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A constructivist Grounded Theory strategy in applied linguistics research

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Abstract

Der Schwerpunkt meiner Dissertation dreht sich um ein Thema, das mehrere Disziplinen im Bereich der angewandten Linguistik integriert. Die Wahl eines Paradigmas zur Betrachtung des Forschungsproblems sowie einer geeigneten Strategie zur Entwicklung des Forschungsprozesses, waren die schwierigsten Aspekte meiner Forschung. In diesem Beitrag möchte ich meine Erfahrungen mit der Anwendung der Grounded Theory und ihrer Integration mit anderen Datenanalysestrategien im Bereich der angewandten Linguistik darstellen. Folglich wird der methodologische Entscheidungsprozess bei der Auswahl einer konstruktivistischen Grounded Theory Strategie zur Lösung des Forschungsproblems beleuchtet. Darüber hinaus werden die philosophischen Grundlagen der Grounded Theory und die Kernkonzepte, die den Kodierungsprozess leiten, kurz erläutert.

Schlagwörter: Applied linguistics, coding process, Grounded Theory, researcher's position, transdisciplinary research, constructivist grounded theory

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1 Introduction

The topic of my doctoral research is the cultural adaptation of Iranian students in Vienna. The pivotal role of host country language proficiency in facilitating intercultural communications within society and the university environment was one of the most significant reasons my attention was drawn towards researching this issue.

Cultural and societal issues have always piqued my curiosity. This research invited me on a journey to study how applied linguistics intersects with culture and identity on the one hand, and with migration, language policies, and discrimination on the other. It was imperative to consider the interrelated disciplines in my study, which proved to be a valuable experience for me. As a consequence, the door was opened for me to go beyond discipline boundaries and study various aspects of the difficulties faced by Iranian students as they adapted to life in Austria.

I initiated this project with a qualitative approach, collecting data through focus group discussions. Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method, whose primary objective is to concentrate on the research issues in order to achieve a broad spectrum of perspectives from participants through participants' interactive discussion (Hennink 2014: 1–2).

The process of selecting participants for each focus group necessitated a significant amount of time and careful consideration. As the moderator of each group, I asked some questions to encourage participants engage with the topic. The focus groups primarily discussed the challenges experienced by participants in Vienna throughout their academic journey.

Within every group, participants actively engaged in the discussions, exchanging their experiences in various contexts. The friendly atmosphere within the groups created conducive circumstances for exchanging experiences and promoting the expression of varied viewpoints. Consequentially, the focus groups provided valuable and extensive data for my research. Furthermore, I employed individual interviews and short essay writings to achieve theoretical saturation and conduct an in-

depth analysis of the research problem. My Iranian background as well as having a student position in Vienna, provided me the opportunity of being a member of participant groups.

Upon completion of the initial focus group discussion as a pilot study and subsequent data analysis, it became evident that the findings encompassed a wide range of dimensions. Therefore, I needed to use an appropriate strategy beyond the scope of simple latent content analysis and phenomenology to address the analysis of the results. Various practical aspects of language use in the dominant society, including discrimination and resulting inequalities in different dimensions of the lives of these students and the impact of German language proficiency on their educational process and daily communications, constitute parts of the research findings. Therefore, the examination and analysis of data from various perspectives necessitated a strategy that goes beyond content analysis that reaches one holistic concept through phenomenology.¹ Consequently, the research question defined its path within this project, and that was what I was seeking. My goal was to select a strategy that was appropriate for the problem of my research. I had no intention of blindly duplicating an established research framework or merely proving the results of previous studies. Therefore, I embraced the challenges of entering the field of Grounded Theory (GT) research.

In my effort to examine the various challenges experienced by immigrant students, I required a strategy that would enable me to explore and analyze different aspects and dimensions of these challenges. I delved into GT and its different schools of thought to choose an appropriate strategy for identifying various aspects. GT's capacity enabled an analysis of the factors that influence these issues and the consequences that arise from them. Thus, in my thesis, I am currently analyzing and discussing the mentioned issues as well as the existing relationships between the main concepts acquired from data coding.

1 Using the phenomenology strategy, researchers eventually arrive at a fundamental concept. Nevertheless, in GT, there is the potential for the emergence of different fundamental concepts, along with the relationships between them.

During my study, I found that different philosophical roots led to the formation of various schools of thought related to this strategy. Hence, to decide on the appropriate variety of GT for my research, I needed to understand these differences. It was an invitation for me to engage with the underlying philosophical issues.

Given that this strategy was not a common approach in the existing methodologies for research in the field of applied linguistics, I dedicated a substantial amount of time and effort to conducting an extensive search for appropriate sources, reading diverse literature, and learning from it. Hadley (2017) offers a critique of the insufficient consideration given to the potential of GT within the field of applied linguistics, despite its effective use in other sociological domains. He asserts that a significant hindrance to implementing the GT strategy in applied linguistics research is the lack of familiarity with this strategy among professors and students. According to his perspective, the issue contributes to the persistence of existing biases within this domain (Hadley 2017: 4–7). Hence, in this article I will share my experience on how constructivist GT is a good fit for applied linguistics research related to culture, society, and language policy.

The current paper first presents a brief description of GT and its varieties (Section 2). Then, I discuss the main scientific challenge in my research journey, which was the path to reaching the logic of adopting a constructivist GT for my research (Section 3). Following that, I explain the process of gathering data until it reaches saturation (Section 4). Subsequently, I continue with a discussion of the researcher's position in the research process and my coding process based on the selected strategy (Sections 5 and 6, respectively).

2 What is Grounded Theory?

As a qualitative research strategy, GT is based on *symbolic interactionism*,² entailing interpreting data to understand how individuals behave and interact with the “social phenomenon under investigation” (Priya 2016: 50). By analyzing the socially constructed meanings incorporated in the lived experiences of research participants, researchers gain insight into their ideas and comprehend the formation of reality (Milliken & Schreiber 2001: 180).

The GT research process is characterized by its fluidity, interactivity, and open-endedness since researchers maintain an innate connection with their topics. The process entails doing comparative analysis to establish levels of abstraction. The researchers’ involvement with and comprehension of comparisons and emerging findings influence the analytical orientations (Charmaz 2006:178).

In fact, the emergence of GT was a response to the severe criticisms of quantitative scientists regarding qualitative research. In response to the dominance of quantitative research, American sociologists Strauss and Glaser introduced Grounded Theory Method (GTM) through their seminal book titled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967 (Charmaz 2006: 4; Glaser & Strauss 1967). Furthermore, they attempted to address the limitations inherent in sociological research by shifting focus away from the mere replication or verification of existing theories, hence creating space for the development of a novel “theory from data systematically” (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 2–3). Therefore, their effort was widely regarded as a revolution in the field of social science research (Bryant 2017: 375; Charmaz & Thornberg 2021).

The fundamental principles of GT encompass the reduction of preconceived ideas about the research problem and data, the simultaneous process of collection and analysis of data, considering their

2 Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective developed from pragmatism, which considers the individuals’ “active and reflective role” in constructing “selves, society, and reality through interactions” (Charmaz 2006: 186).

mutual influence on one another, and the embracing of diverse interpretations of the data (Charmaz 2008b: 155).

Flexibility is a fundamental feature of GT. It requires researchers' openness to various interpretations of the data. Furthermore, by emphasizing flexibility (Charmaz 2006) even in the final stages of the research, GT gives the opportunity to the researcher to review the defined codes, revise them, or change their categorizations. Remaining open to novel issues enables the researchers to modify their direction despite how their projects progress (Neuman 2014: 177). GT enables researchers to develop novel theories by using inductive and abductive reasoning. Incorporating the researcher's intuitive interpretation of empirical facts through abduction might broaden the theoretical scope to unforeseen domains (Charmaz 2008b: 153).

In my project, I aimed to get an extensive understanding of the diverse facets of challenges experienced by students in their cultural and social interactions within Austrian society. I needed to examine participants' experienced challenges from different perspectives. Hence, the adaptability of GT in employing multiple data-gathering methods and subsequent analysis as an advantage enabled an in-depth examination of my subject.

Furthermore, GT afforded me the opportunity to thoroughly analyze the data gathered from interviews, focus group discussions, and short essay writings. This enabled me to explore the problems from various perspectives and examine the influential factors on Iranian students' adaptation in the dominant society. In addition, employing constructivist GT allowed me to consider the socio-cultural and political context in my research.

With further study on GT, I came to understand that epistemological viewpoints play a significant role, which affects how researchers collect data, interact with the data, and engage in subsequent coding and analysis procedures. These epistemological varieties led to the development of different schools of thought within GT, from "objectivist GT

derived from positivism”³ to “constructivist GT as part of the interpretive tradition” (Charmaz 2006: 130). To decide in line with my research topic, it was essential to have an in-depth understanding of the distinctions between these different schools of thought, which required a deep study of the theoretical foundations of GT.

In the following section, I will explain how I ended up choosing constructivist GT.

3 The adoption of constructivist Grounded Theory

The principal figures in the GT schools of thought were Juliet Corbin, Barney Glaser, and Kathy Charmaz. Various philosophical perspectives employed in GT have led to variations in the coding process and the positions of researchers within the investigation. According to Hadley (2017), a thorough comprehension of emerging paradigms and active involvement in foundational philosophical discussions are crucial in the pursuit of alternative methodologies within the field of applied linguistics. To attain a comprehensive understanding, it is important to delve into the foundational notions that underpin a novel trajectory (Hadley 2017: 27–28). Hence, in this section, I briefly discuss the philosophical foundations that led me to decide on my perspective in the research journey.

The underpinnings of positivism, rooted in observation and objectivity, have significantly influenced the development of GT. Meanwhile, the constructivist perspective of Kathy Charmaz, by focusing on abductive reasoning, has been crucial in shaping constructivist GT.

3.1 Glaser & Strauss: The foundations of Grounded Theory

Although several influential paradigms have been introduced in recent decades, Glaser & Strauss’s (1967) initial statement is considered the

3 “The positivist tradition attends to data as real in and of themselves and does not attend to the processes of their production” (Charmaz 2006a: 131).

foundation of the entire qualitative revolution because it made qualitative research defensible and respectable during a period when quantitative researchers dominated in framing research (Charmaz 2000, 2006: 6, 2008b).

The founders of GT endeavored to develop precise evaluations for qualitative research. Due to the distinct reasoning employed in qualitative research compared to quantitative research, they argued that qualitative research should be assessed using different criteria compared to quantitative research (Charmaz 2008a: 399). Hence, they established the explicitness of principles and procedures essential to achieving the goal through a systematic method while collecting data and providing explicit strategies for analyzing them (Charmaz & Thornberg 2021; Strauss & Corbin 1990: 409–410). Furthermore, their purpose was to develop a theory by analyzing empirical data.

GT was introduced during an era when established ideas of thorough scientific methodology dominated. Consequently, Corbin and Strauss's statements were developed from a positivist perspective on scientific research (Bryant 2003). Glaser & Strauss (1967) recommend using the extant body of literature in the research area just as a means of providing a broad overview of the study. Therefore, they prevent the researchers from entering the research area solely relying on the existing theory, as it could restrict their perspective during the GT process.

Nevertheless, Glaser and Strauss gradually pursued different intellectual paths and Strauss proceeded to collaborate with Juliet Corbin.

3.2 Strauss & Corbin: A next stage of Grounded Theory

In 1990 Strauss and Corbin jointly published *Basics of Qualitative Research*, a seminal book that established their shared perspectives on GT. Nevertheless, this cooperation terminated the collaborative path between Strauss and Glaser in GT.

The initial method introduced by Strauss and Corbin is based on three stages of coding. The primary coding stage, referred to as “open

coding,” includes examining word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence recorded interviews considering what each data section is about (Hadley 2017: 41). In the secondary stage, they define categorizing related initial codes into groups. In the third stage, called “axial coding,” categories are linked to subcategories, which specifies the properties and dimensions of a category (Corbin & Strauss 1990: 13; Strauss & Corbin 1990) and is used for sorting and organizing substantial volumes of data following the initial open coding phase (Creswell 1998). Adhering to axial coding leads to following a predetermined framework for emerging theories.

The divergences across various schools of thought within the GT process can be attributed, in part, to variations in the approach to reviewing and incorporating existing material during the coding process. According to Strauss and Corbin, engaging in a comprehensive review of relevant literature even before initiating the research process has the potential to increase the researcher’s ability to generate innovative ideas throughout the coding and data analysis phases (Hadley 2017: 40). Generally, I considered traditional GT inappropriate for my research because I did not intend to replicate a predefined framework. Therefore, I proceeded with an investigation into other GT variations.

3.3 Glaser and classic Grounded Theory

In response to Strauss and Corbin’s cooperation in GT, Glaser (1992) published his book *Basics of Grounded Theory* and significantly diverged from their viewpoint. He portrayed himself as the primary hero and proprietor of GT while criticizing Strauss for being detached from GT’s objectives (Bryant 2017: x).

Although he defines initial coding and categorization as the first stage of the coding process, he believes in strict adherence to the data itself, without considering the researcher’s perceived ideas. Furthermore, he does not adhere to the axial coding phase. Instead, to change the path from a predetermined model, and maintain the emerging

nature of GT, he introduced “theoretical codes.”⁴ He defines theoretical codes as, “abstract models that emerge during the sorting and memoing stages of Grounded Theory (GT) analysis. They conceptualize the integration of substantive codes as hypotheses of a theory” (Glaser & Holton 2005: 1).

Theoretical codes exhibit greater flexibility compared to Strauss’s axial codes. According to Glaser & Holton (2005: 1-4), theoretical codes are abstract concepts that are not meaningful without substantial codes. They come from existing theories in the literature. Hence implicitly providing the conceptual framework through which substantive codes interrelate as an interconnected hypothesis to address the primary concern. Consequently, applying theoretical codes requires familiarity with numerous theories in multiple fields. Glaser does not insist on using theoretical codes but argues that, as abstractive models, they assist researchers in comprehending how substantive codes in a study might be related to hypotheses (Glaser & Holton 2005: 13).

When it comes to using existing literature, Glaser emphasizes that the researcher should avoid delving into the literature related to the research topic (Hadley 2017) and believes in postponing the incorporation of existing material until “the generation of the core concepts” (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 37). Glaser’s view on using existing literature has been critiqued by Charmaz (2006), and could be considered paradoxical as Glaser simultaneously proposes the use of theoretical codes derived from the existing literature.

I faced another issue regarding this perspective on keeping the distance of researchers from data and maintaining a neutral role as observers (Charmaz & Thornberg 2021). Additionally, since Glaser’s perspective is grounded in positivism, his theoretical codes are defined without implementing consideration of contextual factors (Charmaz 2006: 127). Glaser, an objectivist grounded theorist, emphasizes avoiding preconceptions, such as the impact of social, historical, and

4 Glaser presents a series of 18 theoretical coding families that include analytic categories such as his “Six Cs: Causes, Contexts, Contingencies, Consequences, Covariances, and Conditions” (Glaser 1978: 74–82).

situational settings on “what is happening in the research” (Charmaz 2017: 39). I decided this strategy was not appropriate for my research. Subsequently, I continued to examine Charmazian constructivist GT.

3.4 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist GT was introduced by Kathy Charmaz in the year 2000. Based on a constructivist perspective, she focuses on the position of the researcher and the interaction between researcher, participants, and data, and proposes conducting the coding process and developing a theory (Charmaz 2000). Flick (2009: 468) defines constructivism as an epistemology in which the social reality is seen as the result of constructive processes.

Charmaz’s argument in GT emphasizes the distinction between two ideological viewpoints: objectivist and constructivist (Bryant 2003). Charmaz (2008a: 401) criticizes pure objectivism in GT for assuming “single passive reality.” Instead, she advocates for a constructivist approach that embraces the complexities inherent in multiple realities. According to her constructivist perspective, the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed (Charmaz 2000: 523). Within this framework, the interactive process of research takes center stage, with the researcher’s position and active participation becoming pivotal. Furthermore, applying abductive reasoning fills a gap in previous GT schools of thought. In contrast to Glaser, Charmaz does not advocate for the employment of complex guidelines in the process of theory formation. Instead, she promotes the notion of theorizing as a form of practice. Constructivist GT advocates for engaging with the world and constructing a conceptual understanding of it to define reality (Charmaz 2006: 128–129). In this school, to achieve a comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to consider the social and cultural context around the data and individuals involved.

These points were quite significant in addressing my research problem. Given that my study focuses on intercultural interaction and

related issues in the dominant society, it was crucial to consider the experiences of participants within the social, cultural, and political context. Nevertheless, it was important to consider participants' cultural, social, and political backgrounds also in their country of origin while analyzing and discussing specific issues. Furthermore, interactions between the researchers and participants, along with the data, were an essential factor in developing my study process.

Charmaz's idea that researchers shape the study outputs by their dynamic interaction with data and the research context they bring to the analysis, stands in contrast to the classic notion of a passive and neutral observer (Mills et al. 2006: 9). This perspective underscores the inseparable link between the researcher's influence and the unfolding research narrative.

Charmaz (2006) suggests using "focused coding." Through focused coding, the researcher delves into a detailed examination of key and pivotal concepts in research data, analyzing the dynamics of the relationships among them. However, she does not oppose the use of theoretical codes and considers their use advantageous where it can be helpful. She also considers the beneficial aspects of an initial literature review and researcher reflexivity (Yarwood-Ross & Jack 2015). She is not opposed to using existing literature but emphasizes that it should not overshadow the generating of new ideas by the researcher based on the data (Charmaz 2016).

When it comes to the topic of language in particular, Charmaz & Belgrave (2019: 749) underscore the significance of language and culture in GT research and contend that all data are filtered through the lens of language and meaning. They argue that data inherently carry traces of their historical, material, social, and situational contexts. Furthermore, Charmaz (2017) prioritizes grasping the actions and meanings attributed by participants rather than merely replicating them in a pure objective manner. Therefore, establishing a deep connection, adopting an inquisitive stance towards participants' lives and issues, along with maintaining a degree of distance from the researchers' worldviews during the analysis of transcribed interviews, serve as indispensable tools for researchers seeking a profound level of comprehension within

this strategy (Charmaz 2017). Despite facing criticisms like other GT schools, the constructivist perspective aligned well with my research question, as I needed to consider the social, cultural, and political context in my analysis. Glaser, an objectivist grounded theorist, emphasizes avoiding preconceptions, such as the impact of social, historical, and situational settings on “what is happening in the research” (Charmaz 2017: 39; Glaser 2013). Therefore, applying his perspectives to address my research issues was not useful.

In summary, through a detailed study of various intellectual schools and methods in GT, I realized that all approaches undergo two coding stages. In the first stage, they undergo a meticulous examination of interviews and note-taking. Subsequently, in the second stage, there is word-by-word and line-by-line coding, followed by the categorization of initial codes. Only the Strauss and Corbin model suggests a third, axial coding stage.

Although there is an apparent similarity between these stages, the underlying epistemological perspective behind them is what sets them apart. This epistemological variation leads to different interactions between researchers and data, and researchers and participants. Different ideas between schools are revealed when the researchers confront “tension between emergence and application” (Bryant 2017; Charmaz 2014: 151).

Charmazian Grounded Theory, like other GT schools, faces criticism. For instance, Glaser critiques the constructivist viewpoint regarding discovering concepts, emphasizing the exploratory aspect of GT. However, his clarification regarding the discovery issue in classic GT is unclear. In contrast, constructivist GT develops conceptualization through dialogue between the researcher and the study topic. Furthermore, Charmaz is unbiased towards constructivism and does not view it as the exclusively valid form of GT. However, she considers it appropriate for a comprehensive analysis of constructivist concepts (Bryant 2003).

Through examining various types of GT, I found more proximity between constructivist GT and my research problem. While adhering to the precise process of initial coding and classification, constructivist GT

provides the researcher the flexibility to move beyond establishing a predetermined framework in the path of data analysis. The researcher is allowed to consider the reviewed literature where necessary. Additionally, the researcher engages with the research problem, and how participants construct a reality by conducting a detailed analysis of the data and considering the socio-political, cultural, and contextual conditions.

When it comes to interviewing participants, the flexibility of GT grants the interviewer the autonomy to expand upon ideas that arise on the subject matter being discussed (Charmaz 2006: 29). Hence, during the process of conducting interviews and focus group discussions, when required, I strategically asked questions to elucidate the discussion, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the topic.

Moreover, in the process of analyzing the collected data derived from the lived experiences of the participants, I faced issues regarding paradoxes and power dynamics that contribute to discrimination and inequality. As my research is grounded in the field of sociolinguistics, I decided to employ Critical Discourse Analysis alongside the content analysis of GT structures to address linguistic elements that conveyed power dynamics and inequalities in the discourse. I identified some proximities between the philosophical views of these two strategies. These issues include considering the researcher's active role in the research process and engagement with data, reaching across disciplines, following social justice goals (Charmaz 2017: 40), as well as maintaining a critical perspective both in Charmaz's constructivist GT and Critical Discourse Analysis. Furthermore, due to the significance of language in GT, the use of Critical Discourse Analysis proved advantageous in integrating linguistic elements into coding, data analysis, and conveying concepts.

4 Data saturation

Systematically collected and analyzed data are the foundation of GT (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 1). According to the constructivist GT principles

(Charmaz 2008a), the standard for data collection is to reach the theoretical saturation level. The achievement of data saturation in GT does not include the obtaining of recurrent actions and codes in collected data. Instead, it indicates the stage at which the essential characteristics of the fundamental concepts in the research have been fully developed. The point at which theoretical saturation is achieved can be understood as the stage where no further features or aspects of the concepts in the data are discovered (Charmaz 2006: 113).

By allowing researchers to employ various methods to gather data (Charmaz 2006: 10), GT enabled me to integrate focus group discussions, interviews, and short essay writing for gathering data throughout my research project. Consequently, I continued to collect data regarding the challenges that Iranian students experience in their academic life, progressing toward the phase of enriching the categories. Throughout the data gathering process, I remained focused on the primary goal of enriching the underlying concepts through sampling in GT. Therefore, after the initial coding of each focus group discussion and interview, I identified the pertinent issues that necessitated attention to enhance the research concepts. I then considered these issues during the further interviews.

Another challenge I faced in this research was achieving data saturation. I continued collecting data until I reached a stage where the characteristics and properties of the main concepts could be well described. To reach this stage, I arranged four focus group discussions, 22 interviews, short essays, and five interviews with experts. Therefore, I faced a large amount of data to transcribe, translate, and analyze.

The beginning point was a focus group discussion. In executing each focus group, I faced new experiences as well as some challenges, including the time and precision required for the accurate selection of participants for each group, and coordinating the time and location with the participants.

For precise selection of participants in each focus group, I invested extensive efforts prior to its implementation, including establishing communication with Iranian and Austrian students and conducting preliminary discussions to get to know them before inviting them to

participate in group discussions. In addition, I had to consider the delicate issue of ethnic diversity and the university affiliation of Iranian students in Vienna. Hence, achieving precise coordination for every focus group required substantial attention and effort.

Further, I also faced some challenges while conducting the group discussions. For instance, in the first and second groups, despite coordinating the timing and location with the members of the group and getting a final confirmation, I faced two cases of urgent cancellation.

Therefore, in limited time, I had to establish communication with other candidates who met the required criteria to maintain the group arrangement with the appropriate number of participants and ethnic and academic diversity. Managing this crisis in a short amount of time was challenging. One solution that helped me address this issue was approaching more participants than the required number for each group as substitutes.

In general, my inherent interest in communicating with people was one of the factors that made advancing this project, despite all the efforts and challenges involved, a rewarding experience for me.

Ultimately, reaching the data saturation level in my research relied on awareness of the variety of saturation levels in different studies, which are influenced by the nature of the study and the complexity of the topic (Baker & Edwards 2012; Hennink & Kaiser 2022; Morse 1995). Hence, to avoid setting a predetermined sample size, I employed the principles of GT. Following these principles, data collection continued until all key concepts and categories were clearly defined by their properties. In GT, these categories represent the fundamental components of a developing theory. Reaching data saturation indicates the achievement of theoretical saturation in the study suggesting that “no new properties of the category emerge during data collection” (Charmaz 2006: 12).

5 The researcher's position in constructivist Grounded Theory

Throughout the research process, I played various roles in different positions. Each role brought forth its set of challenges and advantages, shaping my journey in profound ways. I enjoyed playing various roles. In this section, I will delve into the role I undertook as a researcher during the data analysis phase.

The continuous engagement with participants and data constituted one of the main reasons for adopting a Grounded Theory structure. Hence, I considered not only the overt substance of the interviews and short essays but also the deep contents, the socio-cultural and political context of the participants, and the contextual factors about the dominant community. During the coding process, I made a conscious effort to thoroughly comprehend the participants and adopt their perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of their meaning. In addition, in cases where participants held opinions contrary to my beliefs, I considered them without any bias and attempted to examine the issue from their perspective.

This active involvement became particularly compelling due to my Iranian background and extensive experience living in Iranian society. It afforded me a unique ability to resonate with the experiences shared by participants and interviewees regarding their origin community and the motivations underpinning their educational migration. Furthermore, having experienced student life in Austria, I could better comprehend their experienced challenges in the context of the dominant society. These personal interactions fostered my interest in the data analysis process.

Each of these stages provided me with valuable experiences, even extending beyond the scope of academic research. As a result of my extensive involvement with the subject matter, I gradually discovered that my ideology was changing. By analyzing the actual experiences of the research participants, I gained an in-depth understanding of the underlying sufferings caused by societal discrimination. Consequently, I try to respond to any kind of differences I face in my everyday

existence with heightened comprehension. Furthermore, my inclination toward helping individuals, irrespective of any differences, significantly expanded and my intellectual belief in not belonging to any borders but rather to the unified whole of the universe was reinforced. Therefore, I perceive this experience as an integral component of my philosophical journey and self-development in life.

However, in my research process, the complexity of these interactions lies in maintaining a delicate balance between active involvement and the necessity to keep a certain degree of distance as a researcher.

Hence, I ensured continuous control over my degree of involvement and my subjective standpoint to effectively manage the extent of engagement with the topic and minimize any potential bias throughout all phases of my research.

6 My data analysis journey

Considering the crucial role of data in GT, I endeavored to allocate significant time and effort to collecting and subsequently analyzing data for my research. Coding and categorization processes entail a long journey in GTM. Following the establishment of an analytical framework through the initial coding process to explain larger segments of data, I applied focused coding. In this phase, I categorized the related codes under the most focused code.

According to the GT principles, I followed an “emerging design” by starting the coding process immediately after collecting the initial set of data from the focus group discussion (Creswell 2012: 433). Therefore, I transferred the recorded interviews to my computer and began the transcription process. Additionally, I documented details on all the crucial points I faced during the focus group sessions and interviews to consider them in my coding process and analyses, also writing new ideas. Given that all interviews, except for one group discussion with Austrian students, were conducted in Persian, I translated each of them into English after the transcription.

Since I chose constructivist GT according to my research topic, I was open to new ideas and generating new codes and categories based on my research data. Hence, I did not follow the predetermined axial coding as Corbin and Glaser had defined it, leading to a predetermined framework. Charmaz views GT as a set of “principles and practices rather than prescriptions or packages” (Charmaz 2006: 9). Therefore, she follows a “flexible, open-ended guideline” for GT, following a “crucial coding process,” “writing progressively analytic memos” during data collection and the coding process, “theoretical sampling,” and “theoretical saturation” (Charmaz 2008b: 163). Her flexible principles appeared appropriate for my study.

I initiated the initial coding by carefully listening to the interviews and thoroughly reading the transcriptions and notes. Subsequently, in the open coding stage, I meticulously reviewed the transcriptions word by word and line by line, coding segments containing significant content. In the open coding phase, I attempted to define the codes to reflect the “actions and statements” behind the participants’ statements as “action phrases” (Bryant 2017: 370; Charmaz 2006). I performed this process after completing each of the focus group sessions and interviews.

As I mentioned before, during the process of coding and categorizing data, I considered the social, cultural, and political conditions of the participants and the dominant community. Therefore, I did not adopt a purely objective view of the data.

In general, in the coding process, I engaged in a process of constant comparison, through comparing data to data, codes to codes, and categories to categories. This process helped me to identify relations. Through this process, I maintained flexibility and remained open to unexpected findings within the data. For categorizing the initial codes, I repeatedly reviewed and examined my notes. In practice, the cyclical coding process proved highly beneficial for idea development and clarifying relationships between categories. Although, in my experience, this process is time-consuming and requires considerable patience and effort, I can say that it leads to the discovery of new and intriguing connections. Furthermore, during the coding process, I was writing my

initial analysis and discussion on the coding sections as memos. These memos helped shape the structure of the final analysis and find the relationship between categories.

Under the flexible principles of constructivist GT, which allow the use of existing literature, when necessary, I considered the literature while categorizing codes and defining relationships between them when required. I found this flexibility very useful since, in some cases, I allocated codes closely related to each other into categories, which are abstract concepts covered in the existing literature. Therefore, due to this flexibility, in the categorizing phase, I used both focused codes that arise from emerging ideas during the coding process as well as theoretical codes that align with the appropriate concepts found in existing literature.

While I am mindful at all stages to remain receptive to the emergence of new ideas based on the research data and to avoid limiting my view to the existing literature, I consider controlling this situation another challenging issue in my research journey.

Another aspect I have encountered during the process of data collection and analysis is the broad dimensions of the results. These dimensions engage various disciplines, aligning with the interdisciplinary nature of the research. Widdowson (2005: 12) emphasizes the significance of employing interdisciplinary approaches to address real-world problems. He argues that enhancing the interdisciplinary aspect of applied linguistics leads to a greater capacity to solve problems within the field. Furthermore, examining the lived experiences of participants in various social positions, including Iranian students who deal with the barriers and challenges of adapting to the dominant society in their daily lives, Austrian students who represent the dominant society in the academic environment, and experts involved in these students' issues, enables me to analyze the issues from multiple viewpoints for a thorough analysis. These characteristics along with applying a variety of data collection methods have shifted the nature of my research from

interdisciplinary to transdisciplinary.⁵ In addition, my research includes other transdisciplinary aspects by extending the analysis beyond academic disciplines and bridging the distance between participants' practical experiences as "real-world knowledge" and academic theories as "scientific knowledge" (Filipović 2015: 118).

Currently, I am in the process of reviewing codes and categorizations of interviews and short essays. Therefore, due to the cyclical features of the coding process in GT, there is a likelihood of specific changes during reviewing codes and categories from previous phases. So far, alongside the coding process through analytical memo writing, I have explored various dimensions of challenges, the influential factors contributing to them, and some of their consequences.

During the final phase of this study, once the categorizations have been completed, any relationships among them will be identified. My theory will be determined based on the probable interactions existing among these categories.

7 Conclusion

The expansive scope of applied linguistics research across various domains can also go beyond interdisciplinarity. An example would be to engage different actors and find solutions for language-related issues in various fields, like the teaching and learning context in schools and universities, language policy, and intercultural communication.

In this article, I made a concise reference to the philosophical foundations that have given rise to various versions of GT. The objective of this exercise was to elucidate the underlying justification for my decision to adopt a constructivist GT strategy for my study. Additionally, due to limited research in applied linguistics employing GT, I

5 "Transdisciplinary research is thus by default interdisciplinary, constructivist and complexity-driven, rooted in the presupposition that knowledge includes participation, contextualization, evolution, life-long engagement, transference and adaptation to other fields and problems/issue" (Filipović 2015: 118).

intended to provide an overview of its potential for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research in this field.

The flexibility for employing various data collection methods, high precision in data coding, and data analysis procedures, as well as the systematic approach of this strategy, are some properties that show it is appropriate for doing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. Applying GT enables the researcher to make more informed decisions at different levels of the research process, including the procedures for gathering data, evaluating said data, and the formulation and discussion of findings.

As a result, utilizing a data-driven theoretical approach becomes crucial for advancing the knowledge base in this interdisciplinary domain, enabling researchers to delve into uncharted territories and foster innovative theoretical advancements, as well as to provide applicable suggestions and strategies for problems.

Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research necessitates analyzing an issue from different dimensions and perspectives, which may lead to the presentation of multiple abstract concepts. Hence, the GT strategy is appropriate for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research due to its potential adaptability, data-centered approach, and focus on addressing social problems. Additionally, it enables researchers to define various concepts and propose hypotheses by considering the relationships between them.

Despite the challenges I experienced when conducting GT alongside Critical Discourse Analysis, I found this research experience to be valuable. As I discussed in this paper, the key part this experience involved reading extensively on the different schools of thought in GT to select an appropriate strategy. This process required ongoing study, continuing data collection to reach theoretical saturation, and conducting meticulous reviews. It also included revisiting previous stages for coding validation and categorization.

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