From Nascent Research Ideas to Emergent Grounded Theory – a Novice Researcher's Reflections on the Grounded Theory Process

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A B S T R A C T

The problem addressed in this paper relates to the challenges faced by a researcher re-engaging with the academic world after an absence of many years. My recent re-entry to this arena followed twenty-plus years of immersion in the international development sector and the exploration of academic opportunities as a new direction that could enhance my international work. My re-engagement in research included challenges that are perhaps slightly different from those who have followed the more conventional academic route. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my journey of re-engagement with research at a doctoral level, in the hopes that it might bring insights that can be of use to other novice researchers as they journey on their academic path. The method used in my research was that of grounded theory in an overseas context, with open-structured interviews as the data collection tool, and women refugees as the research participants. The findings of this paper, therefore, reflect on pursuing a research study within that context as a novice researcher and draw out some relevant points of learning and reflection. The implications of these findings can be of particular use to readers who identify as novice Grounded Theory (GT) students, supervisors of novice GT researchers, or other qualitative researchers yet to determine their methodological route. There are also insights to be shared relating to carrying out overseas research and conducting research in a way that places the voices of the participants in the foreground.

INTRODUCTION

In the years preceding my doctoral studies, I spent two decades supporting indigenous grassroots organizations, primarily—but not exclusively—in sub-Saharan Africa. My work involved delivering training on a range of topics to audiences who lacked access to such opportunities due to limited financial and technical resources. These audiences included programs serving low-income groups such as refugees, orphans, street children, prison inmates, and both urban and rural poor. Each training initiative was based on needs assessments conducted with project staff and beneficiaries, and materials were developed using online research, insights from relevant training I had attended, and input from knowledgeable colleagues.

Through ongoing dialogue with project staff, growing concerns emerged around mental ill-health, including increased suicide rates and a severe lack of support services. A clear gap in trauma-informed approaches led to the creation of a training programme aimed at addressing these issues and equipping staff to better support their communities. I was delivering this programme to South Sudanese refugee leaders in a remote Ugandan settlement when I was forced to leave abruptly due to Covid-related border closures.

After a period of reflection, I sought to deepen the impact of the training by undertaking research, which led to my enrolment in a PhD programme at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. Having been out of the academic world for many years, with an almost accidental re-entry, I am aware that I can bring a perspective to the research process that is perhaps slightly different from those who have followed the more conventional academic route.

As one with a naturally intuitive approach to research, I was keen that the ontological and

epistemological underpinnings of my study resonated with my worldview. I am sure that many researchers do engage with studies that are not directly aligned with their natural worldview, but as a solo researcher, it made sense for me to design my research study in a way that had synergy with my preferred way of working.

Societal and cultural influences have always shaped the ways individuals and communities interpret phenomena. Ontologically, this initially led me towards relativism, which seemed to align with the view that understanding is deeply embedded in context. However, the relativist notion that knowledge can manifest in an endless array of equally valid perspectives felt unsatisfactory (Keller, 2019; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021). My worldview holds that, beneath culturally contingent interpretations and shifting temporal frameworks, many phenomena rest on some inherent, indisputable truths—something absolute relativism fails to accommodate. Exploring subtle realism offered a resolution. This perspective acknowledges that multiple descriptions of reality can coexist, shaped by societal influences and collective understanding, without denying the existence of a shared underlying reality (Pope & Mays, 2020). While knowledge can develop independently of social interaction, it tends to evolve more naturally within a social context. As such, I ultimately aligned my ontological stance with subtle realism.

Social constructionism centers on societal relevance and the collaborative nature of knowledge creation (Burr, 2015). For me, prioritising participants' voices, experiences, and insights was essential, making the concept of co-construction particularly significant. Equally important was recognising the role of context and ethnic heritage in shaping how knowledge is formed and interpreted. With its emphasis on cultural influence, social interaction, and collaborative meaning-making, social constructionism emerged as the epistemological perspective that best aligned with my approach.

Exploration of these paradigms was enlightening and essential in helping me to identify the style of research that would resonate and engage with my ontology and epistemology. The links between subtle realism and social constructionism, the overlaps in their foci, and their close alignment with my worldview made them natural companions as the paradigms that underpinned my research study and informed my role as a researcher. For me to conduct the research from any other perspective might have resulted in a reduction in the degree of authenticity that I could bring to the study.

The methodological design for this study took a combined Grounded Theory and Feminist Standpoint approach. Having observed and personally experienced the dominance of the male narrative in the ethnic communities from which the research participants would be drawn, there was a strong desire to ensure that the voices in this research study would be those of women. Through using grounded theory and feminist standpoint approaches, the woman's voice, usually silenced and disempowered, would be central to this study, providing the dominant narrative and reducing the negative effects of power that they are so often subjected to.

Grounded Theory is a flexible research method that creates an open space in which to construct a theory that is grounded in the data and based on a substantive area rather than exploring a pre-conceived idea or hypothesis (Bakker, 2019; Turner & Astin, 2021). This approach resonated with my natural style of interacting with phenomena, and, given that the women participating in the interviews were my primary data source, it meant that the emerging theory would be grounded in what they said, and in their knowledge and personal perspectives.

Grounded Theory comprises three main genres (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Morse et al., 2021), all evolving from the foundational work of Glaser and Strauss (2017) while preserving its core principles. Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) is one such genre, rooted in a constructivist epistemology that recognises the researcher's prior knowledge and lived experience as influential in shaping the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Metelski et al., 2021). Rather than dismissing these insights, CGT encourages reflexivity—through memo writing and self-awareness—to ensure transparency and uphold the integrity of the research (Ramalho et al., 2015). It positions participants as co-constructors of meaning and emphasizes the intersubjective nature of the researcher-participant relationship, with data and analysis interpreted within the participants' specific contexts (Clarke et al., 2023). Given my prior

engagement with programmes involving the ethnic communities of my participants, CGT offered a framework that not only acknowledged but actively valued this pre-existing knowledge. As such, my study adopted a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach.

Positioning female participants at the heart of the research underpinned the feminist component of this research. Feminist standpoint theory is a key outcome from an evolution of feminist theory that has taken place over several years (Gurung, 2020). Diversity leads to different standpoints (Piedalue & Rishi, 2017), and feminist standpoint should therefore create space and opportunity for female participants to express their own contextualised and diverse understandings (Jenkins et al., 2019) rather than being subjected to sociological explanations traditionally put forward by men; it is this that I have sought to do.

Postcolonialism presents an important consideration for feminist researchers from formerly colonizing nations—one that I found myself grappling with. Feminist researchers affiliated with well-resourced institutions in high-income countries inevitably carry certain privileges, which must be reflexively examined to avoid perpetuating unconscious bias or reinforcing existing power imbalances (Kimani & Vanner, 2021). Some postcolonial feminists question whether Western feminists can truly represent the experiences of women in formerly colonised societies (Mishra, 2013), a concern that was at the forefront of my mind during the planning stages of my research. Yet postcolonialism also offers a broader, non-gendered framework for examining oppression and subjugation (Parashar, 2016). I recognised that neutrality—whether concerning my positionality or the research process—was neither possible nor desirable. A key component of my approach, therefore, was a continuous reflexive engagement with my position concerning my participants. While the concerns are valid, feminist research also holds the power to disrupt patriarchal structures and reduce inequalities—even when conducted by Western researchers (Vanner, 2015). I aimed to harness that potential by designing a study that was both contextually sensitive and responsive.

The insider–outsider dimension of positionality significantly influences power dynamics, yet scholarly debate offers no clear consensus on whether being an 'insider' or 'outsider' is inherently more advantageous (Kimani & Vanner, 2021). Viewing this distinction through a binary lens risks oversimplifying the complex and fluid ways in which researchers may occupy positions along a spectrum—shaped by personal experiences, life circumstances, and the perceived power or representation attributed to them (Bukamal, 2022; Wiederhold, 2015). My own experience reflects this complexity. While my nationality, mother tongue, and cultural heritage position me as an outsider, my longstanding involvement with the participants' communities and similar programmes has fostered a meaningful connection. As a result, I do not occupy a fixed position at either extreme but have developed a deeper identification with the women in my study—perhaps affording me a level of representational insight not available to researchers with no prior engagement in these contexts.

While I acknowledge the argument that truly authentic research on ethnic communities is best conducted by members of those communities, I am also mindful that such research may face significant delays due to systemic barriers—financial, educational, cultural, and logistical—that can limit access for potential researchers. In the interim, I believe research should be undertaken by someone who is well-resourced, contextually attuned, and committed to challenging power inequalities on behalf of participants. I view myself as suitably positioned to take on this role. By including local ethnic members within the research team, the study's authenticity was further strengthened. In amplifying the voices of these communities, the research contributes to redressing power imbalances and enhancing the visibility of those historically situated at the global margins.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on this perspective and draw out points of learning that might be of use to others as they journey on their academic path, whether as novice Grounded Theory (GT) students, supervisors of novice GT researchers, or other qualitative researchers yet to determine their methodological route. There are also insights to be shared relating to carrying out overseas research and conducting research in a way that places the voices of the participants in the foreground.

METHODS

In shaping the research, I identified two non-negotiable priorities: it had to amplify the voices of female beneficiaries and align with concepts central to the training. Women have long been a focus in my professional work, making their inclusion essential. The concept of Wellbeing, a key thread in the training, also emerged as the central research theme—richly nuanced in both academic literature and the lived experiences of the communities I've worked with. Through collaboration with a refugee-supporting organisation that I was connected to, I gained access to two groups of potential participants: forcibly displaced South Sudanese women in northern Uganda and internally displaced Ugandan women in a Kampala settlement, and the research was designed around them.

The research objective from the outset was to explore how women, with lived experience of conflict-affected trauma, understood and experienced wellbeing. Whilst there was recognition that, by using a grounded theory approach, the outcome might show some deviation from this, the substantive area for research was wellbeing in a context of displacement due to conflict. The incentives for the research have been discussed – giving space to hear the voice of forcibly displaced female participants from patriarchal traditions and, in so doing, to counter the normative action whereby male community members speak on behalf of the women, and to broaden the range of voices speaking into the discourse relating to this substantive area. The research was therefore specifically designed to place the female voice at the heart of the research. The participants were drawn from the two groups mentioned above, both residing in displacement communities in Uganda, whereby the patriarchal values significantly reduce the women's voice and perspective, particularly when in conversation with external agencies, as I had experienced in some previous engagements with the communities.

The final research design complied with the requirements of both the UK-based University of Gloucestershire and Uganda-based Gulu University research ethics committees (RECs). The broad research design followed the Grounded Theory process, including constant comparative analysis and memoing alongside data collection until saturation of the theoretical code had been achieved, and the theory had emerged (Urquhart, 2023). All the interviews were carried out by me in-country, over three separate visits to Uganda within a 6-month period. This allowed time for further analysis and review between the three sets of interviews. The interviews had real-time interpretation to ensure that language was not a barrier to the women who wished to participate in the interviews. Some initial participants attended for subsequent interview stages, but, due to the transient nature of the lives of the participants, others were unable to carry out repeat attendance. Additional participants were therefore included in later interviews to collect extra data. Throughout, the participants came from the two communities earlier identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the grounded theory process, the analysis of the data occurred concurrently with the ongoing interviews, and this resulted in the production of different levels of conceptual codes and categories and intermediate conceptual models. Theoretical saturation was reached, and a final conceptual model was produced, which complemented the final grounded theory that had emerged from the data. Throughout the process, there was much contextual and procedural learning by me as the researcher, and these aspects will be considered in this section. Some of this relates to the practical aspects of carrying out overseas research, including the issue of secondary trauma as a researcher. Attention will also be given to the process of navigating the Grounded Theory process as a relatively novice researcher, and some of the learning points that came from this. The section will start, however, with a consideration of the issues relating to carrying out interviews with participants who are deemed vulnerable, and from a context that is very different from that of the researcher.

Interviews: the Considerations

The ethical principles put forward by Beauchamp and Childress of respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (Kearns, 2024) were a constant in the interview design process. In practice, these included seeking to avoid harm through retraumatisation, the process of gaining informed consent and interviewing women categorised as vulnerable adults, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and the issue of power and positionality in the interview process.

Insights relating to these aspects will now be explored.

Completely avoiding the risk of traumatization would require not asking participants to revisit traumatic experiences at all. However, this could also forfeit potential benefits—both for participants, who may gain from the opportunity to share their stories, and for the broader societal good the research may serve (Schippert et al., 2021). In this study, steps were taken to minimize harm while preserving these potential benefits. From the outset, participants were informed that interviews might involve discussing distressing aspects of their displacement experiences, ensuring informed participation. This was reiterated during pre-interview discussions and in the informed consent process. Additionally, a trauma-trained counsellor served as the interpreter, helping to identify signs of emotional distress in participants' verbal responses that I, as a non-native speaker, might not fully detect—despite remaining alert to non-verbal cues. This approach helped safeguard participant well-being while honouring their agency and voice.

Participants were classified as vulnerable adults due to both inherent and situational vulnerabilities arising from forced displacement, violence, and trauma (Mendola & Pera, 2022). Additional factors, such as language barriers and functional illiteracy, heightened their susceptibility to misunderstanding or misinformation. Moreover, the patriarchal norms within their ethnic backgrounds contributed to gendered social power imbalances, leaving many women with limited autonomy or experience in self-expression, and therefore more vulnerable to others speaking on their behalf (Lacey, 2013; Owino et al., 2022). To mitigate these risks, interpreters were used throughout the interview process, enabling clear, two-way communication and reducing the potential for coercion or miscommunication. All information was provided in the participant's preferred language (Arabic or Acholi), and never solely in written form—ensuring that, despite illiteracy, women could share it with a literate friend or family member if desired. Additionally, the exclusive use of female interpreters helped to address gender-related power dynamics (Acosta Vicente, 2024).

An ethical tension arose between respecting the influence of male local leaders—who often expected to control participant nomination—and ensuring participant confidentiality, voluntariness, and freedom from coercion. On the advice of UNHCR and senior settlement leaders, this was addressed by holding a public meeting with both community leaders and members. During the meeting, the purpose of the study and the importance of voluntary participation were clearly communicated, and women were directly invited to volunteer. This public approach reduced the risk of behind-the-scenes coercion. Had any signs of coercion been observed or suspected, individual follow-up discussions would have occurred before confirming participation. However, no such concerns were raised, and all participants clearly affirmed their voluntary involvement. Additional safeguards included selecting private interview locations and scheduling sessions during quieter times to preserve confidentiality. In the final write-up, numeric codes were used for all participants to maintain anonymity.

Ethical research practice demands that participants are fully informed and provide voluntary consent before involvement, using a tailored approach and signed consent forms (Kang & Hwang, 2021). In this study, the interpreter and I met with each participant beforehand to explain the interview's purpose, the research background, and the voluntary nature of participation. To avoid bias or leading, I withheld any indication of the information I hoped to gather, allowing participants ample opportunity to ask questions. Many inquired about the interview, myself, and my personal story, fostering trust and rapport alongside securing consent.

Both the oral explanation and the written consent form were provided in the participant's mother tongue. Where direct translations were lacking, the interpreter used descriptive language to ensure understanding. Notably, participants signed the consent form after the interview, once they were familiar with its content; none used the thumbprint option. While I was conscious of the inherent power imbalance that might pressure participants to consent, there was no sign of hesitation. Instead, many expressed gratitude for the chance to share their experiences and represent their communities. Their proud smiles as they signed—despite limited prior access to education—and moments of connection through our shared identity as mothers

suggested the process was affirming and positive for them.

The interview process involves a dynamic and shifting balance of power among the researcher, participant, and interpreter, which evolves throughout the interaction (Kim, 2023; Råheim et al., 2016). Less structured interviews grant participants greater control over the knowledge shared, allowing them to prioritise issues most relevant to their experience (Robinson et al., 2021). In my study, employing open, unstructured interviews empowered the women to steer the conversation according to their personal contexts, diminishing researcher dominance and shifting power toward the participants. I further addressed power imbalances by openly acknowledging my lack of direct experience in the study area and positioning the participants as the true holders of knowledge.

Nevertheless, power dynamics are also influenced by how each party perceives the other, shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, education, profession, gender, age, and ethnicity, which can subtly affect interactions (Au, 2019; Knott et al., 2022; Anyan, 2013). To mitigate this, I engaged in continuous self-reflection and employed strategies to reduce perceived positional power gaps, such as ice-breaker discussions about shared experiences like motherhood and faith, and highlighting my prior involvement in their communities. Contrary to concerns about outsider status, many participants appeared comfortable, with some sharing deeply personal information they had never disclosed within their community. Overall, I believe my relative outsider position did not hinder data collection; in fact, it may have facilitated it. However, had I been a complete outsider—lacking contextual knowledge and the ability to connect empathetically—this might not have been the case.

The Research in Practice

Although the research design had received full approval from both ethics committees, unforeseen ethical challenges required real-time adjustments. As a novice researcher conducting solo fieldwork overseas for the first time, I found these moments of situational ethical decision-making somewhat nerve-wracking, especially given the stipulations from the local university REC. While I understood and agreed with the ethical rationale for changes, I

was also cautious not to jeopardize the research by upsetting the REC. Minor adaptations—such as adjusting interview times and locations, pausing interviews during signs of traumatization, or allowing early interview termination—felt manageable and unlikely to raise concerns. However, when the refugee Camp Commandant requested that the planned community pre-interview information meeting be cancelled—a requirement of the Ugandan university REC—the situation felt more serious. Unable to reach the REC for guidance and unable to delay data collection due to logistical constraints, I carefully weighed the options with a local facilitator and, using contextual sensitivity, complied with the Commandant's request. The ethical reasoning behind this decision was sound, prioritizing the well-being of participants and the community, as well as preserving a vital working relationship that enabled trauma counselling services for hundreds of refugees. Had I resisted, this could have jeopardized broader beneficence. Reflecting back, I stand by these decisions and appreciate the years of prior experience that supported me in making ethically sensitive, contextually appropriate choices.

Another significant adjustment to the research design involved the interview format. While initial interviews were conducted individually to ensure confidential sharing of personal experiences, later interviews—focused on selective coding and exploring emerging concepts—shifted to a group format. Since some ideas lacked direct translation, group discussions provided participants with space to collectively explore and articulate their perspectives, though it was emphasized that consensus was not expected or required. To preserve individual viewpoints, each participant was invited to share their response, with written notes taken throughout.

Immediately following each interview, I recorded field notes and wrote memos to maintain transparency and capture initial reflections. A debrief with the interpreter offered an opportunity to share contextual insights and supported their well-being, helping to decompress after intense sessions. Transcriptions were completed locally within two days of interviews. I found memo writing invaluable—not only as a reflexive tool but also to document the rationale behind real-time ethical decisions. These memos supported ongoing

comparative analysis, contributed to theory development, and aided the research write-up. I strongly recommend memo-writing or journaling to all qualitative researchers, not just those using grounded theory, as a vital way to track evolving thoughts and key decisions throughout the research process.

Reflecting on the interview experience, it was very hard hearing the horrific traumas that the participants had been through, and I felt some guilt at being the one who had instigated them reliving those awful times. I was also conscious of not looking so shocked or upset by their experiences that they might feel uncomfortable or unable to share any further revelations. Equally, I did not want to appear unperturbed, heartless, and uncaring. To that end, I partially took my lead from the body language of the interpreters who, as trauma counsellors, were more experienced at knowing the appropriate level of response. This also ensured that I was being contextually sensitive to any nuances associated with their ethnic heritage.

However, the overwhelming memory is seeing how much the women appeared to appreciate the opportunity to participate and be able to represent their sisterhood. There is no denying that the process of reliving some of their previous traumatic experiences was painful for them, but through using the open-structure interviews, the pressure was never on them to expound beyond what they felt able and willing to share. At the end of each interview, I deliberately made time to sit with the participant and interpreter, checking how they were feeling and what their thoughts were on the interview experience. In every instance, the response was positive and related to their sense of being grateful to have the opportunity to represent the experience of displaced women across the world and share in something bigger than just their context. Knowing that they were feeding into research that would enter the wider academic world clearly meant a lot to them and, in some way, gave a deeper meaning to the horrors of what they had been through. For the South Sudanese women, whose ethnic gendered traditions require submission to the views and voice of male family and community members (Munene & Wambiya, 2019), there was an added level of appreciation at being given the chance to share their thoughts directly. When I returned for the final set of

interviews, I used some visual images and diagrams to illustrate the findings thus far. The women found these very enlightening and were very taken with the fact that the images were grounded in the information that had been shared by them in previous interviews. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to give these women this experience, and through it, for them to mentally step out of their day-to-day life and feel a sense of connection to something bigger.

My Experience of Secondary Trauma

In his study of secondary trauma (Keyel, 2021) refers to the decade that he previously spent working for organisations that served refugees and migrants, and the assumption he made that this exposure would sufficiently prepare him for the experience of carrying out interviews with a traumatic narrative. Before the interviews, I was aware of the potential for secondary trauma for interviewers and interpreters involved in trauma-related interviews, but as with Keyel, through my previous work with the displaced communities, I already had experience of sitting and listening to the horrors of the war as they shared their stories with me. I assumed this would prepare me for the research interviews. However, with these interviews, an intensity not previously experienced occurred due to the cumulative effect of the interviews, the transcription process, and repeated in-depth exposure to the transcripts during the analysis. This intensity resulted in secondary trauma.

Symptoms of secondary trauma include anxiety, emotional exhaustion, irritability, restlessness, disconnection from others, guilt, self-blame, and a range of stress-related physical manifestations (van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019). For the researcher, these can be experienced both within the interview setting and outside it, within professional or personal components of life (Middleton et al., 2022). I certainly had an increasing sense of exhaustion as the interviews progressed, and on reflection, more space between the interviews might have been sensible. But a subconscious coping strategy kicked in, and I was able to maintain a sensitive and professional approach for each interviewee, no matter how many previous interviews had been conducted.

After returning from the first round of interviews, I felt exhausted—physically drained and

emotionally depleted—and found myself increasingly irritable with those around me. I avoided discussing the interviews, even in vague terms, with friends and family who were concerned about my well-being. While confidentiality was one factor, I later realized that my silence also served as a protective mechanism: by not articulating what I had heard, I could maintain emotional distance from the trauma that had been shared with me.

Despite this, I experienced a deep sense of guilt—guilt for having lived such a comparatively easy life, and for not having personally endured the pain the women I interviewed had suffered. Rationally, I knew this guilt was misplaced, but emotionally, it was hard to dismiss. I also found it increasingly difficult to maintain objectivity in the analysis. Repeatedly reading the transcripts began to feel retraumatising, as the emotional weight of the content accumulated.

Avoiding the trauma through silence proved unsustainable. Thankfully, two supervision sessions helped to puncture the 'bubble' of secondary trauma I had been carrying. This enabled me to reframe my guilt and engage more constructively with the research. I came to accept that while I couldn't change the women's experiences, I could honour their stories by giving them space in wider discourse. That, I realised, was the true value of the research.

The women themselves were profoundly grateful for the opportunity to share their stories and see them take on broader meaning. Through the research, their voices moved beyond isolated accounts to represent refugee and displaced women from Uganda more widely. This recognition helped ease the emotional burden I had been carrying. As the pain of secondary trauma receded, it was replaced by a deeper resolve to do justice to their experiences—and to ensure their voices were truly heard.

Navigating the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) Process

Regarding the navigation of the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) process, there are some learning points that I would share with other novice researchers, particularly if they are solo researchers, as I was, albeit with a supervisory team. Firstly, a wealth of literature abounds regarding the Grounded Theory method, which can help new researchers better understand the general process to be followed (for example: Birks & Mills, 2015; Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Corbin, 2017; Noble & Mitchell, 2016). However, this same wealth of literature can feel overwhelming, with many differing views and perspectives. To that end, I found it helpful to identify the genre of Grounded Theory that I wished to follow and then focus on some key authors within that genre. By staying within their bodies of work, the potential clamor of other voices was reduced, and I gained clarity and uniformity on the process to be followed. It is also worth remembering that, provided the non-negotiables of grounded theory are met, there is room for flexibility and nuance within the implementation of the Grounded Theory process. I would also recommend joining a network or forum to connect with other grounded theory practitioners. I found this to be very helpful, and, despite researching different topics and using different GTM genres, still the fundamental approaches and processes were sufficiently aligned to gain useful insights and learning.

My analysis methods for this study were primarily offline, although I did make some use of qualitative analysis software in the earlier stages. Initial coding took place in Uganda during the first round of interviews; however, unreliable internet access meant I had to adapt and develop an offline approach. After returning home, I attempted to continue the analysis using an online software package, but I found it too rigid and prescriptive—perhaps due in part to my limited familiarity with the tool. In contrast, the more fluid, intuitive style I had developed while working offline seemed better suited to the nature of the data and my analytical process. As a result, I returned to offline methods for the bulk of the analysis.

I primarily used incident-by-incident coding, which proved especially effective given the narrative style of the participants. Their stories often involved extensive scene-setting, frequent repetition, and shifts in perspective—including switches between first and third person, and inconsistent references to the same individuals. For instance, a participant might describe her uncle alternately as "the uncle," "him," or "the brother" (referring to a parent's sibling). Using incident-by-incident coding allowed me to navigate these narrative complexities and extract meaningful codes

without becoming mired in the variability of expression.

My early attempts at coding, in hindsight, amounted more to labelling individual incidents than to true conceptualization. As a result, the initial analysis yielded a wide array of labels that, while seemingly distinct, were in fact conceptually overlapping. This was an early misstep—understandable, perhaps, given my novice status with grounded theory. Fortunately, guidance from more experienced grounded theorists helped clarify the critical difference between surface-level labels and deeper conceptual codes. With their input, I was able to recalibrate my approach and begin developing codes that captured broader conceptual meaning.

For instance, what initially appeared as separate labels—abduction, family members being murdered, and torture—were later understood as variations of the same overarching concept: 'experiencing violence'. From there, the constant comparative method took hold naturally, and the transition from initial codes to focused codes, and ultimately to the theoretical code, felt organic and intuitive. Without the support and insights from the grounded theory community, I might have remained stuck in a cycle of labelling rather than genuinely coding, which would likely have led the research in a much more superficial and fragmented direction.

Another learning point was to trust the process. There were times for me when the analysis seemed to be going too smoothly, and, as the codes emerged and the memos were written, the next steps seemed to be falling into place. However, a dose of imposter syndrome regarding my relative inexperience in the process resulted in me doubting myself and assuming that I had missed something. This might have been enhanced by the early mistake with labelling versus coding, but it took me a while to trust in my ability to follow the process.

Once past the initial struggles with labelling versus coding and imposter syndrome, I enjoyed the constant comparative aspect of the analysis, which felt very intuitive to me. The iterative, back-and-forth aspect of the analysis resonated well with my preferred multi-tasking style of work as I moved between the interviews to search for further data to populate newly identified codes in subsequent rounds of coding, and it was satisfying that the initial interviews remained pertinent to the analysis right to the process end. Knowledge that I could return to the field for further data collection as new codes and themes emerged that needed deeper exploration was very welcome. This reduced the pressure on the initial interviews of worrying if enough information had been gathered or not, and instead, I was able to enjoy the interactions with the participants for what they were.

A very useful piece of advice given to me before the interviews also helped reduce any self-imposed pressure to 'get the interviews right'. The advice was to treat each interview as a conversational journey, whereby the interviewee, having been told the substantive research area, takes the interviewer on a journey through the information that they choose to share. The interviewee decides where the journey is going, and the interviewer has the privilege of joining them. This approach removed the pressure of getting the perfect interview questions and enabled the participants to share the information most important to them. It also removed researcher leading or bias, and the subsequent grounded theory could therefore be shown to be a theory that was constructed from and grounded in data that centred on the participants' views.

Reaching theoretical saturation is an important stage in the grounded theory process. It is the point at whereby the researcher can confirm that they have enough data to demonstrate an emergent theory robust enough to withstand scrutiny and rigour (Saunders et al., 2018). The debate on how to confirm achieving theoretical saturation is ongoing, with no single set of criteria strongly abounding above others (for example: Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018; Rowlands et al., 2016; Ünlu & Qureshi, 2023). For myself, as a novice researcher in the GTM field, I found the review of different perspectives a very useful process to undertake, as it helped me to recognise how I could determine and justify why I felt that I had reached theoretical saturation in my research, and be confident to stand by that decision. There was always the temptation to wonder if more interviews should have been done, or if, as a novice, I might have missed something in the analysis process. However, a particularly useful approach that I followed was the pragmatic approach to determining theoretical saturation as propounded by Low (2019). She proposes that if the conceptual model and theory

can be shown to be robust, address deviant cases, and be conceptualised and generalised enough to work within broader social contexts, then theoretical saturation has been achieved. By taking this pragmatic approach and addressing her three questions, I felt assured that I had done enough to reach saturation.

The Grounded Theory Emerges

The final stages of the grounded theory process were very satisfying as the theory started to emerge and it underwent tests to hone it down to its final form. In part, these tests were also those used to demonstrate that theoretical saturation had been reached.

Having demonstrated the robustness of the data and that it would address deviant cases, the final stages in the process were to reduce the theory to its underlying uniformity, and then test it for fit, work and relevance, and modifiability (Weed, 2017). This part of the process allowed for a satisfying look back at how all the data had resulted in the final theory, but also permitted a look forward to see how the theory might be of use and relevance in broader social contexts, as well as speaking into wider academic discourses. This switching of perspective from the detail-focused to the wider-reaching was a very pleasing stage to reach, and the opportunity to view the extent of the legacy that came from the forcibly displaced women.

Eighteen months after the first set of interviews was carried out, I returned to meet with the team who had facilitated the interview process and share my findings with them. I concluded my presentation by citing the grounded theory that had emerged and then asked for their reflections on the relevance and usefulness of the findings for agencies like themselves, which provide support to forcibly displaced women. The conversation that followed was beyond hopes and expectations in terms of positivity and useful feedback. There was no doubting the relevance of my findings for their work, and how it would help to improve the service that they provide to their clients. At the end of the meeting, I had a real sense of mission accomplished for myself, and of the positive legacy that had come from the words of the displaced women who had been courageous and generous enough to share their stories with me – a very satisfactory outcome for my piece of research.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to share some reflections on my recent re-entry into the world of post-graduate research and lessons learnt along the way. These include reflections relating to the process of determining worldview and methodology, through to navigating the research design and implementation in an international space. I have also included reflections particular to the process of carrying out a grounded theory study. I recognize that the post-graduate journey will be different for each individual progressing along it, but I hope that some of my musings and moments of enlightenment will be of benefit to others, both those who are on their post-graduate journey and those who are supporting them.

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