Abstract
Interviewing is a frequently deployed data collection method in grounded theory research. Theoretical sampling is a core feature of the grounded theory method. Theoretical sampling is commonly understood as a means for sampling participants with a set of theoretical considerations in mind. However, theoretical sampling also occurs in the actual data generating process, for example through interviewing. Here, we illustrate how interviewing can be used as a vehicle for theoretical sampling. We discuss how to set up an interview study for it to be amenable to theoretical sampling. We show how interviewing and theoretical sampling align as the study proceeds and how interviewing in grounded theory can steer the course for theoretical sampling. We demonstrate how co-construction of data in grounded theory interviewing fuels theoretical sampling. Finally, we show that proceeding with questions for the purpose of theoretical sampling requires reflexivity and flexibility on the part of the researcher. We conclude that generating and analyzing data through the course of interviewing allows the researcher to probe into, expand on, and saturate key concepts and categories which collectively steer the inquiry and subsequent sampling. In the absence of theoretical sampling, it is not possible to grasp the basis for modifying interview questions or to decipher what or how questions should be asked, and for what purpose.

Keywords
theoretical sampling, grounded theory, interviewing, theoretical saturation, qualitative

Introduction
Interviewing is the most widely used tool for collecting data in qualitative research (Green & Thorogood, 2014). The form and style of interviewing in qualitative research is shaped by multiple factors including the overall approach and purpose of the study (e.g., explanatory or descriptive), the research premise of the study (e.g., inductive, abductive, deductive), and the relational context between the researcher and participants of the study (e.g., the degree of co-construction between the researcher and participants; O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Qualitative interviewing is not only focused on capturing experiences and perspectives from participants. It also allows for the interpretation and in some cases explanation of those experiences—in relation to each other and the contexts in which they arise (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Grounded theory is a commonly used approach in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and interviewing is the most frequently deployed data collection method in grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012), either alone or in conjunction with other data collection methods (e.g., observation and compilation of documents and texts; Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The method comprises a set of procedures and techniques used to build concepts and theory so that they are “grounded” in the data (Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data collection and analysis proceed in tandem and ongoing analysis steers the course of the inquiry in grounded theory. Emergent concepts in the data being generated are used to guide where to go to for more data, from whom more data should be collected, and for what purpose (Bagnasco et al., 2014). This form of sampling—
directed toward building concepts and theory from data—is known as theoretical sampling.

Theoretical sampling is a core feature of the grounded theory method, originating in the early work of the founders of the method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012). It functions in all variants of the method including classical (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Holton, 2004), Corbin/Strauss (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), constructivist (Charmaz, 2014), situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2017), and critical realist (Hodd, 2018; Oliver, 2012) grounded theory. The researcher moves from purposive sampling (or other forms of non-probability sampling) to sampling for concepts that are emergent in the data (Bryant, 2020; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1992). The conscious pursuit of key concepts in data generation signals that a researcher has begun to theoretically sample (Charmaz, 2014) and it is the relationships between these concepts that may ultimately constitute theory. Theoretical sampling is not just a discrete stage of sampling in a grounded theory study. It also works in parallel with and/or is interspersed among other sampling methods when conceptual categories (more encompassing concepts) emerge at different stages of the study and where the researcher needs to generate the comparative data to build concepts and categories constitutive of theoretical constructs and patterns in the data (Conlon et al., 2020).

Interviews in grounded theory (as in other qualitative approaches) take forms such as individual/dyadic interviews and focus groups (Hennick, 2014; Mitchell, 2014; Morse & Clark, 2019). Although interviews and focus groups have traditionally been conducted face-to-face in qualitative research, online interviews and focus groups are now commonplace in qualitative research (Kite & Phongsavan, 2017; Salmons, 2015). Given the primary function of grounded theory to build concepts and theory “from the ground up,” interviewing in grounded theory can never be standardized or formulaic. This is because emergent concepts in the data prompt the researcher to steer the interviewing to elicit the meaning and dimensions of those concepts. Unstructured interviews (where there is no specific “set” of questions at the outset) are suitable in a grounded theory study when little is known about the phenomenon or process under study and when the intention is to extract the basic parameters of that phenomenon/process with maximum openness to what aspects of it matter most (Foley & Timonen, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are more suitable for a grounded theory study when the researcher has identified, albeit tentatively, some domains that have already situated the inquiry which interviewing can then begin to expand upon (Conlon et al., 2015). Interviews in a grounded theory study can move from being unstructured to semi-structured when the process of theory building directs the researcher to hone in on emerging concepts and build theoretical categories to explain the phenomenon under study (Bluff, 2005). While the format and process of focus groups do differ to one-to-one interviews, the purpose of data collection and analysis through focus groups in grounded theory is also to identify processes and patterns in data, and to build concepts and theory from data (Birks & Mills, 2015; Stewart, 2007).

The inherent flexibility of qualitative interviewing is useful for grounded theory because—as data collection and analysis proceed in tandem—new questions can be asked of research participants and data when the analysis begins to yield concepts and later when a theoretical framework is constructed. Issues particularly pertinent to the emerging inquiry, can where necessary and fruitful, be pursued through interview questions that elicit additional insights to achieve a thorough conceptualization of the data. Interviewing is envisaged differently by various grounded theory schools—for example, aiding the process of “discovery” in the original conception (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012) versus being a vehicle for the “journey” of co-construction by constructivist grounded theory practitioners (Charmaz, 2014). However, whether or not as researchers we are trying to “get at” processes “out there” (for instance, as realists or objectivists) or are more focused on allowing accounts of lived experiences, processes and practices to be co-constructed during the interview, interviewing in all variants of grounded theory involves putting emergent concepts in dialogue with each other. Remaining open to new data but also searching for and clarifying key processes and patterns in the data calls for extensive probing and possibly modification of the interview guide during the process of data collection (as explained below). As a grounded theory study progresses, questions become more focused viz. aimed at understanding what is “going on here” and how key events, incidents, behaviors, and processes in the data are shaped by context(s) and are constitutive of categories.

The goal of any grounded theory study is to reach theoretical saturation of the data—the point at which all key categories are fully contextualized and dimensionalized to substantially explain the emergent theoretical construct. Theoretical saturation in all variants of grounded theory necessitates flexibility, creativity and reflexivity in the interview process in order to build concepts, categories and theory. Hence, the interviewer is to varying degrees a “co-constructor” (with interviewees) of the data because the researcher has the capacity to deploy knowledge and insight to sensitize concepts in data and to steer the course of the inquiry (Timonen et al., 2018). Apart from classical grounded theory which contends that theory emerges from data viz. is discovered by the researcher (Glaser, 2002), the process of data collection in grounded theory situates both the interviewer and interviewees as active in the construction of knowledge.

Our previous work has illustrated theoretical sampling in action in grounded theory studies (Conlon et al., 2020). Commonly understood as a means to sample for additional participants with a set of theoretical considerations in mind, theoretical sampling can also “be progressed through a variety of means and techniques in the actual data collection process. Most commonly, this happens through interviewing, for instance, steering questions in the direction of emergent theorizing” where “the focus of data collection, including the questions asked, can change in the theoretical sampling process”
(Conlon et al., 2020, p. 949). Here, we take an in-depth look at interviewing as a vehicle for theoretical sampling. Researchers who embark on a grounded theory study intending to use interviewing as a tool for data collection need to decipher: How do I set up my interview study with the view to being able to do theoretical sampling? How do theoretical sampling and interviewing align as the study proceeds? How does interviewing steer theoretical sampling in the theory building process? How does co-construction of data through interviewing help to accomplish theoretical sampling? In some cases, can interviewing impose restrictions on researchers to pursue theoretical sampling? Here, with the aid of examples of how we used interviewing in our grounded theory research, we answer these questions and outline how interviewing in grounded theory can be used as a vehicle to theoretically sample. Our overall aim here is to make interviewing as a tool for theoretical sampling in grounded theory accessible to researchers who are new to the grounded theory method. Each study conducted by us which is used to illustrate interviewing as means to theoretically sample had ethical approval from a research ethics committee.

How Do I Set Up My Interview Study With the View to Being Able to Do Theoretical Sampling?

Some preliminary steps and reflections are necessary when setting out to use interviewing with the view to theoretical sampling in a grounded theory study. First, the researcher should ask: can I “get at” the interviewees and data that I might need? In other words, when envisaging possible paths and directions for both initial (more encompassing, heterogeneous) and subsequent (theoretical) sampling, is it likely or will it be possible to follow these? If not, it is necessary to consider adjusting the research design/focus so that it is more amenable to theoretical sampling. As outlined above, theoretical sampling is a process that evolves in the course of the study, and this first step can be challenging due to the unpredictability of the precise course of theoretical sampling. Indeed, this step should be seen as the first stage of an ongoing practice of reflecting on sampling throughout the study. Conducting online interviewing (e.g., via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.; Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Microsoft, 2020) or telephone interviews can increase the sources available to the researcher to theoretically sample in interviewing because remote interviewing eliminates many issues to do with accessing participants who are not proximate to the researcher.

Second, the interview guide should be so succinct that going out to do the first few interviews might even seem a little intimidating: the researcher should be wondering—is the interview guide sufficient to go by? If the researcher sets out with a large number of questions, the interviews are likely to run into too many distinct directions, and the researcher will feel under pressure to “cover” all the questions. This kind of “scattering” approach risks rushed, superficial interviews that cover numerous “topics” but prove conceptually unsatisfactory. This in turn will make theoretical sampling more difficult or even impossible. Interviewing with the goal of accomplishing theoretical sampling and subsequently theoretical saturation is not a “fact-finding mission”—it is not about ticking one box after another in the manner of racing through a list of questions but rather should serve the function of “opening up” the inquiry so as to be able to progress toward building theoretically oriented accounts (Sbaraini et al., 2011).

Third, it is important for the grounded theory researcher to take great care in formulating the small number of questions in the interview guide with the view to it serving as the device that launches the data collection. The researcher is tasked with thinking through the pros and cons of posing questions in a particular way and piloting them if possible. However, the guide is merely the starting point for interviewing, and the focus of interviewing needs to evolve as the study progresses if it is to accomplish theoretical sampling and reach theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The guide should not be approached as “cast in stone” but rather as something that can be adapted and complemented through extensive prompting (where needed) and probing in directions that are conducive to theoretical sampling. Indeed, inherent to theoretical sampling is the expectation that interview guides would evolve as insights in the inquiry deepen. The interview guide can and should be informed by the literature on the area of the inquiry but not in a deductive manner (Timonen et al., 2018). In other words, both the interview guide and the literature that informs it should be viewed as a launch pad, not a straitjacket.

Some studies in grounded theory are highly conceptual in their intellectual origin, necessitating a lot of “translating” of concepts into everyday language. This illustrates how literature can play a part in theoretical sampling from the very beginning of a study. For instance, in a study by Timonen and Conlon focused on intergenerational solidarity, key concepts of “solidarity” and “justice” (and ideas underpinning them) which had informed the study, had to be expressed as “give and take” and “help and support” at the level of the research instrument i.e. the interview guide (Conlon et al., 2015). The research participants’ responses to the interview questions moved the process of theoretical sampling in theoretically germane directions, resulting in a new conceptualization where social class underpins many forms of intergenerational solidarity at both family and societal levels (Timonen et al., 2013). This illustrates the dynamic, iterative interaction between conceptual-theoretical and everyday language in the process of planning, conducting and steering the interviews that serve the purposes of theoretical sampling.

How Do Theoretical Sampling and Interviewing Align as the Study Proceeds?

The researcher should not rush the grounded theory interview process. As explained, theoretical sampling is not simply about sampling for more participants or more “varied” participants; it is first and foremost about saturating concepts and ultimately, building theory through the practice of theoretical sampling.
(Timonen et al., 2018). Hence, the researcher should not be “just interviewing” and “getting data.” The challenge of proceeding in a grounded theory study arises from the fact that the researcher is constantly asking: where do I go now, what do I want and need to understand better, and how do I go about filling out (or rejecting) the concepts that are emergent in the data? This is all in the interest of initiating and furthering theoretical sampling. Interviewing in grounded theory is never only focused on expanding upon the emergent concepts. Rather, it also necessitates deciphering the relevance (or not) of concepts to move data generation forward.

When the researcher initiates and progresses the process of interviewing, there are (very broadly speaking) two modes that she can enter and move interchangeably between. These can be labeled as the “push” and the “pull” of theoretical sampling in grounded theory interviewing. The “push” refers to the more active interviewing style, when the researcher has identified a potentially productive and illuminating line of inquiry in the data which then triggers theoretical sampling. Recall that the direction of a grounded theory study can be somewhat open at the outset, and this calls for careful attention to what the data “tells” the researcher. The “push” is oriented toward developing a fuller understanding of the relevance and dimensions of these initial patterns. However, while “pushing” in line with theoretical sampling, the researcher must remain aware of the major pitfalls of forcing data for instance by asking leading questions that might steer the interview(s) in directions that would not have unfolded, had more open questions been asked. In grounded theory, it is essential to grasp the overall conceptual development of the data and then orientate the interview style that serves conceptual development best (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The “push” of theoretical sampling is not about merely “confirming hunches” or looking for what the researcher wants to find. Instead, the researcher must remain attuned to the “negative cases” and avoid confirmation bias. Interviewing must remain a rigorous, reflexive and open endeavor throughout the course of a study where the researcher is attuned to the complexity of the phenomenon/process under investigation.

For instance, when interviewing grandparents from higher socioeconomic groups, Timonen developed the category of choice, relating to grandparents who chose not to be closely involved in the care of their grandchildren (Timonen & Doyle, 2012)—something that seemed particularly marked among the (higher socioeconomic) groups with the resources to pursue “Third Age” interests. However, Timonen also came across and sought out grandparents from higher socioeconomic groups who were involved in grandchild care. Investigation of these grandparents revealed an additional dimension of choice, namely the choice to be involved for instance because the grandparents believed it to be politic from the point of view of staying in touch with the grandchild where the parents had divorced; or because they were highly committed to the child’s early education (Timonen & Doyle, 2012). This contrasted to the lack of choice among grandparents whose adult children were unable to afford formal childcare (McGarrigle et al., 2018). Actively probing into these divergent practices led to the development of the core categories of grandparental choice (to be involved in caring for grandchildren, or not) and constraint (need to be involved in provision of grandchild care regardless of personal preferences).

The “pull” in grounded theory interviewing comes from becoming attuned to a line of inquiry that may or may not prove to be productive in the sense of leading to conceptual development. The “pull” can arise quite spontaneously when conducting interviews on topics and discovering the data is veering in novel directions not reflected in the literature or in the researcher’s own prior research in that area. For example, in Conlon’s current study on women’s experiences of abortion care in Ireland, novel and surprising talk featured in interviews centering on processes of the embodied experience of abortion and an emerging concept of “unquestioning entitlement” to reproductive autonomy. Conlon had previously interviewed women from Ireland proximate to them accessing abortion services in England on two occasions (Conlon, 2005; Mahon et al., 1998) when abortion was illegal in Ireland and had not heard this vein of talk in either of those studies. Drawing on theoretical sampling, Conlon is exploring whether the recent contextual shift wherein Ireland had a referendum on abortion that yielded a strong vote in favor of changing the legal position to allow for abortion is the catalyst for this new vein in women’s talk about abortion in the current research. The theoretical sampling question this raises is: has the debate about abortion in Ireland, acknowledged as having been dominated by a position in favor of “Repeal” of the constitutional ban on abortion, opened up new discourses and broken longstanding taboos in how women communicate in research interviews about abortion? In theoretical sampling, Conlon is carefully navigating data collection so as to tap into this novel openness and vein in women’s talk signaled in openness in the talk to discuss processes and aspects of the abortion experience (e.g., embodied experience of the aborting pregnancy, acknowledging feelings of sadness and loss while still wanting to terminate the pregnancy) to get a handle on “what is going on here.”

The “pull” in grounded theory interviewing that comes from becoming attuned to a line of inquiry also requires remaining open to the full dimensions of that line of inquiry. For example, when Foley conducted unstructured interviews with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) patients about their experiences of healthcare services, participants spoke openly about how being a parent influenced their decisions about care. Participants’ concerns were underpinned by the concept obligation to family. Foley resisted the temptation of only asking questions about care in the context of parenthood to participants who had children. Rather, she also posed open-ended questions about obligation and parenthood to participants who did not have children. Data generated from these participants found that having no children alleviated the burden of obligation to family (Foley et al., 2014a). Not being a parent in ALS also became an important dimension to understanding the significance of parenthood for decisions participants made about care and how
obligation to family among people with ALS as they engage
with healthcare services can vary depending on parenthood
status.

How Does Interviewing Steer Theoretical Sampling in the Theory Building Process?

As stated earlier, grounded theory is not only about generating
categories that are grounded in the data. Of equal importance is
how the concepts generated are understood in relation to each
other. Interviewing in grounded theory is used to generate con-
cepts and tease out the relationships between these concepts to
build theory (Morse & Clark, 2019). Grounded theory also
involves interrogating emergent concepts and categories in light
of relevant insights from outside of the study (Glaser & Strauss,
1967/2012). Articles reporting empirical data by their nature are
limited in their capacity to illustrate what sampling for concepts
looks like in the process of data generation (e.g., interviewing)
and theory building. Next, we illustrate how interviewing in a
grounded theory study can be used to effectively steer theoretical
sampling in the theory building process (i.e., when interviewing
proceeds in the direction of emergent theorizing).

In the above-mentioned ALS study, Foley had sought to iden-
tify key processes that underpin how people with ALS engage
with healthcare services. The sample comprised 34 people in
total. By the 30th interview of the study, the primary category
of loss had been identified and dimensionalized. Loss encom-
passed multiple dimensions including the loss of control. The
category of control had been constructed and part of it, processes
constitutive of exerting control in healthcare services. Subse-
quent interviewing sought to generate an understanding of the
relationship between these categories (i.e., loss and control) in
order to fully saturate them and build theory. At the outset of the
31st interview, participant #31 spoke at length about loss in ALS
including loss of control, for example:

P#31: I find myself in a constant battle, day after day because
this MND [ALS] alien that has taken over my body and
that I have not too much defence against. Normally in a
war you win some battles; I’m losing all the battles and I
know for a fact I’m going to lose the war. The war is lost
already because MND is going to take me anyhow, but
I’m not winning any battles, because I feel the arms that
I’m provided with in no way, can in any way defeat or
even hold back this alien that is taking me over.

The literature on loss and adaptation in ALS had pointed to
how people with ALS can regain control and restore normality
in their lives. In order to further interrogate the relationship
between loss and control, Foley continued through probing and
clarifying questions to generate data on how participant #31
perceived loss of control and the strategies that participant #31
used to cope with loss of control:

Interviewer (F): You mentioned at the beginning of the inter-
view... that you feel absolutely no control over
the condition?

P#31: ... I’m terrified of my life being in everybody
else’s hands except my own... the thought of
like sitting in a wheelchair paralyzed and
depending on other people to do for
me... that’s a total nightmare, that is my worst
nightmare. I would hope before I got to that
condition that I would die... It’s very difficult
and already I’m losing control over all of that.

(F): Though you feel less in control, are you aware
of any strategies you might use to try and get
that control back or try and be in control?

P#31: Well I still try and do whatever I can myself but
I’m beginning to realize I’m not going to be
able to control all these things and I really don’t
like the fact that I will depend so totally on
people to do things for me.

This interviewee’s commentary about loss of control indi-
cated to Foley that participant #31 did not feel he was regaining
control but anticipated more loss including more loss of con-
tral. The participant’s communication at the outset of the inter-
view had already suggested that loss in ALS was insurmountable. There seemed little or no possibility for parti-
cipant #31 to overcome his loss because of the uncontrollable
nature of ALS and increased reliance on others including ser-
vices. This was consistent with Foley’s earlier theorization (in
theoretical memos) of the relationship between loss and control
in ALS based on data from other participants who had talked
about loss in ALS. She then probed more into why participant
#31 felt loss in ALS was insurmountable:

(F): Why do you think there is such loss in MND?
P#31: ... [Because] you lose everything, absolutely every-
thing... may not be [all] due only to the physical condi-
tion of MND, but it most certainly is related
psychologically. I used to love in the evening to sit down
and have a glass of wine, bit of cheese, no real desire now.
I’ve no feeling of wanting to do stuff like that [anymore]... . . . Personally, I think my own body is withdraw-
ing from my old life into this new situation and I’m
discarding all the things that I used to do, used to enjoy.
I’m not doing it deliberately... my body is saying you
know, pull back from that and that is what happening.

The data indicated that people living with ALS needed to
come to terms with loss rather than attempt to control the
incurring loss. Foley proceeded to probe:

(F): Is it the potential of not being in control that frightens you
most... as you progress with MND, you give some more
control over to services to look after you?

P#31: . . . The balance [of power] is changed even now, because
when I’m using that walker [walking aid], if [spouse] not
here I can’t even make a cup of tea for myself... . . . But
it’s still important [for services] to be available, when I
need somebody that they are available... [and] to make
decisions when you are in control, when you can pick a
room [for end-of-life care] that you like, when you can
tell them what you want to do, what you want them to do for you.

This participant’s preferences for care indicated that he was still striving to exert control in his interactions with healthcare services even though he had strongly communicated that he was losing control and anticipated further loss of control. Together with earlier theorizing about how participants were engaging with healthcare services in the context of loss, Foley theorized the process of exerting control in healthcare services as a means of coming to terms with loss (Foley & Timonen, 2016; Foley et al., 2014b). This example of interviewing illustrates how interviewing in a grounded theory study can steer theoretical sampling to build theory. Questions followed a line of inquiry based on the data generated and proceeded to tease out the relationship between key concepts and categories. Teasing out the relationship between key concepts and categories in interviewing helped to saturate categories (in this case, loss and control). Moreover, sampling for concepts and categories both in and outside of the dataset and then probing in the context of similarities and anomalies between the interview data and what was already known about loss and control in ALS, was key to the theory building process. Examination of the relationship between loss and control for people with ALS resulted in novel theory about how people with ALS adapt to loss (Foley et al., 2014b).

**How Does Co-Construction of Data Through Interviewing Help to Accomplish Theoretical Sampling?**

How co-construction of data occurs in grounded theory is a matter of debate (O’Connor et al., 2018). In constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), researchers actively engage with strategies that reveal their preconceptions which can become part of the analysis. In contrast, in classical grounded theory, the researcher seeks to bracket her preconceptions and so the researcher’s preconceptions become subjected to the same analytical process as for any concepts emerging from the data (Glaser, 2002). We take a general view that data generation in grounded theory is a co-constructive process because the theoretical sensitivity (i.e., the ability to give meaning to data and to understand what has relevance to the inquiry) that is needed for theoretical sampling implicates the researcher and participants in every stage of generating data. Here, we illustrate with examples how sensitivity to the positions adopted by both the researcher and participants in grounded theory interviewing facilitates theoretical sampling.

As mentioned, in the ALS study, data had pointed to the importance for participants to feel in control of their care. Prior to conducting the study, Foley had worked as a clinical specialist occupational therapist with people with neurological disorders including people with ALS. She had observed prior to the study how people with ALS balanced between accepting, resisting, and declining assistance from services as they advanced in their condition (Foley, 2004, 2007). Early interviewing in the study had not featured any questions around acceptance (or not) of healthcare services or indeed acceptance (or not) of ALS. However, as the study proceeded, data reflected varying degrees of acceptance of ALS and on some occasions refusal to accept ALS. Multiple incidents were also identified whereby patients felt conflicted between recognizing the need for services and wanting to avoid or delay services. Foley reflected on her prior experience of ALS patients and proceeded to ask questions of participants that could help tease out how varying degrees of acceptance of ALS or indeed non-acceptance in ALS, might frame how participants balanced between accepting, resisting or declining assistance from healthcare services.

In a study conducted by Elliott O’Dare on how older people forge and maintain intergenerational friendships (Elliott O’Dare et al., 2020), co-construction of data in interviewing was key to theoretical sampling. In the initial semi-structured interviews, Elliott O’Dare had attempted to “get at” the nuances and complexities in the processes of forming and maintaining an intergenerational friendship. She posed the open question “can you tell me about any downsides or difficulties to having a younger friend?” because her own experience and some extant literature had indicated that in same-age friendships, downsides or difficulties between friends could lead to unhappiness within a friendship or cessation of a friendship. However, participants perceived no downsides or difficulties to having a younger friend and instead spoke extensively about commonalities between them and their younger friend(s). Elliott O’Dare reflected on her standpoint from which she had posed the open question and honed her theoretical sensitivity to what were in many cases, unexpected dimensions to intergenerational friendship formation and maintenance for older people. In subsequent interviews, the category of “difference” emerged whereby participants judged “difference” between them and their younger friends not as a downside or difficulty, but rather as an interesting and valued part of their intergenerational friendships. The emergence of the category of “differences” seemed at first contradictory to participants’ earlier descriptions of commonalities with younger friends. Elliott O’Dare then proceeded in subsequent interviews to theoretically sample for the dimensions and variance of “differences” to decipher how “differences” in intergenerational friendships also serve to maintain friendships for older people. On completion of interviewing, “difference” emerged a key construct for understanding the process of intergenerational friendship maintenance for older people (Elliott O’Dare et al., 2020).

The theoretical sampling process entailed in Conlon’s work described earlier involves the researcher looking out for talk that was previously silenced and tracking novelty in this data particularly aligned with notions of autonomy and new framings of abortion discourse. This is not only a process of co-constructing meaning but also a process of co-constructing space for talk. Forms this careful exploration is taking include for example, listening and watching out carefully for often non-verbal (gestural) clues to the embodied processes, remarking on
gestures to the participants, allowing space in the interaction for non-verbal gestures to evolve into talk, and sharing hunches with participants about emerging insights from earlier interviews with women in subsequent interviews. Careful tuning into women’s openness to taking this direction in the talk is required however and this entails researchers carefully parsing and analyzing each interview through fieldnotes and transcribed talk. The challenge in this work is steering a course between longstanding social science conventions for qualitative interviews (e.g., be neutral and do not make participants uneasy) and creating a safe space where previously taboo topics and silenced discussions are allowed to be brought out into the open. Shifting to online interviewing for a proportion of data collection under restrictions arising from the evolving Covid-19 pandemic (Jowett, 2020) will provide insight into how online interviewing shapes further the co-construction of openness and “space” to talk. Participants’ consent to audio-visual recording provides opportunities to further examine participant expression in the course of both interview formats including the role played by researcher and participant in the co-construction of data and subsequently, in the process of theoretical sampling.

In this section, we have shown how theoretical sampling via interviewing in grounded theory necessitates sensitivity to the positions of both the researcher and participants. We have also shown that meanings constructed by both the researcher and participants drive theoretical sampling in the process of interviewing. In a novel direction, we also discuss the co-construction of space to talk. In our examples, the researcher’s insight about data and context combined with procedures to sample for concepts based on participants’ accounts and experiences, meant that both the researcher and participants shaped how interviews progressed toward theoretical sampling.

Can Interviewing Impose Restrictions on Researchers to Pursue Theoretical Sampling?

Interviews are overtly language-based research instruments. The use of language is central to the process of interviewing (Polkinghorne, 2005) and, in grounded theory, to the process of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). This is the case for face-to-face and remote real-time interviewing. For example, it is possible to steer questions in online interviews in a manner that is similar to steering questions in face-to-face interviews because it is first and foremost about what happens in the course of the interview that facilitates theoretical sampling. Interviewing in grounded theory is an evolving process and so the language used by the interviewer needs to be highly responsive, reflexive and adaptable in order to phrase questions and probe in a manner that serves the purpose of theoretical sampling. However, the researcher’s reflexivity and ability to adapt questioning are tested in interview situations where the desirability of theoretical sampling is questionable. The interviewer needs to be attuned to, for example, the importance of silences or potential distress on the part of participants and judge how the line of inquiry might best proceed—or be terminated. Judgment about whether to close a line of inquiry or keep it open is highly contextualized and depends on multiple factors. For example, in the study focused on how inter-generational solidarity is constructed across generations as mentioned earlier (Timonen et al., 2013), an interviewee by the pseudonym of “Iris” (age 87) associated being in need of care with being a burden, and proudly declared her intention not to become a “burden” on her adult children. At this point, the interviewer could have probed further into feelings behind this strongly expressed determination “not to be a burden.” However, principles of non-maleficence suggested that lines of probing that might give rise to intensely uncomfortable feelings (in this case, possibly fear and anxiety) were to be avoided. Instead of probing further into the notion of “burden,” the interview proceeded in a closely related direction of theoretical sampling in this study (strategies in cultivating self-care and independence in view of perceived “busyness” of adult children’s lives; see Conlon et al., 2014).

In contrast, the context of interviewing people with ALS about their experience of healthcare services was very different. Not only were participants informed that interviews could result in a degree of emotional distress, participants’ accounts in of themselves were embedded in the context of living with a rapidly progressive and terminal condition. For example, some participants had in the early stages of data collection voiced uncertainty about end-of-life care. Foley pursued this line of inquiry and in places, looked for conditions that provoked uncertainty or conversely reassured participants about end-of-life care. Asking questions of participants about their expectations of end-of-life care found that uncertainty for participants was alleviated when they had trust in healthcare professionals who they felt had the capacity and expertise to deliver on their preferred choices for end-of-life care (Foley et al., 2014c).

Grounded theory interviews on sensitive topics can proceed in directions that the data has sensitized the research to go. For example, in conducting interviews with women on the experience of abortion, Conlon has found that an open-ended approach to interviewing allowed the parameters of the inquiry on a research topic that is highly fraught in broader social and political discourses to emerge from the interview data itself. As illustrated, creating conditions for where the interview is a safe space to talk and where talk did not have to be so carefully mediated by discourses that usually prevail abortion was conducive to theoretical sampling. Here, the opportunity to talk freely without being concerned about sensitivities of others that participants were in a dependent relationship with, or about being judged or stigmatized for having an abortion is allowing novel concepts not featured in literature on this topic to date emerge in interviews.

In some cases, difficult emotions such as fear might also emerge quite spontaneously in interview accounts and can be probed into. For example, when using focus groups to interview key stakeholders (service users, home-care workers, nursing and other health professionals, and policy makers) about their experiences, expectations and delivery of home-care services, Timonen and a colleague (Lolich) found that service
users felt fortunate in having home-care services but also feared the possibility of losing these services. Explicit expressions of fear by older adults led Lolich and Timonen to probe further into participants’ accounts to identify key conditions in home-care services that can provoke concern for service users. Subsequent probing during focus group interviews identified that unpredictability and ambiguity surrounding funding and allocation of services were among the reasons for service users’ fear of losing services. Service users’ fears surrounding access to services also included the fear of not being able to regain access to services if discharged from services. In some cases, it emerged that older adults had continued to hold onto services even if their care needs had diminished for fear that services could be difficult or impossible to re-access in the future (Lolich & Timonen, 2020).

There is of course the question of how far theoretical sampling can go in interview-based research. Theoretical sampling for concepts via analysis of interview text on its own might not always capture key incidents and conditions that are ripe for elaboration. Indeed, talk-dependent qualitative methodological can have limitations because they do not routinely incorporate attention to affect or materiality (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2017). Conlon’s work reported here particularly raises questions about how to resolve the limitations of talk as data. We have shown that while there may be some occasions when specific questions may change in the interest of participants, interviewing even in the most sensitive of topics is an effective means to pursue theoretical sampling. Focused attention on participants’ affect and behavior in addition to what is communicated by “talk,” can progress theoretical sampling in a grounded theory study. In our experience, interviewing has not limited our scope for theoretical sampling.

Conclusion

We have in this article shown how interviewing can be employed effectively as a vehicle for theoretical sampling in grounded theory, even when words are hard to find to fit experiences being researched. We have also shown how sampling for concepts and categories through grounded theory interview-based studies, extends well beyond sampling for participants to generate concepts, categories and theory. Generating and analyzing data through the course of interviewing allows the researcher to probe into, expand on, and saturate key concepts and categories which collectively steer the course of the inquiry and subsequent sampling.

Theoretical sampling is not limited to generating data through active interviewing. However, in the absence of theoretical sampling, it is not possible to grasp the basis for modifying interview questions in the course of interviewing or to decipher what or how questions should be asked, and for what purpose. It is a valuable exercise to consider the amenability of a prospective grounded theory interview-based study to theoretical sampling at the design stage of the study. Reflexivity and adaptability on the part of the researcher is required for formulating questions at all stages of the inquiry. Sensitivity to the positions of both the interviewer and interviewees in data collection and the wider contexts framing the inquiry and analysis aids theoretical sampling.

The purpose of this article was to make interviewing as a tool for theoretical sampling in grounded theory accessible to researchers who are new to the grounded theory method. We are also motivated (along with other instruction on theoretical sampling and interviewing—the wealth of scholarship referenced in and beyond this article on these topics) by the wish to make theoretical sampling in grounded theory very accessible to all researchers. Here, we have illustrated with examples, the merit and feasibility of interviewing as a vehicle for theoretical sampling and how effective interviewing can be to fuel theoretical sampling. We have also demonstrated how we anticipate interviewing having a place in theoretical sampling and grounded theory for some time to come. Being clear about the emphasis in theoretical sampling on sampling for concepts over and above sampling to generate more data from more participants, is key to generating highly conceptualized data through interviewing in grounded theory.

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