

## The Power of Secondary Analysis in Building Theory and Action: A Response to Carl May

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When I was asked to respond to Carl May's piece I was pleased because his work is always thought-provoking. After reading his argument about linking empirical research and theory-building I felt that my own thinking was moving in the same direction for a number of reasons.

I am increasingly aware of the limitations of the research that I am doing with a group of colleagues in my research centre, research that can be classed in Carl's terms as small scale, qualitative case studies of contingencies and relational processes. After finishing a project we have often asked ourselves 'so what?' with regard to increasing theoretical understanding, in our case, of people's experience of living with long-term musculoskeletal conditions, and the responses of health professionals and health systems. Did we add anything to the body of knowledge on pain, chronic illness, or professional-patient relationships? And the 'so what?' question also emerged when thinking through whether anything would change in health policy and health care as a result of our research.

Does the push from many health-related funding sources to demonstrate benefit of our research to patients, mean simple utilitarian and linear relevance? Or is there a place for theory-based enquiry that moves our thinking forward? The current debate about the Research Excellence Framework (REF) parallels this when the president of the BSA, John Brewer, writes that we need

...a new narrative about impact that acknowledges the economic benefits and which also broadens the debate. This 'impact narrative' might make reference to sociology's engagement with the big issues of future industrial, scientific and economic change - sustainability, labour migration, climate change, peace processes, the link between demographic shifts and welfare demands and the like, as well as our ongoing interest in the cultural and relational dynamics of social life. (John Brewer, 2009).

I am mindful of the obligations of qualitative researchers towards the people they study. We amass large amounts of material from interviews (sometimes several interviews over time) and observations. Increasingly, we employ methods that require considerable engagement and work from research participants, such as the keeping of diaries, email or telephone conversations, photography or other visual expressions of people's experiences. How much of this material do we actually use in our analysis and writing? Most of us are constrained by time and resources,

especially as research funding is time-limited, and thus much empirical material goes unused. Anne Grinyer (2009) draws attention to people's judgement about whether participating in research is worthwhile, and the need for researchers to use all the data they have co-produced.

These different strands of thinking do come together in Carl's paper: the need to go beyond small-scale studies through theoretical development and to provide explanations for action. My additional thought about the ethical implications of qualitative research gives a further impetus to adopting secondary analysis so that we do justice to the contribution of research participants.

Carl briefly refers to other approaches for synthesising prior research. I think it is worthwhile expanding a bit on this issue. There has been a proliferation of meta-synthesis work, an umbrella term for various approaches. One of my PhD students (Watts, in progress) is carrying out a literature review on this topic and makes a number of observations that reflect what Carl states - quoting Moreira - about synthesising results, which tends to obscure original interpretations and their theoretical underpinnings. Thorne et al. (2004) report on their various qualitative meta-synthesis projects which aim to develop theory, and emphasise 'the interpretive and creative nature of any attempt to build generalisations from other people's material' using self-reflection and political conscientisation. While their paper presents an impressive account of the sheer hard work and methodological ingenuity required to build theory it does not wholly address the question of empirical generalisations in the way that Carl has posed it. His case for the role of secondary analysis in theory-building is persuasive, precisely because it rests on returning to the primary data in order to build integrative analysis across studies and groups of researchers, and exploiting the opportunities for exchange, debate and analytical transparency.

Thus far, I have been wary of calling any of our centre's work 'Grounded Theory', very much because of the reason that Carl mentions, that is, most of our findings are empirical generalisations. Moreover, fitting Grounded Theory into too tight a schedule always seemed too difficult and time-consuming. This reluctance has been somewhat overcome with the publication of Kathy Charmaz's book 'Constructing Grounded Theory' (2006) which makes the endeavour more manageable by opening the black box of theory building. Her approach to theory is particularly attractive when engaging in secondary analysis because she emphasises that

Grounded Theory leads us back to the world for a further look and deeper reflection - again and again. Our imaginative renderings of what we see and learn are interpretations, emanating from dialectics of thought and experience. (Charmaz, 2006, p.149).

I would argue that that is precisely what we do when carrying out secondary analysis with teams of researchers, optimising the collective power of thoughts and experiences, so that we build theory that is relevant and focused on making a difference.

## References

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