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The Grounded Theory methodology to conduct content analysis of sermons and interviews: Critique and response

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The search for a good method to analyse sermon content (and the content of interview documents) has been prevailing since the past decades to evaluate current practice so as to construct better theories for practice. I think that we have found it in the methodology of inductive, qualitative research of the Grounded Theory methodology. In this article, I am going to use the Grounded Theory approach to describe the phases of qualitative empirical research, namely, literature study, sampling, open coding of the data, selective coding of additional new data and theoretical coding to be able to construct an emerging theory of praxis using the concepts developed for this specific action in our discipline. There are critical comments for this methodology. I will try to address these critical views and argue that the Grounded Theory is in line with the science of research.

Keywords: Grounded Theory analysis; content analysis; sermons and interview documents; critique on method; response to critique.

Introduction

In the social sciences, the Grounded Theory methodology for conducting the scientific analysis of the *content* of documents such as sermons and interviews is being used worldwide as a qualitative, inductive research method in contrast to the quantitative theory-testing empirical approach. Glaser (1978) used this well-grounded approach for research in the social sciences for the first time. Later, Charmaz (2006) strengthened the methodology by adding constructivist methods, and then practical theologians started making use of this method to conduct research in a specific context and a specific problematic situation by means of the three stages of inductive qualitative empirical research to develop an emerging praxis theory derived from practice in that specific problematic situation (cf. Boonstra 2016; Pieterse 1995, 2010, 2011, 2013; Pieterse & Wepener 2018; Pleizier 2010; Verweij 2014). Practical theology deals with the study of contemporary contexts where we conduct research on the communication of the gospel in preaching, liturgy, pastoral care and youth work (cathegesis). In cases where there is absence of a well-researched theory regarding how to proceed with pastoral practice, we need new theories to be generated for praxis in that context and for a specific problematic field. For this research, the tools of qualitative, inductive research where the contents of research documents could be analysed fit our need.

Such theories could then be tested by means of quantitative empirical research.

Pieterse (1995) conducted a Grounded Theory analysis of Desmond Tutu's sermons during the first (rather beginning stage) stage of the methodology. In the field of homiletics, following Charmaz, Pieterse (2010, 2011, 2013) conducted a long-term research of 26 sermons in preaching on poverty in South Africa. In the Netherlands, three excellent researches on preaching using the Grounded Theory were published (Boonstra 2016; Pleizier 2010; Verweij 2014).

Students in our country are making more and more use of this method; this can be seen in the works of Shaun Joynt (2017), Steyn (2020) and Barnard (2020). The empirical turn in Practical Theology was initiated by Johannes A. van der Ven (1990), but he still worked using a quantitative method of testing theories by means of questionnaires and statistical analysis (see also Van der Ven, Dreyer & Pieterse 2004). However, the qualitative approach is now being used more and more in Practical Theology.

In this article, I am going to describe the phases of qualitative empirical research by using the Grounded Theory approach, namely, literature study, sampling, open coding of the data, selective

coding of additional new data and theoretical coding to be able to construct an emerging theory of praxis using the concepts developed for this specific action in our discipline. There is critical comment on this methodology which I will put on the table without an extensive description of every critical view. I will try to address these critical views and argue that the Grounded Theory is in line with the science of research.

The phases of Grounded Theory research of sermons or interview documents

Grounded Theory research usually follows different phases or methodological steps during the research process.

Firstly, the researcher identifies the substantive area of research – in the example, I am going to use it in the area of preaching. This happens after a time of *close observation* of this area to identify the possibility of a problem.

Then follows a *literature study* of the substantive area, in this case, homiletics. The researcher must orientate himself or herself in the prominent literature in preaching and then concentrate on the area where a problem could be identified. Once a problem has been identified, the researcher has to formulate a theoretical framework to guide his perspective: In my research, I worked by adopting a reformed theological approach, keeping in mind that we have to work with faith as we deal with the relationship between God and humans, and the relationship of humans with each other, and also remember that during the interpretation of the text and the receiving and interpretation of it by the congregation, the Holy Spirit is at work (Pieterse 2011:97). I also understand preaching as a Word event (Long 1989, 2005; Pieterse 1979:117–120). This perspective on preaching also guided the decision regarding how to collect documents to be analysed. In my research project of preaching on poverty (Pieterse 2010, 2011, 2013), I needed sermons from Matthew 25:31–46 as the sermon text. The literature study also provided *sensitising concepts* that help to guide the researcher in the description of the content of the documents in the inductive open coding phase (for more information on these sensitising concepts refer to Pieterse 2011:98).

Then follows the phase of *sampling*. This is conducted by means of theoretical sampling (Glaser 1998):

> Theoretical sampling results in an ideational sample, not a representative sample. It is about an area of interest, a conceptual about, not a numbered about. (p. 159)

The aim of sampling in this methodology is to get enough codes of content to substantiate categories with their properties to formulate concepts that can make up a theory (Pleizier 2010:88). The researcher must consider the variables of age, gender and education when dealing with the sample. In the methodology of this kind of research, small samples are sufficient. The sample size used in earlier research is as follows: Pleizier had 15 respondents (Pleizier 2010:89),

Verweij included 34 sermons from 12 pastors (Verweij 2014:55) and Boonstra included 18 sermons (Boonstra 2016:94–95). In my research, I have asked my ex-doctoral students who are now ministers in eight provinces of South Africa to identify preachers from the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk [NG Kerk], DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church (URC) by means of a theoretical sample, and to ask these preachers to deliver a sermon on Matthew 25:31–46 in their congregations, and then submit it in written or as a printout. I visited the provinces, collected the sermons and was involved in conversations with the preachers regarding the contexts of their congregations. I collected data in two stages and analysed 26 sermons delivered by 26 preachers (12 pastors from URC and 14 pastors from DRC).

After the collection of the sermons followed three cycles of content analysis using the Grounded Theory method involving open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding (Boonstra 2016; Charmaz 2006; Pieterse 2010; Pleizier 2010; Verweij 2014).

Open coding

Coding is the process of reading carefully through your transcribed data, line by line and dividing it into meaningful analytical units. When you locate meaningful segments, you code them. Coding is therefore defined as marking the segments of data using symbols, descriptive words or unique identifying names. It simply means that whenever you find a meaningful segment of text in a transcript, you assign a code or label to signify that particular segment (Nieuwenhuis 2007:105).

Coding is therefore the process of defining what the data are about (Glaser 1978:55). The researcher creates codes by defining what she sees in the data. In open coding, as a first step in the coding cycle, the researcher started with a close reading of the sermon document. Every piece of content must then be given a code using short words that capture the essence of that content. The whole document must then be coded in this way. Researches can use the ATLASti program to help with the coding, but it is important to read every piece of content yourself and make sure that this piece of content is not overflowing with other content which is not the same. Coding is a process of *interpretation* of the content – therefore, the researcher must check again and again.

Coding practice entails categorising segments of data using a short name that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data (Verweij 2014:72; see also Charmaz 2006:43). It is important to keep a list of all codes that are developed during coding.

The *open coding* phase usually starts with a small number of documents. In my research I proceeded with the open coding phase using the first six sermons that I received from the preachers. After this first round of open coding, I collected six more sermons and analysed their content and started to

compare the content of the codes to see if there are codes that carry the same content (Pieterse 2011:99). *Constant comparison* of the codes with their contents is a central part of Grounded Theory analysis (Glaser 1978:55). Constant comparison of the data helps the researcher to conceptualise (Glaser 2001). In cases where codes are representing the same content, the researcher can then combine them into a new set of codes keeping it apart from the original – and always go back, look at every code and keep on comparing. This is important in the process of categorisation and conceptualisation keeping in mind the goal of constructing a theory for praxis. The open coding process continues with every new sermon that is analysed. A vast number of codes are established and these codes can be sorted out into code families, which eventually become categories. At the end of the open coding process, the search for categories among the many codes is conducted. A category is a piece of content that is unique and the meaning of its contents does not overflow into other categories. This analytical step implies the selection of certain codes that have overriding significance (Charmaz 2006:186). In this exercise, an abstraction process starts where several codes are joined into an analytical category that can become an analytical concept. The researcher must always be aware of and sure about the link between the emerging category and the empirical data. Now, one can focus on core categories that will emerge. The core categories may develop into core concepts in the building up of the grounded theory.

What is helpful is the writing of *memos*. Ideas that come up in the researcher's mind from the data can be written down in these memos which he or she must also constantly check during the process of content analysis.

'Memos are the theorizing write-up about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding' (Glaser 1978:83). Researches can also read the work of Saldana (2009) for a general insight in coding. After the open coding is saturated, the researcher can then draft an open coding analytical model of the sermons or interview documents so far coded. For an example, see Pieterse (2011:109–110).

Selective coding

The second cycle of coding is selective or focused coding (Charmaz 2006:45–46, 57). The researcher must now collect new data for this step in the process of constructing an emerging theory based on the data. In the new data, one has to look for new meaningful contents that can enrich and strengthen a code derived from open coding or deliver a new code. Up to now, open coding and finding categories because of constant comparison of codes and segments are descriptive and therefore help research in an inductive way. In this second phase, selective coding, the researcher starts with *deductive* research actions. By means of theoretical sampling, new sermons must be collected in which the researcher will now look for selective codes – codes that enrich the emerging categories with more characteristics and properties. More categories may emerge. The codes of the analysis in this phase are more directed, selective and conceptualised than

the former codes. Selective coding refers to using the most significant and frequently used earlier codes (now initial categories) to sift through large amounts of data and impart a cluster of characteristics to the categories. Now you can categorise your data inclusively and completely. Axial coding comes into play now.

Researchers then reassemble their categories by using a process known as axial coding in which they describe the phenomenon being studied in terms of central categories (Osmer 2008:52).

Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data in order to give coherence to the emerging analysis (Charmaz 2006:60).

Core categories become selective codes by means of the attachment of properties – to identify every category as a unique piece of content different from another category. At this stage, advanced memos refine the conceptual or core categories.

Theoretical coding

The researcher should remain theoretically sensitive during the whole process of analysis, but especially during this third cycle of coding when theoretical memos are written with a further refining of concepts. According to Charmaz (2006):

> Theorising means stopping, pondering, and rethinking anew … The acts involved in theorising foster *seeing* possibilities, *establishing* connections, and *asking* questions. Grounded Theory methods give you theoretical openings that avoid importing or imposing packaged and automatic answers. (p. 135)

Theoretical codes are the most abstract codes that come to the fore by means of a creative handling of constant comparison and sorting of memos, and the reviewing of core categories. If any new data reveal no new properties of selective codes or provide no further theoretical insights, one can adopt certain core categories as theoretical concepts. The categories and concepts are then saturated by the data.

During this creative and theoretically sensitive phase, reading of relevant literature can shed new light on the issue, without trying to force these ideas on the data. The literature can then bring to light where the emerging theory differs, or support in some areas the ideas prevalent in homiletic literature. The interaction with existing homiletical theories will be in the fashion of the crux of practical theological critical interaction between praxis and theory. In this interaction, leading principles will be theological and ethical interpretation (cf. Osmer 2008;139–161).

Constructing a theory

The concepts in a formal theory are abstract and general, and the theory specifies the links between these concepts. The relations between the concepts should now be indicated. In developing a Grounded Theory that emerges from the data,

the theoretical relations between concepts are expressed in hypotheses. For an example of the construction of such a theory, see how I did it in my research on preaching on poverty using Matthew 25: 31–46 as the sermon text (Pieterse 2013:187–191).

Critical voices on using Grounded Theory as the research method

It is important to understand the background of the critique on the Grounded Theory research approach. This is the positivist approach in the social sciences since the influence of the Enlightenment gained ground. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007):

> In the 19th and 20th centuries the prevailing … world view in research was objectivism, rationalism or positivism. … It was believed that natural, physical laws exist that determine all occurrences, including human behaviour. In other words, there is a fixed reality out there that is determined and regulated by independent physical laws. It is the task of the researcher to discover these laws or universal truths by employing research techniques that will make it possible to uncover them. (p. 48)

This view of research was employed in the natural sciences and yielded great results. The works dealing with humanities and theology were put aside as not scientific. In the social sciences it was Auguste Comte who introduced the positivistic approach in the social sciences. It was about 180 years ago that Comte published his book *A Program of Scientific Work Required for the Reorganisation of Society* (Barnes 1961:82). Barnes called this development of the social and political philosophy of Auguste Comte as the beginning of the positivistic utopia of humanity (Barnes 1961:81). All social sciences follow suit in order that their research be branded as scientific. With the empirical turn in Practical Theology, Van der Ven connected with the Chicago School on empiricism under William James' influence. 'Let empiricism become associated with religion, as hither to, through some strange understanding, it has been associated with irreligion' (James 1977:142; cf. Van der Ven 1990:10). Van der Ven's work and that of his students were therefore quantitative analysis conducted by using questionnaires and statistical analysis – in the positivistic stride.

But this culture is now changing. Nieuwenhuis (2007) speaks of an emerging worldview:

> The emerging worldview and increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional worldview brought about disagreement between those who favoured the scientific method of the positivist paradigm and those searching for an alternative approach to research. (p. 49)

Brueggemann (2005) puts it aptly as:

> Ours is a religious and cultural situation in which the question of authority must be posed anew, because the categories of the conversation have shifted. Ours is a postmodern, post-scientific, post-Enlightenment, post-positivistic situation. (p. 5)

The alternative approach of inductive, qualitative empirical research is now being developed.

The problem with postmodernism is that there are varying opinions related to it. Authors who are working in a postmodern school of thought are not working with a single point of view (Nieuwenhuis 2007:63). During my work on a Dutch commission, to evaluate their theological research in 2007, some theologians spoke of a post-postmodern idea in trying to overcome the relativism in the movement and get a grip on a good methodology in the postmodern paradigm.

Grounded Theory works using an inductive methodology. It conceptualises from the analysis of the data and develops concepts from the data. In this process, new data are collected until the concepts are saturated and no new ideas can be found anymore. It is exactly this *inductive process* where the critics are zooming in.

Some critics see it as a fetching back of the philosophy of inductivism proposed by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and adopted as a model in science (Boonstra 2016:80). This means that it is a model of science that works with the idea that scientific knowledge is found when inductive generalisation is used to discover a scientific law or theory based on observation or experiment. In the work of Cover (ed. 1998) they see the inductive method as being hopelessly naïve in searching for any theory from data without starting with a current theory as proposed in Hans van der Ven compares Dewey's work and Glaser's work on qualitative content analysis (Van der Ven 1993:124–127). Dewey (1986:113–116) departs from finding a theory when he approaches the data, while Glaser works with an open mind to discover a theory in the data. He then says that Dewey's work is scientifically good, but the inductive discovery work of Glaser is not (Van der Ven 1993:126). The criticism mentioned above is clearly from a positivistic perspective, while Grounded Theory is in accordance with the emerging new paradigm and employs a qualitative methodology. When the researcher approaches the sermon data of preachers using a theory to conduct content analysis, she or he will impose his or her own ideas on the sermon content. Then it will be impossible to find out what the preacher has actually said in his or her sermon.

But is it true that Grounded Theory is only inductive in its research? There is also a *deductive* element in the second phase of the research process when categorising and conceptualisation are seriously handled and the analysis of new data is used to conceptualise new concepts for a theory – the selective phase of the process (cf. Boonstra 2016:91; Glaser 1978:72).

The critique on Glaser's approach of *discovering* concepts and a theory in the data led to a discussion among those who practise Grounded Theory. Glaser (1978:18) realised that discovering of a theory in the data may not be the correct formulation. He therefore formulates a number of conditions regarding how to approach the data with an open mind. But this did not satisfy Charmaz. She argues that the concept of *discover* still has the ring of an idea which

the analyst wants to find in the data. Charmaz (2006:10) proposed a constructivist approach to Grounded Theory's content analysis which means that the concept of *emerging* is used instead of *discovering* a theory in the data. In such a case, the real contents of the sermons have a better chance to emerge from the data. This approach is now widely used while conducting content analysis when using the Grounded Theory methodology.

In light of the criticism of the method of Grounded Theory, it is important to conduct inductive, qualitative research within a postmodern worldview in a *systematic* and *methodological* way, which Grounded Theory helps to carry out. Qualitative research is at par with the science of research in the sense that, when conducted systematically and methodologically, it is regarded as scientific work in the social sciences (Ferreira 1994:3–6; Nieuwenhuis 2007:52–58). We must always remember that the results of a Grounded Theory research of the contents of sermon and interview documents are always very specific cases and in specific contexts – therefore, the results are relevant for the time being and should be tested again in new contexts using new data in the future.

Conclusion

In my many years of search as a homiletician to find a workable method of content analysis of sermons to evaluate the ongoing preaching praxis with the aim of constructing better homiletical theories, I finally found the Grounded Theory methodology in my work on Desmond Tutu's sermons (Pieterse 1995, 2001). It was then in the beginning stage but has since developed rapidly based on Charmaz's approach and through more and more research work conducted in the field of homiletics. In spite of the criticism of scholars who prefer the quantitative methodology for research in our discipline (testing current well-developed theories), I still think that for finding new theories from praxis the Grounded Theory methodology is currently the best way to go about.

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Competing interests

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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