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Abstract This paper explores the use of storyline in grounded theory research and potentially other research methodologies that seek to explain phenomena. Storyline as a research strategy has had limited discussion in the literature. Although stories have been used as both a source of data and a means of reporting research findings, the use of storyline is underutilised and undeveloped as a method of constructing and conveying grounded theory. Construction of a theory that is grounded in the data and not influenced by external concepts is possible through the use of storyline. In presenting grounded theory in the form of a storyline, the nurse researcher is able to explain and describe the theoretical contribution in the context of nursing knowledge. Theoretical precedence, variation, limited gaps, the use of evidence and appropriate style are characteristics of an effective storyline. As both a means and an end in itself, storyline enhances the development, presentation and comprehension of the outcomes of grounded theory research in nursing.

Key words grounded theory; qualitative approaches; research methods; storyline

Introduction

Research as a means of generating knowledge is constantly evolving. A number of methodologies and strategies can be used, particularly by the qualitative researcher, in conducting studies in the social world. Qualitative research relies on words to interpret and convey meaning that cannot be measured quantitatively. In this paper, we discuss the use of storyline as a strategy both for developing and disseminating grounded theory. Through application of the guidelines presented in this paper, the researcher is able to present findings from grounded theory research in a manner that is contextualised, engaging and relevant to nursing.

What is storyline?

The use of 'story' is not unknown in the scholarly arena. Storytelling has long been used as a teaching strategy in the educational sector (Cangelosi and Witt, 2006). Stories are not a new concept in research, being commonly used in a number of qualitative methodologies. The experiences of individuals, groups and communities can be encapsulated within stories and disseminated through their telling (Patton, 2002). Overtime, the use of stories in qualitative research has seen an evolution of the status of this strategy (Charmaz, 2005). Narrative analysis relies on stories from various sources of data, as a means by which the researcher can uncover sociocultural patterns and experiences within their unique context (Patton, 2002). Ethnography, with its focus on the description of culture (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007), uses storytelling as a means to convey research findings. The emphasis in ethnography is on the narrative, which takes precedence over embedded analytical renderings in the form of categories (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). Patton (2002) also identified stories as a unique data source in evaluation research. The use of stories and storytelling in these methodologies has a specific purpose and one that is different from the storyline approach described in this paper.

Storyline as a technique of analysis is most commonly associated with grounded theory, reflecting the sociological roots of that methodology. Grounded theory research aims to produce a theory that serves to explain a phenomena in the context within which it exists. Theoretical development occurs as an end result of specific data collection and analysis techniques. Although storyline was not addressed as a specific methodological strategy in Glaser and Strauss' (1967) seminal work on grounded theory, an extensive description of the use of storyline was presented in Strauss and Corbin's (1990) text. This work generally, and storyline as a grounded theory technique specifically, drew harsh criticism from Glaser in his subsequent rebuttal (Glaser, 1992). Much of this criticism related to the over-reliance by Strauss and Corbin (1990) on storyline as a framework into which data could be made to 'fit'. Such an approach is inconsistent with grounded theory's emphasis on allowing the data to direct how the story develops (Glaser, 1992) and is an extension of Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) more technical and prescriptive approach to grounded theory. The criticism attracted by these authors may explain in some measure the reduced attention paid to the use of storyline in the second edition of their text (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define *story* as a 'descriptive narrative about the central phenomenon of the study' and *storyline* as the 'conceptualization of the story... the core category' (p. 116). Within this text, and to a lesser degree in the second edition of this work (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), storyline is a tool that is used to

aid theoretical development and, to some extent, dissemination. Storyline is a means by which integration of theory during the process of analysis can be achieved (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), yet these authors delay its use until the later coding stages. Where theory generation or explanation is the intended outcome of research, integration should begin early, commencing with the constant comparative analysis that is characteristic of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and continuing through the entire process of analysis into the writing up of the grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). Furthermore, the use of storyline in conveying grounded theory is given only limited consideration by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), with the full potential of this method to present grounded theory being largely untapped.

For us as qualitative researchers, storyline has a greater role in all stages of grounded theory methodology and potentially other methodologies that seek to describe and explain phenomena. Notwithstanding the limitations of Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) discussion of storyline and Glaser's (1992) subsequent dismissal of this technique, we argue that storyline in grounded theory can be used throughout the research process, with the intent of constructing, integrating and making visible the final theory. It is therefore both a means and an end in itself. From a pragmatic perspective, storyline has the power to bring to life a theory that may otherwise be dry and unpalatable.

Guidelines for the use of storyline

The use of storyline can permeate the entire process of grounded theory. The form that the storyline takes, however, will vary at different stages of the research. During the early phase of data generation, the storyline will germinate as the researcher compares data with data, and data with developing categories (Glaser, 1978). From the initial stages of this analysis, *definitional statements* can be used to define and summarise what the data are saying (Birks, et al., 2007). Definitional statements capture the essence of a given category for the purpose of furthering the analysis. As analysis progresses, Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommend the use of hypothetical statements to identify relationships between categories, and explicate the storyline once the story has taken shape. These hypothetical statements together form an outline of the storyline as it develops and can be confirmed by returning to the data or the field. This process of constant regrouping is critical. Although the researcher must be sensitive to the developing storyline from the earliest stages of the research, the storyline should not be constructed in isolation of the data. In other words, one should avoid producing a storyline that is then imposed on the analysis. Any story that exists in the data will become evident through the correct application of analytical processes and procedures (Glaser, 1992).

Once the final theory has evolved, we propose a number of strategies that can be used to ensure that the storyline is an accurate reflection of the data within which it is grounded. These guiding principles can be remembered through the use of the mnemonic 'TALES' (Table 1).

Theory takes precedence

Grounded theory in its written form is different from other manifestations of qualitative research in that the emphasis is on the theory as a product of analysis

Table 1 Guiding principles for writing the storyline

Writing the storyline

T – Theory takes precedence
A – Allows for variation
L – Limits gaps
E – Evidence is grounded
S – Style is appropriate

(Charmaz, 2006). When writing the final storyline the theoretical constructs (categories and their relationships) that form the foundational framework are given precedence (Strauss, 1987). This required focus can become problematic when the writer becomes so caught up in producing a readable storyline that all semblance of theory is lost. A failure to explicate theory is a common problem with what some researchers purport to be ‘grounded theory’ studies (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). What results is a description of the phenomena rather than a theory that explains activities and processes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Although description has its place in qualitative research (Annells, 2007), it is not grounded theory.

A balancing act is required on the part of the researcher to ensure that their theory is translated into storyline while remaining both digestible for the reader and reflective of the analysis. Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) argue that the required emphasis on analysis can impact negatively on the readability of the final work. The writer does not necessarily have to sacrifice creativity for the sake of making the theory explicit. Charmaz has consistently argued that it is possible to write an interesting, imaginative, inspired grounded theory that presents theoretical constructions reflective of the data (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001).

Allows for variation

In writing the storyline it is not possible, nor indeed necessary, to account for every piece of data. The storyline is an abstraction of what has been constructed through careful and grounded analysis of the data. The concepts, categories and relationships in the data, along with the processes from which these were derived, are often implicit in the storyline (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as a consequence of this abstraction. Through presenting a conceptual rendering of data that has been fractured and reassembled, the storyline need not account for every individual case specifically (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A well written, grounded storyline will be able to explain what the data are saying (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The researcher will at times find cases that do not appear to fit the overall theoretical scheme. Charmaz (2006) asserts that when such negative cases come directly from the data they encourage refinement of the developing theory. Incorporating variation will not work against the storyline, rather, such variants add depth and further dimension to the developing theory as expressed in the storyline, much like an unusual character adds dimension to a fictional story. Strauss and Corbin (1998) further argue that building variation into the final theory increases its reach and explanatory power.

Limits gaps

One advantage of the use of storyline is its ability to identify gaps in the developed theory. As has been discussed, integration both facilitates and is achieved by the development of the storyline. Stories of any description rely on logical structure, consistency and flow. Holes, gaps and inconsistencies in a grounded theory will be highlighted during construction of the storyline. This process will make obvious such limitations as would pages torn from a novel make that story incomplete.

Careful attention to analytical processes throughout the research will ensure that gaps and limitations in the evolving theory are identified as analysis progresses. Charmaz (2006) considers that it is the identification of such gaps and limitations that characterises the element of discovery in grounded theory. The researcher may find, however, that in spite of diligent work, gaps in the theory are made evident through the writing of the storyline. In such cases, it will be necessary to return to the data and possibly even the field in order to theoretically sample for data to complete the theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). One should avoid the temptation to use poetic license to fill in the gaps that are made apparent by the storyline. Charmaz (2006), for example, argues for creativity in the writing of a grounded theory without 'transforming it into fiction' (p. 172).

Evidence is grounded

Grounded theory is so named because the theory that is generated through the analytical processes comes directly from and is 'grounded' in the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The explication of a grounded theory through storyline involves the identification of relationships that draw concepts together. These relationships and indeed the concepts themselves require validation to ensure that they remain an accurate, albeit abstract, representation of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Once again it is attention to analytical procedural detail throughout the research process that will reduce the potential for misinterpretation of meaning or the presumption of unsubstantiated relationships.

Vigilant adherence to process will not, however, eliminate the need for validation during the writing of the storyline. Grounded theory development does not occur as a linear process composed of distinct phases (Birks, *et al.*, 2006). Neither does validation occur as a separate process but is undertaken in concert with coding, category development and theory generation. During production of the storyline, the research progresses to comparative analysis at a higher level, moving between raw data, memos and the writing of the storyline, to ensure that the theory produced is a valid yet abstract account of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Style is appropriate

There is no prescription for the writing of qualitative research generally, or grounded theory specifically (Sandelowski, 1998). Storyline is an effective way of presenting a grounded theory and one that can be adapted and modified for specific purposes. The style of writing will be determined by the purpose and targeted audience of the final written piece. The frameworks imposed by institutions or publication houses may be restrictive, yet it is possible to work within prescribed formats and still do justice to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The written storyline is constructed by the researcher and reflects their conceptual interpretation of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Another researcher working with the same data may render a different interpretation. Primeau (2003), in discussing her own research, indicates that personal factors determined which data appeared significant for the purpose of identifying concepts and generating theory. Personal factors such as intuition and creativity that the researcher brings to the writing process will influence how the story is told (Jones, 2002) and identify the researcher as a participant in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). As discussed above, it is possible to be creative while remaining faithful to the data. An appeal to be creative does not relieve the writer of a responsibility to be accurate, honest and rigorous in the reporting of research findings (Jones, 2002).

Practical issues such as length, the use of headings, tone and language will need to be considered in preparing the final written piece. The theoretical construction may be determined by the inherent process or other logic that will guide the integration (Charmaz, 2006). As the storyline is an abstraction, the need for detail that is often required in other forms of research reporting is removed. Attempting to include minute detail can result in a loss of the point being made (Mitchell and Charmaz, 1996). As discussed above, the theory takes centre stage. A desire to include every detail in the written work will serve only to reduce rather than increase impact for the reader (Sandelowski, 1998). The potential for the reader to become bored is amplified with the inclusion of redundant detail (Strauss, 1987). Despite the abstract nature of the storyline, Strauss (1987) suggests that the writer has the choice of allowing the written piece to remain a completely conceptual account, or to include examples of raw data (for example quotations) thereby adding life and credibility to the storyline. The extent to which the theoretical concepts themselves are overtly or covertly expressed is also determined by the writer and their purpose (Charmaz, 2006).

Storyline – an example

The following is an example of the storyline that arose from the work of the principle author that examined the impact of postregistration baccalaureate degree studies on nurses in Malaysian Borneo. The storyline is a narrative presentation of the theory of *becoming professional* that was constructed from this grounded theory study. With reference to the above guidelines, it is clear that this storyline has been styled for its inclusion as an exemplar in this paper. We have, for example, minimised detail, chosen not to include quotations and have abstracted variation rather than include specific negative cases. Major categories are used as headings to provide some structure to the piece, and the reader may detect the presence of subcategories and concepts imbedded throughout the storyline.

Seeking knowledge, discovering learning

A search for knowledge saw nurses in Malaysian Borneo undertake postregistration degree studies. The desire to study at tertiary level was often a long held dream for nurses, who in many cases had to postpone their personal goals because of work, family and financial commitments. Nevertheless the desire for knowledge and the prospect of personal achievement and professional development ensured that motivation was maintained. The opportunity to enrol in baccalaureate studies

eventually presented and, with encouragement from others, often at a time of maturity in life and career, this opportunity was seized.

In undertaking undergraduate nursing studies with an international university, nurses in Malaysian Borneo found themselves exposed to a world they had not expected. A new culture of learning within a western approach to education, along with literature from the global professional community, resulted in a broadening of horizons for these nurses. They had been seeking knowledge, yet they had discovered learning. The acquisition of knowledge and collateral skills beyond what was original sought was accompanied by a new attitude to learning as a life-long process. Even before the benefits of subsequent outcomes or rewards had been felt, the sense of achievement for these nurses was great, particularly for those who had enrolled in their studies later in life. The pride in their accomplishment extended beyond themselves to friends, family and colleagues.

For nurses in this location, the opportunity to fulfil their dream of obtaining a degree, the exposure to a world beyond that with which they were familiar and the sense of achievement that came from the successful completion of baccalaureate studies in nursing had implications beyond the outcomes that were immediately apparent. These changes were only the beginning for these nurses as they were to experience a process of becoming different.

Becoming different

Becoming different was a process of transformation for nurses in Malaysian Borneo. In some cases, this transformation was gradual, whereas in others it was noticeable and distinct. The nature and extent of change, although unexpected, was nonetheless significant.

Undertaking studies at tertiary level instilled skills in reasoning, problem solving and decision making. The ability to think differently – analytically, critically and reflectively – was developed through both the content and process of study. The knowledge acquired during study was transformed and transferred both within and beyond the work environment. Gone was the familiar task orientated approach to nursing care. Theory was applied to practice as new knowledge was valued and internalised, while existing knowledge was validated and refined. The changes were not confined to the cognitive domain, but were accompanied by changes in attitude and challenging of values and beliefs.

Affective changes occurred in the wake of baccalaureate nursing studies. The acquisition of new knowledge and the accompanying cognitive changes cast a new light on the world. Both personally and professionally the world was seen in a different light. A new understanding and appreciation of nursing saw prior held notions of nurses as dependent handmaiden rejected. Nursing gained status as a distinct, respectable profession in the eyes of those who had completed the degree. The role of nurses in securing their own professional destiny was acknowledged. Nursing was no longer ‘just a job’ as a greater interest and excitement in the professional role was discovered.

These nurses recognised the difference that the tertiary study had made to them professionally. They also recognised the difference it could potential make to others, the practice of whom fell under the critical eye of those who had completed the degree. The attitude, performance and behaviour of other nurses became a source of frustration and disappointment. A rejection of the negative image of nursing that was

held amongst the public and by other health care professionals was accompanied by a recognition that the source of this image often came from within the profession. Frustration was further fuelled by an awareness that, relative to the development of nursing internationally, locally the profession was progressing slowly.

The new perspective from which these nurses now viewed their world therefore illuminated both positive and negative elements. Ultimately there remained recognition of the true value of having completed baccalaureate nursing studies. These nurses graduated from a course that was not at the time recognised by the Malaysian government. Some degree of disappointment was experienced by those who were denied conventional rewards such as promotion and the associated remuneration. There remained, however, an appreciation of the real rewards that were attributed to their degree studies, including enhanced abilities in practice and the ability to make a greater contribution to the profession.

The recognition of responsibility to the profession extended to include a responsibility to other nurses. A desire to influence colleagues was achieved by means such as the sharing of knowledge and role modelling with the ultimate aim of building others up as professionals. Nurses who had completed the degree saw a need for more, indeed all, nurses to undergo the same experience with the same outcomes so that they too would become different. Encouraging others to study and providing guidance to those who had chosen to do so was seen as one means to this end. The extent of this influence went beyond the workplace as their achievement in completing tertiary studies saw these nurses set an example for family, friends and community.

Through seeking knowledge, these nurses discovered learning, a new approach to thinking and a new perspective on their world. They sought to bring others along to this new way of thinking and feeling so that they too could become different. Ultimately, these changes led them to a process of becoming professional.

Becoming professional

Changes occurred to those who had undergone baccalaureate nursing studies in all dimensions of being. The self as a person, a nurse and a professional were entwined for these nurses who failed to distinguish one aspect of self from the others. Becoming professional, therefore, both contributed to and was a consequence of changes in the individual as a person and as a nurse.

Becoming a better person occurred through the process of completing postregistration degree studies. Personal qualities that were previously hidden were discovered and developed. Greater confidence and self esteem were accompanied by a sense of independence, responsibility, competence and personal strength. Becoming a better person was manifested in changed relationships with others. A less judgmental and more understanding attitude towards patients was adopted. Interactions with others were enhanced, fuelled by a greater understanding of the importance of good communication strategies in dealing with people at all levels, in all settings and from a variety of cultural backgrounds. These changes were most apparent in the workplace, yet appeared to spread beyond the professional environment to the family and social setting.

The changes to self as an individual provided a foundation for becoming a better nurse. As expected, an outcome of study was improvement in the planning and delivery of nursing care on a daily basis. More significantly, a greater appreciation of the diversity in nursing practice was realised, accompanied by a stronger commitment to the role of the nurse. A more comprehensive approach to the provision of holistic care was ultimately adopted. Greater concern for the patient

extended to a desire to ensure quality of care through raising standards of practice. Nurses became agents of change, making a difference to both the work environment generally and those who practiced within it.

The effects of becoming different culminated in the establishment of a professional identity. A professional image was constructed within the individual who portrayed themselves accordingly. This new professional persona was captured by the eyes of others. Nurses who had completed the degree were subsequently recognised as professionals and accorded the respect deserving of this status. Possession of an enhanced knowledge base, along with the marked change in attitude, presentation and performance of these nurses saw them being viewed and treated differently. Now regarded as being on par with other health care professionals with whom they worked, these nurses found a new voice, being able to advocate, represent and speak for their patients. What these nurses had to say was being heard. Opinions, guidance and advice were sought by others as nurses found themselves in new position of trust. The nature, extent and complexity of work assignments increased as a natural consequence of increased confidence from others. The professional identity was established. These nurses had become professional.

Illustrating the storyline

Diagrams and models are important tools for use in grounded theory. We found, as Charmaz (2006) suggests, that the use of diagrams was valuable in all stages of the research examining the impact of postregistration studies on nurses in Malaysian Borneo. In this paper, we focus our attention on the use of diagrams in relation to storyline, as both are important elements of the integrative process in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Star (cited in Strauss, 1987) describes the value of illustrations in visualising the story and identifying gaps in the theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that diagrams may be more useful than storyline for the purpose of theoretical integration. We propose that both are not only useful analytical tools, but also necessary for the researcher who wishes to convey the meaning of their grounded theory comprehensively and unambiguously.

Diagrams, like the storyline itself, will vary in form and function at different stages of the research process. A diagram used for the purpose of exploring developing concepts, categories and relationships may be quite different to the final model that visually reinforces the storyline used to present the final grounded theory. Diagrams can be as simple or as complex as the storyline dictates. Be aware that what may seem comprehensible to the researcher may be undecipherable for the reader. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that an emphasis should be placed on abstraction, logic and flow in integrative diagrams. These authors caution against the excess use of labels, lines and arrows, which serve only to complicate rather than clarify the storyline. Figure 1 represents a model of the storyline presented above. This model provides a visual representation of the core elements of the grounded theory. The arrow format depicts the unending nature of the process of *becoming professional* for these nurses.

From storyline to theoretical contribution

A significant outcome of research is the contribution that it makes to the existing knowledge base of a discipline. The researcher is obligated to demonstrate how the

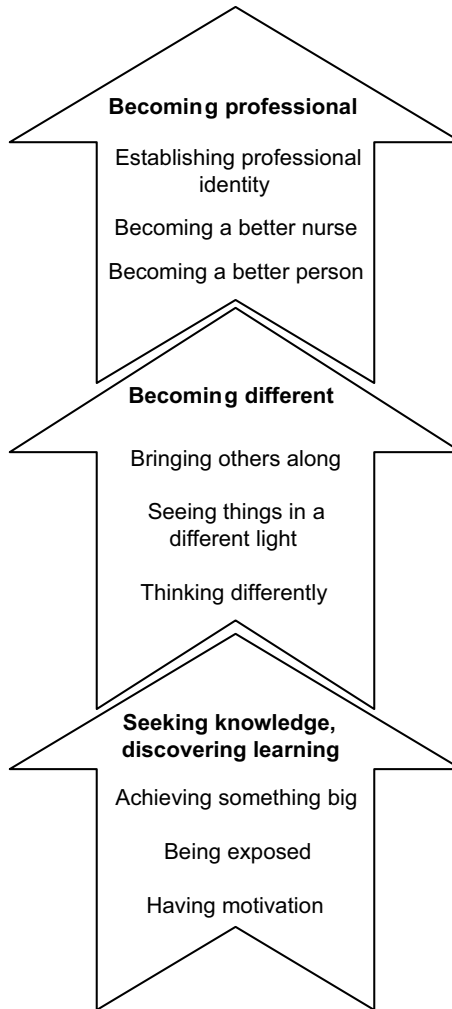


Figure 1 The process of *becoming professional* through baccalaureate degree studies.

findings of their investigation make a theoretical contribution. Traditionally, this contribution is evidenced through the linking of the outcomes of research with existing theory and literature. Charmaz (2006) suggests that the distinction between a theoretical framework and literature review is often blurred, depending on the researcher's purpose. Theoretical frameworks are used throughout a research study to provide structure and guide interpretation of findings (Roberts and Taylor, 2002). In many approaches to research, literature reviews are undertaken at the commencement of a study in order to establish what is already known about the area of investigation and where gaps exist (Minichiello, et al., 2004). At the completion of a study, findings are discussed in the context of the identified theoretical framework and literature to ensure the contribution to knowledge is

clarified and explained (Roberts and Taylor, 2002). How this is achieved can vary. In qualitative research, an explanation of the research outcomes may be provided in a separate discussion or can be interwoven with the findings depending on the preferences of the researcher and the nature of the study.

In grounded theory research, existing knowledge in the form of literature and theoretical frameworks are used with specific intent. Grounded theory is an inductive approach that seeks to generate a theoretical explanation of phenomena. The products of this methodology make a theoretical contribution in their own right and also add to existing theory and knowledge (Strauss, 1987). The researcher does not start with existing theory but builds concepts up from the data (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007). The researcher is cautioned against being influenced by predetermined theory (Glaser, 1978) and for this reason usually delays the use of literature and extant theoretical concepts until the grounded theory has begun to take shape (Strauss, 1987).

Theoretical coding is used in the later stages of grounded theory analysis for the purpose of moving 'your analytic story in a theoretical direction' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). Glaser (1978) is the strongest proponent of theoretical codes, describing several sociological constructs known as 'coding families' that are used to reconstruct theory following the fracturing of data that occurs during early analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1998), while not referring to theoretical coding or coding families specifically, do use similar concepts with similar intent during their 'axial coding' phase. Through the use of theoretical coding, relationships between categories are identified, and the theory is clarified and explained (Charmaz, 2006).

Glaser (1992) argues that theoretical codes, as with any external concept, can only be used as and when dictated by the developing grounded theory. We concur with this assertion given that the use of such extant codes is akin to imposing an external framework on the inducted grounded theory. For this reason, we position the discussion of our grounded theory outside of the storyline. In the example presented above, we have chosen to limit the extent of description and explanation to our interpretations as products of analysis. In doing so, we eliminate confusion as to which concepts have arisen from the data and which have been imported. Maintaining this distinction does not reduce our obligation to highlight the contribution that the grounded theory makes to existing knowledge. However, we do argue that theoretical concepts can be more effectively used to explain grounded theory as expounded through storyline when done by means of a separate discussion.

Although Glaser (1978) describes 18 coding families familiar to sociologists, he does suggest that others may be used. We assert that theoretical frameworks derived from nursing are in fact useful and relevant for explaining grounded theories and discussing the contribution these make to nursing knowledge. For example, in positioning our theory, we located the above storyline in the context of Roberts' (2000) theory of professional development (Figure 2). Roberts proposes that nurses move through a series of stages of professional identity development in the process of overcoming oppression. Through incorporating the work of Roberts into our discussion of the storyline, we were able to add to, support and validate her work and in so doing explain and reinforce the value of our own contribution. The process of forging links with existing knowledge in this way is therefore a reciprocal one.

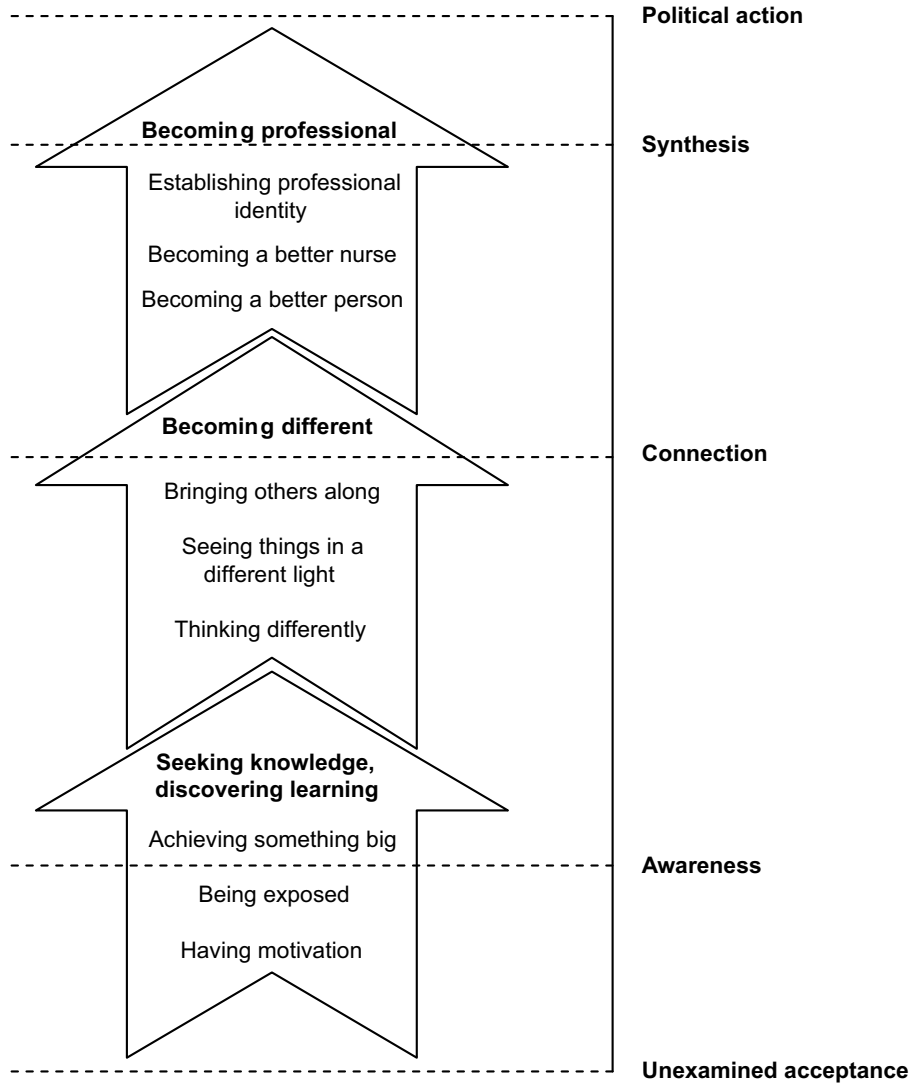


Figure 2 *Becoming professional* within a framework of professional identity development.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the use of storyline as an effecting means of constructing and conveying grounded theories in nursing. Storyline permits the researcher to present the theoretical products of their research in an interesting and creative way without diminishing the credibility, validity or merit of their work. Grounded theory methodology can be an exciting process of discovery for the researcher. Through the use of storyline, the outcomes of this process can be equally as engaging for the consumers of their research.

Key Points

- Storyline is a strategy that can be used with effect in research methodologies that seek to explain phenomena, most specifically grounded theory research.
- Storyline can overlay grounded theory analytical processes for the purpose of theory integration and enhanced presentation and readability.
- Through the use of storyline, nurse researchers can produce grounded theories that contributed specifically to nursing knowledge and theoretical development.

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