resources Canada, 2005). Federal and provincial division of powers and responsibilities were laid out in the 1867 *Constitution Act*, also referred to as *The British North America Act, 1867* (Parliament Canada, 2017). Under the *Act*, each of the provinces is responsible for policy

development and service delivery related to education, health and social care, and the regulation of the professionals that provide services within these domains, including social work (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012a; Pullen-Sansfaçon, Spolander, & Engelbrecht, 2012b). Hence, collecting data in different provincial policy, service delivery and regulatory contexts added variation and diversity to the dataset, allowing comparative analyses to occur.

In order to work across diverse provincial contexts, the co-researchers located in the three provinces worked as a team, together with their Ras, to understand the local contexts related to each research site. To gain this understanding, the team set aside time during their web-based and in-person meetings to discuss contextual dimensions of the research. Setting aside this time for discussion resulted in the creation of mutual understandings among team members regarding specific provincial contexts. At the same time, the research team as a whole would review and discuss policies and practices related to migration that had Canada-wide relevance. Engagement as a team working across three diverse research sites allowed the team members to obtain data specific to different geographic regions and therefore to understand specificities of different contexts to assist in theory development using a nuanced pan-Canadian lens (Fulton et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, the daily process of working as a team across academic institutions, great geographical distance and in different time zones, as well as across languages, were intersecting challenges that the team had to overcome.

### **Working across Languages**

In Canada, a variety of languages are spoken, two of which are legislated as being “official”: French and English, making Canada officially a bilingual country (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2016). Most provinces consist of an English-speaking (Anglophone) majority and a French-speaking (Francophone) minority, the size of which varies considerably by province. Quebec is the only province with a Francophone majority, with the rest of the provinces having an Anglophone majority (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2015). Our research team worked bilingually and collected data in both official languages.

Each team member had at least a functional level of bilingual language proficiency, but the team quickly adopted English as our language of communication. Working bilingually meant that the team needed to develop strategies for completing participant recruitment and obtaining consent, as well as production of tools for data collection and data analysis, and receiving institutional ethics approval, in both languages. The team proceeded with awareness that participants would primarily speak the dominant language of the province they chose to settle in; however, the team was also prepared to recruit and interview participants in the minority official language within their province, should they request that accommodation. The team’s goal was to honour the language choice of participants and ensure their language preference was accommodated in order to make the interview as comfortable as possible for the participant.

As tasks were divided among team members (e.g., one team member would agree to develop an interview guide while another would author the recruitment letter), each team member would develop the material in their preferred language and then share it with another team member for translation. Having a linguistically diverse research team conducting the bilingual study was an asset because we were able to avoid subcontracting translation of documents to a professional translator. While translating the materials ourselves was often time-consuming, we felt it created opportunities for mutual learning and dialogue that deepened the teamwork experience and relationships among team members.

Wong and Poon (2010) emphasize that it is a “misconception” to believe that “any bilingual person can be a good translator” (p. 152). From a postcolonial perspective, attention to the power dynamics involved in translation is regarded as a pathway to culturally competent research as language and acts of translation have historically been sites of domination, subordination and colonization (Casado, Negi, & Hong, 2012). Without attending to the power dynamics associated with translation, there is a risk that cultural and linguistic hegemony will be perpetuated. Therefore, in order to engage in culturally competent and linguistically sensitive research practices, the significance of language translation in knowledge production should not be underestimated (Casado et al., 2012; Jones & Boyle, 2011; Wong & Poon 2010). In our case, having various team members serve as translators ensured not only technically accurate translation but also coherent interpretation of culturally- and professionally- specific meanings (Wong & Poon, 2010). Through our thorough and thoughtful translation process we were able to ensure that translated wordings reflected participants’ voices.

The bilingualism of the team also permitted us to analyze and interpret the words of the participants in the language in which they were spoken. Accordingly, we did not translate the full interview transcripts. However, the coding process was completed in English because the majority of the interviews were completed in English and the team decided that having a unilingual codebook was important for inter-coder consistency and coherence. During the team meetings, the developing codebook was extensively discussed and reviewed to ensure consensus on meanings and definitions of the codes. This strategy ensured that the patterns that emerged from the data in the latter stages of coding were based on codes in one language rather than two which in turn helped us to engage in categorization, conceptualization and abstraction by ensuring that important meanings were not “lost in translation.”

As grounded theory methodology requires that emergent codes and categories be grounded in the data, attending to the linguistic nuances and interpretations while analyzing the data bilingually was done with a great deal of care. Accordingly, a substantial amount of time and resources were dedicated for this purpose.

According to Timonen, Foley, and Conlon (2018), data analysis in grounded theory develops “from a close reading of the data” across multiple rounds of analysis (p. 7). Given the varying levels of proficiency in English and French of each person completing the analysis, team members worked together to interpret the data by sharing their knowledge and understandings in deciphering meaning from the interview transcripts. The goal was to ensure accurate and rich reading of the data. Google Translate and various online dictionaries were occasionally used as aids to support this work and could be called upon for clarification when differences in understandings arose. Memoing was employed as a tool to document key decisions made around language as these decisions were viewed as an important factor in how the coding process evolved and the codes were formulated (Timonen et al., 2018). For the Francophone team members, working primarily in English added an extra layer of complexity to the work because not only were they completing data analysis in a language other than their first language, but they also had to develop “a feel for the data” in both languages (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 7).

A key lesson learned around working bilingually in the manner described above is that close readings of data in more than one language and creating a unilingual codebook from a bilingual dataset is a tedious, time-consuming and complex task, especially for researchers working in a language other than their first language. Nonetheless, engaging in this process with multiple coders was found to enrich the reading of the data by emphasizing the importance of careful interpretation and offering a unique linguistically-based lens from which to interrogate the data.

## Working across University Systems

Managing ethics requirements was another challenge faced by the team. Working across three sites and three universities meant that ethical clearance needed to be obtained by each co-researcher, for each site, before the research could begin. Ensuring consistency of tools and data collection procedures across the three sites was a priority for the team.

Each team member had direct access to research materials using a secure password-protected cloud-based document storage and access system, Dropbox (<https://www.dropbox.com/register>). Among the research materials shared among team members were our memos (Charmaz, 2014). Following each interview, the interviewer wrote memos containing detailed contextual information and the interviewer's reflections on the interview. Memos were typed using Microsoft Word software and placed in the cloud (Dropbox), so that they were accessible to each of the team members. The memos served to keep all of the team members apprised of emerging observations, interpretations, questions, analyses and narratives. This was a beneficial practice because it facilitated information sharing among the geographically dispersed team members helping to ensure that a high standard of transparency and consistency was achieved across research sites (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The same tools of data collection, namely the interview guide, the participant information sheet and the consent form, were used at each of the three sites, and shared through the Dropbox. The main challenge in using consistent tools in multiple sites was obtaining approvals on all research tools, documents and processes by the three university research ethics boards simultaneously. While the three universities draw their ethical standards from the same ethics requirements (*Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2014), interpretation and application of the requirements can vary locally. Ensuring that the documents, tools and procedures met the requirement of each of the three universities ethics review boards while confirming that any revisions required were subsequently approved and implemented across the three sites required a remarkable amount of coordination and attention to detail. In particular, during the initial stages of the project, many exchanges with the core researchers, university ethics officers, and Ras took place in order to adjust the research tools according to various institutional requirements. On several occasions, changes to a document required by one university necessitated submitting an amendment to the other institutions. This process was time-consuming and complicated. The team quickly learned that obtaining ethical clearance at one university was not necessarily a guarantee that the other institutions would grant it as well. Furthermore, two institutional ethics review boards requested an oversight of the interview guide at each phase, whereas another approved the guide at the outset and did not request to review minor changes provided the general line of questioning remained unchanged. Clear, consistent and frequent communication among the team members and strong leadership from the principal investigator were essential to successfully ensure consistent ethics approvals and standardization of research tools throughout the project.

## Working across Virtual Spaces

When conducting team-based qualitative research, "it is important to anticipate potential problems from differing skills and styles, and how information and files are managed" (Fernald & Duclos, 2005, p. 360). Below we describe how our team worked across these problems within virtual spaces over multiple rounds and levels of data analysis (coding).

**Initial Coding.** The initial coding was conducted individually at each site using NVivo 9 software to allow for the emergence of nuanced local themes and variations. Subsequently,

the initial coding was compared among sites and the initial coding was revised, modified, sorted, sifted and sharpened through multiple iterations of back and forth analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This process followed a recommendation from Spencer, Pryce, and Walsh (2014) who suggested that in grounded theory research, initial data analysis should be completed by teams of three to five coders, whereby the data is coded independently before coming together to discuss ideas among the larger group until consensus is reached. The merging of the three NVivo 9 files from each site resulted in a total of 3000 codes within the single merged file. The generation of a large number of codes is an acknowledged occurrence in grounded theory studies (Puddephatt, 2006) and the corresponding “risk of inundation” (Holton, 2010) emerged within our project at the juncture of the site-based NVivo file merger. The merging of the files, in addition to moving from open to axial coding and working as a team across three sites was a challenging aspect within the study, yet also enriched the team-based process and the outcomes.

**Axial Coding.** During axial coding, understandings, interpretations and meanings of emerging codes and categories were discussed during online and face-to-face meetings through ongoing exchanges among team members. Immediately following the document merger, we found that even if they had similar meanings, many of the existing codes did not merge easily because of different spellings used, variances in codes and/or local discrepancies developed at the site of analysis during the initial coding phase. To manage this challenge, we decided that each co-researcher would be designated a time period (approximately one week) during which they could “cleanse” the merged file before the team-based axial coding process began.

As the challenges that followed the document merger were addressed and the team-based axial coding process proceeded, the team members found that virtually “centralizing” the axial coding process within a single “master” NVivo 9 file and having two Ras designated as the people appointed to update the NVivo 9 file ensured clarity of roles and consistency in the team-based data analysis process. The “master” NVivo 9 file was anonymized and then placed in the Dropbox for secure storage so that all team members could access it. A copy of the file was also saved in a separate location in case the file corrupted or Dropbox became unavailable for any reason.

The approach to team-based axial coding employed by our team mirrors Conlon et al.’s (2015) description of a “bridging process” that facilitates “movement of a researcher between interaction with participant, data and interpretation” (p. 52). The trust that had been established among team members through working together up to this point was central to working collaboratively during the team-based axial coding process (Wiener, 2007). Specifically, the team members trusted one another to “transcend the descriptive detail” to interpret and conceptualize the data (Holton, 2010). Trust in the team was indeed well developed at this point, given the team had been working together closely for a period of two years. The amount of time invested and quality of interaction among team members over the preceding two-year period led to the development of strong and cohesive social dynamics in the group.

The team-based axial coding process was time-intensive and took approximately six months to complete. Being at a distance from each other meant that the team members had to think about ways of working together and sharing files effectively at a low-cost in “real time.” The technical knowledge and creativity of the Ras brought them to their own way of working through the coding process, primarily using a combination of Skype video-chat and Join.Me (<https://www.join.me/>), a web-based screen sharing application. They quickly developed an efficient way of working together online with one of them being responsible for updating the “master” NVivo 9 file in “real-time” while the video discussions took place. This part of the axial coding process was the most time-consuming, with two or three Ras from different sites working on completion of the process three days per week. While there was considerable cost

associated with employing the Ras to complete this phase of the axial coding, it resulted in a rich analysis. The financial implications of intensive team-based grounded theory research have been addressed elsewhere in the literature (Andrew et al., as cited in Barry et al., 1999). In the case of this project, we acknowledge that fully embedding a team-group concept into our teamwork process was costlier than working individually (Pullen-Sansfaçon, & Ward, 2014). Having two or three Ras working together on the second part of the axial coding meant that the budget for RA salaries and benefits had to be double and sometimes triple what could have been paid to a single RA. However, without this collaborative approach the analysis would have lacked its present depth and level of insight. Each of the Ras was familiar with the contextual nuances and realities at their site (province) and this knowledge contributed greatly to the final analysis.

During this labour intensive part of the project, the concept of team-group was particularly important, as there was danger of getting discouraged by the amount of work involved. On many occasions, Ras looked to the core researchers for encouragement and validation. Open dialogue about the morale and emotional aspects of the work was facilitated through monthly team supervision meetings, as well as on an ad-hoc basis. The principal investigator reminded each member of the research team that their voice and contribution was valued and that they had an equal place on the team, whether they were co-researchers or Ras. Given the Ras' deep engagement with the data during the axial coding process, co-researchers were united in a decision to trust in the analytic process being undertaken by the Ras with their guidance and to assure the Ras that they "know the data" and encourage them to "trust the process." Many of the Ras became deeply engaged with the project and their work with the team. Three of the Ras undertook their own research degrees (two masters degrees and one doctoral degree) making use of the opportunity to complete secondary analyses of the dataset. As a result, these Ras grew academically and professionally from their involvement with the study. In sum, despite some challenges, undertaking axial coding as a team within virtual spaces was an advantage to our study as it allowed us to integrate multiple perspectives and to develop nuanced and complex analyses. For the Ras, the experience facilitated opportunities for academic and professional growth within a supportive learning context.

**Theoretical Coding.** Once the axial coding was completed, selective coding began. This step was primarily completed by two co-researchers using the NVivo 9 master file, in consultation with other team members on an as-required basis. Through this process theoretical propositions grounded in the data emerged. At this stage, the two co-researchers who took the lead on completing the theoretical coding realized that they needed to engage in deeper exploration of their divergent epistemological postures toward grounded theory research.

**Working across Epistemological Perspectives.** Many variations of grounded theory have been developed, ranging from the original classic Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967), to Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory. During the development of the study proposal by the principal investigator, the proposed methodology for the study had been classic Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, at the point of initial coding, divergent perspectives, levels of methodological knowledge and takes on grounded theory methods among team members became evident.

Among the lead co-researchers, one had limited experience utilizing grounded theory methods, another identified as a classic Grounded Theorist, and a third was primarily a constructivist grounded theorist. The realization that there were varied perspectives on grounded theory among the co-researchers led to extensive dialogue about the application of grounded theory methods in the context of the study's design. This was an important discussion because in grounded theory, epistemology and methodology are viewed as being closely linked

(Braganza, Akesson, & Rothwell, 2017). This linkage has led to the emergence of various “strands” of grounded theory methods that may be viewed as contradictory with one another (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 2).

The central concerns were identified as having to do with data interpretation, constant comparison and theoretical saturation. However, from a pragmatic perspective, this divide was not an impediment to successful project completion. Through respectful dialogue, the team members were able to proceed with the data analysis process by adopting a “general and integrative” approach focused on “doing” grounded theory (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 2). Specifically, by focusing on the research procedures and their common underlying principles, such as engaging deeply with the data and construction of theory, the project was able to move forward. In the end, through the strength of the team’s commitment to work through their differences in a pragmatic manner, the epistemological divide that became apparent was addressed. The team’s experience with epistemological and methodological divides links to larger questions within grounded theory research identified by Braganza et al. (2017), including “whether” and “how” it is even possible to “fully comply with methodologies, as designed, and whether methodological purity (as opposed to methodological pluralism) is even the ideal to strive for” as well as “who has the power to decide whether a research project should have methodological purity” (p. 8)?

In managing the challenge of addressing the epistemological divide once it surfaced, the team members focused on the strength of the established interpersonal dynamics including a solid foundation of trust and a successful history of working together over time. This focus in turn begat a strong commitment to learn from one another and continue to make forward progress on the work that was underway. Ultimately, the analytic process mainly followed constructivist grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) and a high level of abstraction was achieved (Holton, 2010). Two core categories capturing the non-linear process of professional adaptation of migrant social workers in Canada emerged from the data.

The team’s experience of working across an epistemological and methodological divide echoes Bryant’s (2014) conceptualization of working through different perspectives as he explains that the debates about the various epistemological bases for grounded theory do not substantially affect the practical implementation of specific research projects. Bryant (2014) explains that:

When it comes to carrying out the research itself, one’s epistemological stance is often only of passing interest. The most important feature of the research is its outcome, and it seems to make little or no difference whether the researcher conducts the research from a positivist / objectivist view point or an interpretivist / constructivist one. (p. 125)

Furthermore, the different grounded theory methods share close theoretical origins (Aldiabat & LeNavenec, 2011) and draw from the same data collection and analysis tools (Barnett, 2012; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

## **Discussion**

As we have reviewed in this article, many challenges emerged during the course of the team-based, multi-site, bilingual, grounded theory research project described here. Working across languages, virtual spaces, diverse contexts and differing epistemological and methodological perspectives the team was charged with the responsibility to come up with effective, efficient, methodologically sound and creative ways of working together. Working across diverse contexts and perspectives provided the team with important lessons on

“reflexive engagement” regarding the conceptualization, planning and execution of multi-site team-based research related to philosophy, praxis and ethics (Leavy, 2014). In our team’s experience, the process of working across diverse perspectives was overcome by adopting an open and collaborative consensus-based approach to decision-making and teamwork throughout the project. Indeed, the numerous conversations, reflections and memos written on the possible issues arising from such divergent foundations may well have resulted in a richer overall outcome. The strategies engaged in facilitating effective teamwork that fall under the team-group concept are discussed further below.

### **Strategies for Effective Teamwork**

Johnson et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of team processes that are “equitable” and “fair” in order to ensure successful team functioning as these elements contribute to a shared “sense of justice” that facilitates “the continual reconstruction of newer and better knowledge” among team members (p. 562). Working effectively as a team is also important for enhancing the robustness of the research outcomes, specifically, in arriving at a “final product” that is reflective of an integration of “multiple perspectives” and is therefore also less biased than an analysis completed from the perspective of a single researcher working in isolation (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 90). To help ensure effective teamwork throughout the team-based research project, the principal investigator proposed adherence to Johnson and Johnson’s (2004), five fundamental principles of successful groups: positive interdependence; face-to-face interaction; individual and group accountability; small group skills; and group processing (as cited in Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009). The process was unique because it was adapted to be consistent with the concept of team-group and to attend carefully to the groups dynamics that emerge when facilitating group process from a social work lens. Each of these principles, and the specific contributions from the knowledgebase of practicing social work with groups is discussed in greater detail below.

The concept of positive interdependence denotes that group members are recognized for their unique contributions to the team (Frey et al., 2009). This concept was fully integrated throughout the project by drawing on the strengths of each team member at every step. Members were encouraged to work according to their level of competence while also drawing support from other team members. To be able to identify and focus on each members’ strength is a hallmark of social work mutual aid groups (Steinberg 2014). Realizing “rewards” based on the work of the team also contributed to facilitating members’ interdependence (Frey et al., 2009). For example, the project funded RA travel to attend conferences and involved them in academic publishing.

Attention to ensuring that the team members had regular opportunities for face-to-face interaction was also integrated into the overall project design, beginning at the initial research design and grant writing stage, by holding regular meetings online through web-based video-chat and also budgeting for the time and money involved in holding annual face-to-face team meetings. This provided space to experience in depth discussion, challenge each other’s ideas and develop cohesion within the group (Steinberg 2014) at the same time providing opportunities for task orientated goals such as to offering supervision and providing direction to the Ras, completing team-based data analysis and discussing various other emerging strategies, insights, ideas and interpretations as the project progressed (Frey et al., 2009).

Pullen-Sansfaçon and Ward (2014) explain that skillful facilitation of teamwork is necessary for successful team functioning. The frequent web-based research team meetings ensured group and individual accountability regarding responsibilities and timelines (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). The research team drew upon small group skills such as ensuring rich communication among team members, efficiently organizing group tasks and establishing

parameters and ground rules to work within the team-group (Turcotte & Lindsay, 2008). Using these skills facilitated the establishment of mutual support among team members and fostered group cohesion. The importance of attending to group processes and engaging group work skills during facilitation of team-based research is reflected in the following statement from Pullen-Sansfaçon and Ward (2014):

There is a propensity to frame practice in higher-level strategic, organisational and structural terms and lose sight of the team as a group, such as how different roles may affect the way the team works; how latent conflicts may block the process of working together; or how poor facilitation skills may contribute to the failing of the team altogether. (p. 1292)

Effective group processing was achieved through the leadership of the principal investigator, who maintained a dual focus on task and maintenance functions (the achievement of the research objectives) as well as promoting a positive group dynamic (Phillips, 2001) conducive to good group work, anchored in social group work skills and knowledge. Ras were encouraged to engage in group processing independently from the co-leads through their collaborative work together during the axial coding process. Ras completed much of the axial coding without direct daily supervision and they were empowered to confer with each other on the analytic process and debrief about emerging challenges within the work. The richness of the data collected was deepened by conducting the study at multiple sites and by recruiting participants with a variety of personal and professional lived experiences from diverse community and workplace settings. The diversity of the study sites and participant sample allowed for maximum variation and rich comparative analysis, which are essential to quality grounded theory research (Tuckett, 2004).

Our experience demonstrates that team-based, multi-site, bilingual grounded theory research can be completed effectively across contexts, systems and epistemologies, and within virtual spaces. While undertaking such a complex grounded theory project may appear daunting, challenges can be addressed by attending carefully to team functioning and group processes in the ways described above, which can ultimately enrich the data collection and data analysis processes, resulting in robust outcomes.

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The authors are grateful to the migrant social workers who participated in the study. They also wish to thank those who helped with the recruitment of participants, including the ACSW, NSASW, and the OTSTCFQ. The research presented in this article was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada / Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines (SSHRC/CRSH Grant number 435-2012-0391).

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### Article Citation

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A., Fulton, A. E., Brown, M., Graham, J. R., & Ethier, S. (2018). Multi-site bilingual team-based rounded theory research: A retrospective methodological review. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(11), 2817-2834. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss11/12>

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