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Applying Gadamer's "Prejudices" to a Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

Interpretation and analysis of qualitative data inevitably involves a collision with one's own lived experience. This paper reflects on a postgraduate research project that employed the methodology of grounded theory to determine themes around the meaning that individuals in a school community give to the term spirituality. Reflecting on the process has highlighted ways in which unexamined personal assumptions were at play as the researcher conducted analysis, influencing the interpretation of data. It is argued here that in researching the concept of spirituality, which is both nebulous and highly subjective, becoming aware of one's own assumptions throughout the process is integral to an interpretation that illuminates the data with greater clarity. I argue here that engaging with Gadamer's understanding of "prejudices" can assist researchers in considering their own perspective, regardless of the methodology employed, as well as providing an analytic method of engaging with these assumptions. The method for this engagement is subsequently provided.

Keywords

Gadamer, Prejudices, Grounded Theory, Spirituality, Interpretation

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Applying Gadamer's "Prejudices" to a Grounded Theory Study

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Interpretation and analysis of qualitative data inevitably involves a collision with one's own lived experience. This paper reflects on a postgraduate research project that employed the methodology of grounded theory to determine themes around the meaning that individuals in a school community give to the term spirituality. Reflecting on the process has highlighted ways in which unexamined personal assumptions were at play as the researcher conducted analysis, influencing the interpretation of data. It is argued here that in researching the concept of spirituality, which is both nebulous and highly subjective, becoming aware of one's own assumptions throughout the process is integral to an interpretation that illuminates the data with greater clarity. I argue here that engaging with Gadamer's understanding of "prejudices" can assist researchers in considering their own perspective, regardless of the methodology employed, as well as providing an analytic method of engaging with these assumptions. The method for this engagement is subsequently provided. Keywords: Gadamer, Prejudices, Grounded Theory, Spirituality, Interpretation

Introduction

The interest in children's spirituality and where it is situated in the educational context has seen a number of qualitative studies emerge which tend to acknowledge three common areas: the indefinable nature of the phenomenon, the "universality" of spirituality and, paradoxically, the idiosyncratic nature of contemporary spirituality. Although spirituality has a strong association with religion, contemporary descriptions suggest that spirituality is a phenomenon that is experienced both within, and outside of, organised religion (de Souza, 2012; Erricker, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Perkins, 2009; Scott, 2009; Sunley, 2009). While etymological claims are made to the Christian source of the word itself (Schneiders, 1986; Sheldrake, 2014), spirituality has existed as a central aspect of indigenous cultures that predate Christianity and other theistic traditions (Grieves, 2009; Porocho et al., 2009).

Due to the ineffable nature of the phenomenon, debates continue as to how, and if, spirituality can be defined, particularly in relation to the educational context (Watson, 2017).

Spirituality has been described as a search for meaning and connectedness (Hyde, 2008; de Souza, 2006; Tacey, 2009), a journey towards greater inner awareness (de Souza, 2012) and a relational search for understanding and experience of self and other (de Souza 2012; Hay & Nye, 2006). In their seminal work regarding the spirituality of children, Hay and Nye (2006) developed the term "relational consciousness" to describe how children's spirituality involved a particular type of consciousness nestled *within* a relational context that incorporates self, others, the environment and, for some individuals, a transcendental other. De Souza (2012) writes of a transcendental quest for "Ultimate unity," which conceptualises the compelling human search to return to a primordial experience of unity. Hyde refers to spirituality as a "natural human predisposition" (2008, p. 43) that drives humanity to search for meaning and purpose in life, and connectedness with others. Explorations of the spiritual dimension also refer to the notion of searching (Lipscomb & Gersch, 2012; Perkins, 2009); including an

existential search for meaning (Kimball, Mannes, & Hackel, 2009; Sunley 2009; Williams, 2009), or a sense that there is something more to life (Perkins, 2009). Implicit in the “something more” is the idea that spirituality can involve a yearning for something greater in one’s life (Palmer, 1997); an internal desire for connectedness to something extending beyond the self. Although it seems that the heart of spirituality for most authors contains an emphasis on one’s inner life and one’s relationships, the abstract and complex nature of the term is recognised throughout the literature.

Apparent in many definitions or descriptions of spirituality, are embedded ontological perspectives. In such perspectives, spirituality is regarded as a part of the nature of our being. Indeed, for some, it is the foundational essence of our being. For example, authors such as de Souza (2012) understand spirituality to be, “an innate human trait that pertains to the relational dimension of being.” (p. 291) Similarly, Hyde considers spirituality to be an “essential human trait” (2008, p. 43), contextualizing spirituality as a primordial state and expression of being. This ontological perspective appears in much of the writing in the field (de Souza, 2012; Eade, 2009; Harris, 2007; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Palmer, 1997) and such claims of spirituality are significant. If there is an unqualified acceptance of this understanding then it is essentially being posited that spirituality is not simply an elusive term that attempts to capture mysterious aspects of the human experience, but rather that spirituality is some sort of a primordial essence. Due to this consideration of spirituality as an ontological reality it seems that spirituality in the context of education “begins with the premise that everyone has a spiritual nature that can be developed” (Watson, 2000, p. 97).

This acceptance of spirituality as an ontological phenomenon has alerted me to a tendency in the literature to do two things: one is to offer broad definitions or descriptions that intend to be inclusive of all possible human experience, which seems necessary if references are to be made to a phenomenon that is primordial, innate or essential to human experience. Two, a more limited or refined perspective can be found implicit in the text, often following the broad and all-inclusive definition. There is a shift therefore, in the writing around spirituality that moves from broad and inclusive, to idiosyncratic and personal. The space between all-encompassing definitions and individual personal truths, of both the author and the reader, is what I will explore here.

Using an example from my own interaction with the literature, I refer to King’s (2013) discussion of the spiritual “potential” in children to illustrate this further. In her discussion, King (2013) offers the following description, “*Spiritualities* quite simply *connote those ideas, practices and commitments that nurture, sustain and shape the fabric of human lives*, whether that of individuals or communities” (p. 4, italics original). This description certainly follows the broad framing of spirituality that I have just described and is universally relatable. Further on she explains her use of the word “potential” adding,

Our language has to capture the dynamic and multiple developmental and experimental aspects of the spiritual, its immense promise, its mysterious indefinable, even ultimately inexplicable quality, its ability to grow, embrace and suffuse all experiences of human life. It is this dynamic quality of the spiritual as well as its hidden nature, embedded in a larger context of life’s ongoing flow, which is captured more adequately by the word “potential,” as is spirituality’s capacity to expand and flourish. (p. 6)

The purpose of King’s paper is to present an argument for awakening spirituality. She argues that there is potential hidden within children which needs to be activated in some way; recognised and taught by teachers and parents who can give “the right kind of religious and

spiritual education” (p. 6). Further to this, she explores what the right kind of education might look like.

Earlier in her paper, King gives a brief statement about her own personal context. She mentions that she taught Religious Education some years ago and makes note of her familial experience with children. Reading further, there is confirmation that King’s understanding of spirituality comes from a theistic perspective. In this perspective,

God is always a God of life, a living God who bestows life and sustains it, cares for the whole of life – the life of the earth, the life of nature, and all human life, past, present and future. Christians affirm this belief every time they recite the Nicene Creed with states: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life.” (p. 11)

Therefore, in King’s understanding of spirituality, there exists an omnipotent God who cares for life, as we know it. I am drawn back to her original definition and wonder where her God sits within this definition. Her description is broad and universal, while her “personal truth” is Christian and therefore includes a Christian conception of deity. Therefore, as she explores children’s spirituality the perspective of the paper shifts from broad and inclusive, to a theistic truth embedded in what is personally enriching for her.

Alerted to my own irritation as I read about this “living God” I wonder, who is this living God to me? This caring, giver of life seems to get in touch with a fatherly figure from my childhood, an image that I somewhat now resent. I am loathe to admit that the images that then comes to mind for me when reading King’s description, seem to swing wildly from the old bearded man on the throne in the clouds, to an ineffable grey mist – faceless, nameless, and unknown. These personal reactions about a specific concept within spirituality, i.e., the image of “deity,” expose how my personal history and experiences that I relate to spirituality, will impact immediately on my interpretation of the literature. I may, and indeed did at the time of reading, minimize the importance of a deity quite simply because I do not value or believe in it. Others may assume that references to deities are foregone conclusions because such references exist as inseparable aspects of their own spirituality. With the first and subsequent readings of King’s article, I experienced this barely noticeable irritation and found myself brushing aside her description of a caring God. It was something that I had disavowed in my own life, so therefore, I temporarily cast it aside in my mind.

Prejudices

What was I to do with King’s personal truth, in light of my own? What was I to do with mine in light of King’s? One way of finding a space for personal truths is to draw on Gadamer’s understanding of what he refers to as *prejudices* (2004). Although in its popular usage this term carries with it quite negative connotations, Gadamer uses it to refer to the unexamined assumptions that form part of any understanding, referring to “the conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us,” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 9) calling for a more balanced understanding of the term. In the case of research into spirituality, perspectives may include any number of theoretical, theological or personal assumptions. Sometimes such perspectives go unacknowledged, remaining implicit in the body of the writing rather than purposefully laid bare. What Gadamer offers, is the opportunity to make ones’ prejudices unhidden. The constant task of interpretation according to Gadamer is to become aware of one’s prejudices, in order to more fully illuminate the text itself (Gadamer, 2004).

According to Gadamer and his predecessor, Heidegger, our being *is* interpretation. Heidegger argued that all interpretation springs from the “question of being” (Heidegger, 1962,

p. 24) and that interpretation itself is the primary ontology of humans; every act of being is an act of interpretation. Gadamer's consideration of method outlined in *Truth and Method*, includes his explication of prejudices and how the act of interpretation inevitably involves projecting such prejudices onto the text. This "fore-projection" is not a conscious or deliberate act. Nor is it an intentionally deceptive act. What it puts one in mind of perhaps is a conclusion in the text waiting to be found. To refer back to my reaction to King's caring god of life, I "found" an irritating omnipotent deity, a far cry from the living God she experiences as a part of her theistic understanding.

Although Gadamer implores us to be mindful of fore-projections, he does not suggest that in doing so, we can be rid of any impact that such projections have on our understanding of the text. This is a key distinction between hermeneutic and descriptive phenomenological traditions, whereby descriptive approaches include techniques such as "bracketing" one's prejudices in order to see the text more clearly (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2013). However, fore-projections for Gadamer are not bracketed, instead, they form part of the interpretive process itself. In recognizing that prejudices are central to understanding and interpretation, Gadamer incorporates them into the method of hermeneutic phenomenology, I suggest here, that engaging with prejudices in this way is useful for other qualitative methodologies also.

To engage one's prejudices however, one first has to become consciously aware of them. Though there is much advice on the importance of being aware of your own prejudices, often conceptualized as self-reflexivity in research, there is a paucity of research literature around *how* this self-reflexive awareness occurs at particular moments of interaction with the text or data, or *what* the researcher can do to increase attunement to their own prejudices as part of a self-reflexive process. Taking the time to reflect on interactions with the text, the use of memos and journal writing are all self-reflexive activities but exactly how we go about teasing apart our prejudices from the text itself is unclear, particularly when we experience moments of resonance with the data, or feel that something has struck a chord. Gadamer too, is vague about *how* this occurs but writes instead about what *should* occur and what the outcome should be,

a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (2004, p. 282)

Arriving at the point where the text presents itself in all its otherness, is a slippery task. How exactly does one become aware of one's own prejudices? What are the clues that will lead to the fore-grounding of prejudices? How do we turn "imperceptible habits of thought" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279) that are subconscious and hidden, into perceptible thoughts that conscious and can be employed in the service of interpretation? To consider these questions, I will reflect on my own experience whilst conducting a research project.

Context of the Study

The initial point of interest for my project was that spirituality in education is often referred to as a dimension of the whole child (Noddings, 2005). This led me to wonder how, and if, schools might nurture and develop the spirituality of children. Working within a Catholic school context when I conducted my Master's research, I became increasingly aware

of an assumption when in conversation with my colleagues, that spirituality was implicitly addressed by virtue of the school being religious. Spirituality was equated with Mass, Religious Education and prayer. As I was aware that the literature around spirituality in education recognised it to be broader than what is encapsulated by religion, I chose to interview members of the school community - children and parents - within the school setting, to discover the meaning that they gave to the term.

The aim of the research therefore was to use a qualitative approach to explore thoughts, feelings and experiences associated with spirituality. The two principal questions guiding the research were: *What themes can be identified from the exploration of the spiritual dimension of the individuals within the school community? How might these themes assist schools to more effectively address the spiritual dimension of the individual in the school community?*

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, my aim was to explore and analyse thoughts, feelings and experiences associated with the spiritual dimension of individuals. Charmaz's (2012) grounded theory approach recognises the importance of the researchers placing themselves purposefully into the experience of the process, in order to better comprehend such a highly personal topic. In this sense, the relationship with the participants, the interviews themselves, and the ongoing data analysis, were considered a joint co-creation and a shared experience between the research and the participants (Charmaz, 2012). This was my understanding "going in." I confidently outlined this awareness in my methodology, with practically no understanding of how this would influence my interpretations.

The ethical gravity of researching a topic that is highly personal and ineffable and *then* researching this topic with children, calls for careful attention to our own relationship with spirituality. It is interesting to note at this point, that in briefly reviewing the literature on children's spirituality where some form of grounded theory has been employed, there is inconsistency in the way that theoretical or personal frameworks and perspectives are included. For example, authors such as Hay and Nye (2006), Mata-McMahon (2017) and Raftopoulos and Bates (2011) acknowledge their own personal engagement in the phenomenon thereby giving the reader some sense at the outset of "where they are coming from." This includes reference to how their interest in the phenomenon of spirituality, intersects with their personal and professional lives, such as working as a youth counsellor and having an "active spiritual life" (Raftopoulos & Bates, 2011, p. 157), or maintaining a lifelong fascination with the phenomenon from an "early age" (Mata-McMahon, 2017, p. 170). In their study, Raftopoulos & Bates acknowledge their personal interest in the phenomenon, and then claim to work towards "an objective interpretation of the data" (2011, p. 157) by staying close to the participants direct quotations and considering alternative explanations in the process of analysis. However, this aim of objectivity in analysis seems at odds with the use of grounded theory as Charmaz (2012) has not made claims that her method of grounded theory leads to, or pursues, objectivity. Rather she emphasises a systematic approach to an interpretive method (Charmaz, 2012).

Other researchers adopting grounded theory, do not acknowledge any personal attachment to the phenomenon of spirituality at all (see for example Langford, 2015; Lipscomb & Gersch, 2012; Mountain, 2005). This becomes interesting when we consider a study such as Langford's (2015) where he explores children's use of prayer and carefully outlines a grounded theory coding procedure. This procedure includes the following statement, "Throughout this section, I have placed quotes from the prayers alongside quotes from the Bible that resonated for me" (p. 181). It is exactly this type of resonance that I suggest needs some degree of attention: what did those moments of resonance feel like? What constitutes the experience of resonance with the data? *Why* did these quotes resonate with him? It is odd that such an internally striking moment of significance in relation to the data, remains so detached from any further curiosity about why the resonance occurred in the first place. It is even more curious

however, that an explication of how these striking moments of significance impacted on the analysis, is omitted altogether.

Turning back to my own study, it was conducted at a Catholic primary school in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of University where I was undertaking the degree, and by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne's Research Unit. 7 senior students at the school completed a short questionnaire, comprised of 4 broad questions about spirituality. A more in-depth exploration followed through the use of semi-structured interviews which were conducted with 3 of these senior students and 3 parents from the school community.

Analysis

I applied Charmaz's coding methods to analyse the data. The purpose of employing a grounded theory method is to use the data collected and the subsequent analysis, to generate theory (Charmaz, 2012). The coding process is designed to assist the researcher to stay close to the data, thereby creating and informing theory from the ground up, in this case, from within the school community. This method of analysis was well suited to the school community context as it provided an opportunity for the school to gain insights about the school community, *from* the members of the school community.

Grounded theory analysis requires data to be categorised by initial, focused and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2012). In this study, initial coding refers to the beginning stage of analysis where I coded the interview transcript line by line. What distinguishes grounded theory from other forms of analysis, is the particular focus on meaning and actions in the data and to this end, gerunds were used in the initial coding stage to identify actions of the participants. The use of gerunds helps the researcher to stay close to the participants' perspectives (Charmaz, 2012).

After the initial stage of coding line by line, I entered the focused coding stage of analysis, creating concepts from the initial codes. In this stage, I needed to make decisions about how to categorize the initial codes to make sense of large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2012). This was not a separate phase of coding in relation to the initial codes generated however, and I engaged in a process of moving back and forth between the initial codes and the creation of concepts; the modification and revision of codes continued throughout this stage of analysis. This "back and forth" between stages was aided by the ongoing process of memo writing.

The final phase of theoretical coding occurred as I identified relationships between the categories I had developed in the focused coding phase (Charmaz, 2012). Theoretical coding was a process of drawing the data, previously teased apart in prior stages of analysis, back together into an intelligible whole. This resulted in a story (Charmaz, 2012) about understanding spirituality, which I was subsequently able to feed back to the school community.

Of course, there were limitations to my employment of grounded theory. I stopped short of attempting to generate theory for a number of reasons. I was completing the research as a unit of work in a Master's of Education programme and therefore had to adhere to a timeline of 6 months. This impacted on my ability to see the grounded theory process through to its conclusion, as I was unable to code my data to the point of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2012). There were some aspects of the project therefore, that did not follow the grounded theory methodology to the letter, and I recognise these shortfalls. My intention with the following critical reflection, however, is only to examine the particular aspect of interpretation in my approach that remained outside of my conscious awareness but impacted my analysis as I coded and categorised my data.

Results and Discussion

One of the questions guiding the research was: What themes can be identified from the exploration of the spiritual dimension of individuals within the school community? By employing the use of a grounded theory analysis, themes that were identified through the initial coding stages were *prayer* and *relationship*. What became apparent through the focused coding stages of analysis was that in discussing their sense of spirituality, participants engaged in 4 spontaneous “processes” that occurred during the exploration of the spiritual dimension. The following categories were used to label the 4 processes: *storytelling*, *reflecting*, *feeling*, and *symbolising*. It is my decision to conceptualise one of the categories as *symbolising* that I would like to explore here. The following excerpt is from the memo-writing process:

Symbolising experiences were not as frequently noted as the other processes, but it is arguably a significant process, as it was an aspect of both the questionnaires and the interviews that created strong feelings of connection from the researcher to the participants. It became apparent that when participants described their experiences in symbolic terms, an internal reaction that can easily be described as a sense of connectedness was elicited from within the researcher. This was then noted and recorded in the researcher’s memos. For example, when Child B spoke about forgiving others, she explained it as, “*don’t keep it in your body...just let it go.*” When Parent A used the metaphor of feeling a “*burning inside*” to describe a sense of vocation, it gave rise to rich and vivid imagery, more so than when spirituality was expressed through what could arguably be described as rather banal terms such as, “*living a good life*” or “*being a good person.*”

Here, I followed Charmaz’s method of focused coding, concentrating on what I found to be “most significant” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 46) in this phase of coding. Charmaz does not explicate what she means however, when using the term “significant” to “sort, synthesize, integrate, and organise large amounts of data” (2012, p. 46) in the process of focused coding. As I organised my initial codes and then developed an argument that symbolising was a significant process, I was unaware that this lack of explication around what constitutes “significant” data would give rise to an important methodological question in hindsight, namely: When making decisions about how to code, categorise, synthesize, and interpret data, what lies behind our attention to what we perceive as significant, salient or striking? As stated at the time, I recognised that when the participants were describing their experiences symbolically, I responded with strong feelings of connection. What perhaps should have followed, and what I neglected to do, is question what it was about symbolising specifically that caused this responsiveness within me, thereby leading me to foreground it as a salient category.

So, what were my internal feelings about? The truth of the matter is that while collecting and analysing data, I had been experiencing a renewed sense of creativity in my own life. I can reflect on a number of experiences that increased my own capacity to symbolize thereby increasing my responsiveness to this capacity when I recognised it in others. Therefore, my connection to symbolising, was due to feeling a sense of excitement and wonder at something that had been renewed within myself, sparked by the recognition of it in others.

My (unconscious) expectations of the text in my own case were that conversations around spirituality would give rise to symbolic language and metaphor. These expectations were then, unsurprisingly, confirmed. Rather than acting on this unconscious confirmation bias, Gadamer suggests using these expectations to see the text more clearly. At the time, I could not use them because they were outside of my awareness. So if, in hindsight, I can say

that my results were influenced by my own fore-projections (Gadamer, 2004) onto the data, then I wonder, how could I have used knowledge of prejudices, and awareness of my own, to see the data more clearly?

A Method of Engaging with Prejudices

I suggest that a revision of my own prejudices would have involved three stages. Firstly, it was necessary for me to have some way of apprehending my responsiveness at the time. I wrote memos, but this activity in itself did not succeed in alerting me to my own prejudices. Charmaz (2012) gives a detailed explanation of what memos can look like – from concrete to abstract – but there is a missing detail in terms of homing in on internal moments where something seems to have “struck a chord” before these details find their way into a memo. In Corbin & Strauss’ (2008) method of grounded theory, they refer to a gut feeling – “feeling right” (p. 3) about capturing the essence of the participants’ data. Another use of gut feelings considered here, is how these embodied reactions emerge in the course of the analysis and consider what experiences they are connected to. I suggest that attunement to internal states—embodied reactions, fleeting imagery, memories or feeling states—are the clues that can highlight particular points of engagement with the text.

Following this, it is necessary to record this responsiveness in a memo. Catching ourselves in these moments of engagement aligns well with the instructions for memo writing outlined by Charmaz (2012), who encourages grounded theorists to engage with the writing of memos as, “a living, thinking, feeling human being rather than a pedantic social scientist” (p. 84). This would mean that memos would include a written description of what was happening internally alongside the particular point in the text where a moment of disruption (Jardine, 1990) has occurred. Beginning with fleeting thoughts or images, the purpose would be to record in as much detail as possible all thoughts as they are connected to the text. Writing in this way strengthens interpretations because there is a deepening in one’s understanding of what has triggered a response internally, while at the same time, it opens up one’s thoughts up to other interpretive, and therefore thematic or categorical, possibilities when turning back to the text itself.

Charmaz (2012) suggests approaching memo writing with the understanding that it is intended to free up one’s thoughts, rather than writing with an audience in mind. It seems that approaching this activity in this way, would not only help to explore relationships between categories in a grounded theory analysis, but also provide the space for prejudices to be foregrounded. Therefore, this focus on prejudices is aligned with Charmaz’s approach to writing memos. Although teasing out these minute and barely discernible reactions is remarkably challenging and can never evolve into a fully realised capacity to apprehend all prejudices, attending to these discrete internal happenings allows for a more fertile interpretive space to be opened up between the researcher and the text.

Thirdly, there now exists a space to consider multiple interpretations. It is helpful here to draw on Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) adaptation of “free imaginative variation” which suggests that we imaginatively play with the data by considering multiple possibilities. In grounded theory this is akin to the method of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2012), and consists of considering any number of possible codes and categories, rather than making premature judgements based on what is resonant with the researcher. The purpose of this process, and where it supplements the constant comparative method, is to eventually form a category that is based on what is essential to the particular piece of text or data, once a number of possibilities have been considered (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is helpful therefore to consider the following question after multiple categorical possibilities have emerged: Which of these possible categories retain the essence of what was reported? Consider Taplin’s (2011,

p. 96) category of beginning to “develop a sense of oneness with others” that emerged in her grounded theory study about silent sitting in the classroom, and its links to resilience. One of the statements made by her participants that was included under the banner of this category was as follows,

Every time in silent sitting I feel in my heart there is an ideal kingdom. People there get along well with each other, they help each other, they are always “ready to help others for a just cause” and also sacrifice their own interests for the sake of others. What a peaceful and calm picture, then my heart will calm down. (p. 96)

After considering possibilities such as: silent sitting as a way of attaining a state of tranquillity, inner awareness, altruism, connectedness, etc., my consideration of alternative categories eventually leads to the category, “fantasising about idealistic relations is calming.” This category retains what I believe is essential to the statement (i.e., that the participant is talking about a fantasied world). This is not to say that Taplin’s category is “incorrect” in any way, but rather serves as an illustrative example of the process just described. Considering multiple possibilities and engaging in free imaginative variation when coding and categorising data, aligns with Charmaz’s (2012) recommendation that we maintain an approach to analysis that is both playful and flexible. Additionally, it can fine-tune the activity of constant comparison required in grounded theory, by opening up one’s sensitivity to other possible perspectives.

In my own study, had I apprehended my own responsiveness and analysed it in the ways noted above, the outcome (i.e., the category of symbolising), would not necessarily have changed. In fact, it remains a plausible interpretation (Packer & Addison, 1989) when considered in light of the symbolic language and imagery of religion, and other beliefs, conventions and systems cast as spiritual. What I wonder though, is what possibilities were foreclosed to me, due to my inability to recognise my own prejudices? The problem, therefore, is not that I arrived at symbolising as a category, but rather that other potential categories were precluded because of my internal responsiveness to the participants’ symbolic descriptions of their experiences. Had I considered what was essential to both of the statements, “*don’t keep it in your body...just let it go*” and “*burning inside*,” I suspect a category that encapsulated both embodiment and symbolising would have been the result.

There is no doubt that being able to revisit the interviews and the data repetitively to take my analysis to the point of theoretical saturation would have resulted in a finely tuned analysis that was truer to the grounded theory approach. However, those tenets of grounded theory still do not account for those moments in interpretation that led us to notice and categorise elements of the data in particular ways. As Charmaz notes,

We may think our codes capture the empirical reality. Yet it is *our* view: we choose the words that constitute our codes. Thus we define what we see as significant in the data and describe what we think is happening. (2012, p. 47)

Charmaz therefore acknowledges that regardless of the rigorous processes with which we code data, hidden assumptions are always at play. Apprehending and working with these assumptions through the avenue of internal responsiveness, allows for greater internal availability to the emergence of a multiplicity of meanings. This is essentially opening up, rather than foreclosing, interpretive possibilities.

It has been suggested in the literature that such an intense focus on one’s own thoughts borders on self-indulgence (Pillow, 2014) but I think such concerns can be allayed by keeping in mind that the entire purpose of such introspection is to illuminate the data. Rather than being

self-indulgent, engagement with prejudices in this way is ultimately a process of analytical attentiveness to the text itself.

Conclusion

I have focused here on grounded theory but given the nature of qualitative research and the emphasis on subjectivity by qualitative researchers, it is possible to apply the method outlined here to enhance the interpretation of those research methodologies that acknowledge researcher subjectivity and engage in reflexivity. Gadamer's method is more than mere acknowledgment, providing a way of working within the nexus of interpreter and text.

There is much consensus in the literature that spirituality is regarded as a universal trait. However, there is also much consensus that even if we consider spirituality to be an ontological reality, it remains an elusive concept and we need to tread carefully in our attempts to conceptualise it. As Scott states,

We do not have a grand theory and need to respect the evolving diversity, resisting perhaps a singular definitive model. While each reader may have a preferred approach or a favourite theory, it may be important to keep concepts of spirituality and spiritual development open in recognition of its complexity, its cultural embeddedness, and its under-theorized state: it remains, in part, mysterious. (2009, p. 271)

I am not suggesting that it is necessary to lay bare our personal histories for the world to see. I have only referred to my experiences in the most cursory way. Rather I suggest that we engage with our own "cultural embeddedness" and internal complexity to see this phenomenon more clearly, thereby working with, and in, universal and idiosyncratic experience, and with a phenomenon that may never be clearly defined. Though some of the mysterious aspects of spirituality may be lost, the gains of a more careful and rigorous interaction with this curious human phenomenon far outweighs such losses.

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