

‘Artistic Memoing’ as a technique in Constructivist Grounded Theory

Bryn Ludlow

Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto, Canada

* Corresponding author’s email: brynludlow@outlook.com

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ABSTRACT

The late Constructivist Grounded Theorist Kathy Charmaz’s “memo-writing” technique involves writing about how categories are connected to the data. Likewise, artistic memoing is a visual, or multimodal artistic response about how categories are connected to the data. Artistic memoing can capture naturalistic observations about data that are hard to put into words and can provide clarity about how to describe data in a written form by visualizing it first. An artistic memo is not about a researcher—it is about the data that a researcher collects. Given this, there are ethical considerations involved in artistic memoing in studies that involve human participants specifically, so that the artistic memo does not result in an objective representation of a participant. During semi-structured interviews in my doctoral research study, “What makes a great story?: Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives on Digital Stories Created by Youth Formerly in Foster Care in Canada,” I noticed that participants often responded in similar ways to certain digital stories or themes within them. At times, I felt compelled to respond to what they said in an artistic, or visual way, rather than a written way. In this paper, I present a working definition of “artistic memoing,” which I describe in past research. Drawing upon Charmaz’s discussion of “memo-writing,” in this paper, I place artistic memoing as a reflexive technique within Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis.

Keywords: *Artistic Memoing, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Reflexivity*

1 Introduction

The late Constructivist Grounded Theorist, Kathy Charmaz’s “memo-writing” technique involves writing about how categories are connected to the data (Charmaz, 2003). Likewise, artistic memoing is a visual, or multimodal artistic response about how categories are connected to the data. During semi-structured interviews in my doctoral research study, “What makes a great story?: Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives on Digital Stories Created by Youth Formerly in Foster Care in Canada,” I noticed that participants often responded in similar ways to certain digital stories or themes within them (Ludlow, 2022). At times, I felt compelled to respond to what they said in a visual, or artistic way, rather than a written way. In this paper, I present a working definition of “artistic memoing,” which I describe in past research (Ludlow, 2022, 2019, 2014, 2012). Drawing upon Charmaz’s (2003) discussion of “memo-writing,” in this paper, I place artistic memoing as a reflexive technique within Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis.

2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

The Grounded Theory method emerged in 1967 by two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Creswell, 2007). Following their work, Kathy Charmaz, also an American sociologist, set out to develop a creative, interpretive, and reflexive form of grounded theory called “Constructivist Grounded Theory” (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014, 2006, 2003, 2001). Creswell notes that Kathy Charmaz and Adele Clarke (2005) sought “to reclaim it from its ‘positivist underpinnings’” (Creswell, 2007, p. xxiii). As Bryant (2009, p. 6) explained, “The constructivist form engaged with the problematic issue of data and the active role of



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the researcher in the process of conceptual development.” For this reason, the Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology is appealing to arts-based researchers. According to Charmaz (2001, p. 6396):

The distinctive features of the grounded theory method include: (a) simultaneous data collection and analysis, (b) reliance on comparative methods, (c) early development of categories, (d) intermediate analytic writing between coding data and writing the first draft, (e) sampling for developing ideas, (f) delay of the literature review, and (g) a thrust toward developing theory.

The Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach involves two core stages of analysis: initial and focused coding (Rieger, 2018; Kenny & Fourie, 2015). In the initial coding stage, researchers also continue recruitment and conduct interviews until data is saturated (Charmaz, 2014, 2006, 2003, 2001). As Lal et al., (2012, p. 10) found, “sample sizes in grounded theory typically range from 10–60” (participants); however, this varies depending on the study design. According to Glaser and Strauss, data saturation is determined by the quality of data and when there are no additional codes (Lal, Suto & Ungar, 2012), but as Malterud et al., (2016) report, quality of data is one component of five in determining data saturation.

There are three dominant approaches to grounded theory: Classical Glaserian Grounded Theory (CGGT), Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) and Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Rieger, 2018; Kenny & Fourie, 2015). The approach that a researcher chooses to pursue depends on their axiological worldview and the parameters of their study (O’Connor, Carpentier, & Coughlan, 2018). Creswell (2007, p. 63) suggests that

...social “situations” (addressed by Adele Clarke 2005) should form our unit of analysis in grounded theory and that three sociological modes can be useful in analyzing these situations—situational, social world/arenas, and positional cartographic maps for collecting and analyzing qualitative data.

The social constructivist perspective that Charmaz “advocates for,” as noted by Creswell (2007, p. 65) “includes diverse local worlds, views, and actions”. Though Creswell and Charmaz position Constructivist Grounded Theory “squarely within the interpretive approach” (2007, p. 65), Charmaz (2006) and Creswell (2007, p. 65) have noted these boundaries are “flexible.” Though Constructivist Grounded Theory involves fewer stages of analysis compared to Glaserian or Straussian approaches to Grounded Theory (Rieger, 2018), a collective of doctoral researchers, Nagel et al., (2015) sought to clarify the components of this approach as they found that not many doctoral researchers use it. Compared to other approaches to grounded theory, the *flexible* reflexive component to Constructivist Grounded Theory is not well-described by Charmaz.

3 What is “Artistic Memoing”?

Artistic memoing is an intentional, expressive, and critical arts-based approach to Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis (Ludlow, 2014). It is an investigation of emerging and visual, multimodal ideas about the data (Charmaz, 2003). While artistic memoing, arts-based researchers “render” the data using visual or multimodal arts-based tools, and “in comparison” across participant responses (Charmaz, 2003, pp. 512–513). Artistic memoing can capture observations about the data that are hard to put into words and can provide clarity about how to describe data in a written form by visualizing it first.

Since 2010, I have created artistic memos in response to the data in my qualitative research. The process involves creating artistic outputs of themes and emerging theoretical categories to help shape an emerging substantive theory. As Charmaz (2001, p. 6399) stated, “the emerging theory determines whether seemingly disparate groups make relevant sources to sample for theoretical comparison”. In my Master of Arts thesis study, I created visual memos about body maps created by older adults receiving daily haemodialysis therapy for end-stage renal disease (Ludlow, 2012). In “Witnessing: Creating Visual Research Memos About Patient

Experiences of Body Mapping in a Dialysis Unit,” artistic memoing was a way for me to reflect on the interactions I had with patients who shared difficult experiences about their illness (Ludlow, 2014). The watercolour paintings about body maps were created with watercolour crayons that the patients had used in the study. Memo-writing is well described in the work of Kathy Charmaz (2014, 2006, 2003, 2001), and in articles about Constructivist Grounded Theory (Rieger, 2018); but, artistic memoing is a new contribution. On memo-writing, Charmaz (2003, p. 513) stated,

Memo-writing leads directly to theoretical sampling, i.e., collecting more data to clarify your ideas and to plan how to fit them together. Here you go back and sample for the purpose of developing your emerging theory, not for increasing the generalizability of your results.

Like memo writing, artistic memos also support a transition to theoretical sampling, as artistic memoing is arguably a way to explore emerging ideas and to find emerging patterns within the data. As I wrote in “‘Visual memoing’ as a critical self-reflective practice” (2019, para. 3),

... the process of visual memoing has become a way for me to think critically, and reflexively about the people I meet as a researcher. As a qualitative researcher, written memos are critical for keeping track of thoughts and ideas after an encounter with a participant. Yet, based on my experience, and positionality as an artist and a social scientist, I would advocate that visual memos become a part of visual methods and an engaged critical reflexive practice.

Artistic memos sit between a sketch and a completed artistic piece. They can be created with a multitude of artistic materials, techniques, or mediums. In my experience of creating artistic memos, they are created with media that enables a high degree of expression in response to the data in a short amount of time. Materials such as watercolour pencils, tempera or acrylic paint, and brush markers for example, support this form of expression. Additionally, artistic memos may be created with advanced digital technologies that involve sound. The initial visual memoing work that I have done has been visual. Yet, with advances in technology and artificial intelligence, along with the necessity to pursue equitable research, in this paper I propose a revision to the term “visual memoing” to “artistic memoing,” which encompasses multimodal approaches to reflexivity in Constructivist Grounded Theory.

The questions that an artistic researcher might ask themselves when creating an artistic memo about their data are similar to those that Mitchell et al. (2017, pp. 12–13) suggest that researchers may be informed by in reflexive research:

... what am I trying to do? What do I want to say and to whom? What will move this audience to questions that guide the viewer or audience? What is it about these images and captions that are so provocative? What do I take away from this screening or exhibition?

The product is not as important as the information that results from creating an artistic response to emerging categories in the data. Having said this, documentation of the process is necessary to show evidence of the influence of the artistic memoing step.

Artistic memoing is a form of researcher-driven reflexivity, and is best described by Finlay (2002, as cited in Mitchell et al., (2017, p. 13)) as “reflexivity as introspection.” Constructivist Grounded Theory involves creative approaches to reflexivity, but Charmaz (2014, 2006) does not describe *how* to disseminate the reflexive acts that result as outputs. Likewise, reflexivity is included as a stage in Constructivist Grounded Theory but its definition is somewhat unclear (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2017). As Charmaz (2006) stated, “constructivism fosters researchers' reflexivity about their own interpretations as well as those of their research participants” (p. 146). Self-, subjective, and intersubjective reflexivity about the process, format, and data in a study often occurs while generating research data outputs, yet there are few studies that link these acts (Rose, 2016).

The only element missing from Arts-Based Knowledge Translation (ABKT) in the directions provided by Charmaz (2003) in Constructivist Grounded Theory about the reflexivity stage is knowledge dissemination. But not all reflexive acts in research necessitate public dissemination (Kukkonen & Cooper, 2019).

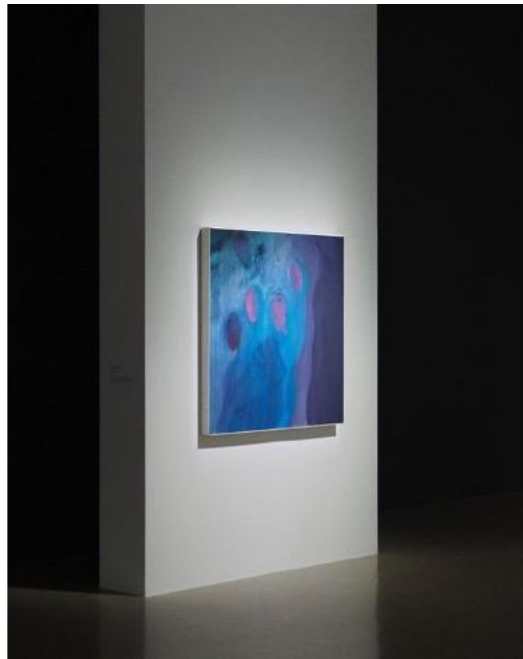


Figure 1: *Their Stories* (2019), acrylic on canvas, 48x64"

4 Ethical Considerations and Significance of Artistic Memoing

Compared to a reflexive act, an artistic memo differs in that it is not about a researcher—it is about the data that a researcher collects. Given this, there are ethical considerations involved in artistic memoing in studies that involve human participants specifically, so that the artistic memo does not result in an objective artistic representation of a participant and presented or published without their informed consent. Alternatively, an artistic memo may be about participants and constructed in a way that is unidentifiable, thus meeting the definition of creative practice in research with human participants. In a painting that I created (Refer to Figure 1), two participants are represented in the image in non-identifying ways. Likewise, the youth-figures are unidentifiable. As I painted the piece, I reflected on my position as a researcher who was listening to participant's stories about the digital stories, and I placed myself at the edge of the piece, listening at a distance, which Palaganas et al., (2017, p. 432) regard as “academic distance”: when a researcher makes an effort to distance themselves from the data to avoid experiencing emotional distress during an interaction with a participant. Despite this active pursuit of visual and textual reflection and dissemination at the analysis stage of my doctoral research study, Rose (2016) states that “[T]here is no discussion of *how* the researcher's social position might affect a digital methods analysis” (p. 303, *emphasis added*). The borders between self-reflexivity in studies involving Constructivist Grounded Theory are obscure. Yet, as an artistic researcher, it is important if not essential to define your place in the research. Furthermore, as Charmaz (2006, p. 504) states, “[Y]ou must become self-aware about why and how you gather your data.” Like participatory reflexivity, Mitchell et al., (2017) stated “radical self-reflective consciousness is sought where the self in-relation to others becomes both the aim and object of focus” (p. 14). As an early career researcher this process of self-discovery is an opportunity to become anchored in one's purpose and foci in research

practice. As I hope is evident, artistic memoing, like memo-writing, is integrated with the analytical process (Charmaz, 2003).

5 Conclusions

In arts-based research and participatory arts-based research, participants create products in response to researcher prompts, for example, the photovoice method. In a Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis, artistic memos can be considered as a reflexive technique: a researcher-created, arts-based research practice that shapes a Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis. Artistic memoing occurs at the analysis stage, forming a bridge between the arts-based outputs created by participants, and the outputs created by a researcher in response to the data at the end of a study. In my dissertation study, it was essential to take note of interactions with participants. Their observations about the format, process, and content during the interviews aided in producing “written memos” that aligned with what participants shared with me during the analysis. During the digital video elicitation and semi-structured interviews, I applied techniques of critical self-reflexivity, including listening for comments about the process and format of the interview. By considering my reflexive response to the data in this study using multimodal approaches to reflection, I feel confident that the results are represented accurately. Though many forms of reflexivity become visual, some may be expressed verbally between participants and researchers, or from a researcher’s thoughts about a theme. Thus, artistic memoing, like written memoing, is also a reflexive act.

6 Declarations

6.1 Acknowledgements

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