An exploration of Grounded Theory with reference to self and identity of part-time, mature learners in Higher Education

being a thesis submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the University of Hull

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July 2013
Abstract

This study explores ‘Constructivist’ Grounded Theory, a methodology advanced by Charmaz (2006) to serve as a redevelopment of Glaser and Strauss’ original version. The study’s focus is a group of mature learners on a part-time Higher Education programme in relation to ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Data from thirteen in-depth interviews are analysed, enabling the construction of a data-driven ‘Grounded Theorisation’. Commensurate with the methodology, no extant theoretical framework is applied to this analysis. The findings from the ‘Grounded Theorisation’ were that while participants encounter varying tensions relating to the accomplishment of their own particular goals, a unifying principle is ‘operating within constraints’. Expressions of how they manage the difficulties presented in these constraining circumstances are interlaced with particular ‘selves’. On an individual level, participants confront the various pressures they experience with ‘selves’ that coincide with their coping strategies. A self that resists a sense of being ‘channelled’ by the demands of the course may take precedence. Other presentations of self include one resigned to taking a patient stance as an explorer in an undulating journey. A further analytic concept developed concerns ‘containing’. This may involve monitoring the impact of studying upon one’s life; alternatively, ‘containing’ may pertain to a personal resolve to block out external impediments and remain on track. When the literature was consulted, the Grounded Theorisation resonated with the extant concepts: ‘identity work’ and ‘framing’ of self. ‘Identity work’ entails thinking of self as resistant, submitting only reluctantly. Further, to be ‘bloody minded’ and resist, rather than circumvent obstacles, might represent a student’s sense-making and their efforts to maintain a feeling of integrity amidst turbulence. Finally, participants’ collective commitment to clearing hurdles is glimpsed via particular constructs and shared phrases: participants ‘frame’, or ‘make sense of’ themselves and their actions with respect to navigating obstacles presented by the course.
# Contents

## Introduction

8

### Chapter One - The evolution of Grounded Theory

13

1.1 Introduction 13

1.2 Broader issues in qualitative research 18

1.3 Questions surrounding structure and process 23

1.4.1 Situational Analysis 27

1.4.2 The emphasis on ‘discourse’ 30

1.4.3 A brief account of the 3 types of map 32

1.5 Summary 34

### Chapter Two - Doing Grounded Theory: second generation Grounded Theory approaches

36

2.1 Introduction 36

2.2.1 Differing logic and preoccupations 36

2.2.2 Charmaz’ focus upon ‘meaning’ 37

2.3.1 Clarke’s focus on ‘situatedness’ 37

2.3.2 Attention to structural elements 38

2.3.3 How are these procedures put into practice? 39

2.3.4 Creating situational maps 40

2.3.5 Creating social worlds and arenas maps 41

2.3.6 Creating positional maps 41

2.4.1 Core Grounded Theory tenets 42
2.4.2 Analytic strategies performed in all Grounded Theory approaches 44

2.4.3 The making of comparisons 44

2.4.4 Theoretical sampling 45

2.4.5 Theory development 45

2.5.1 The process of starting the fieldwork 46

2.5.2 The use of sensitising concepts 48

2.5.3 The practice of coding 51

2.6 Which approach to use? 54

Chapter Three - The Grounded Theory journey in practice 57

3.1 Introduction 57

3.2.1 The context for the empirical study 57

3.2.2 Ethical considerations 58

3.2.3 ‘Intensive’ interviewing 60

3.2.4 Analysis of interview data 62

3.2.5 Understanding the coding process 63

3.3.1 Strategy 1: A4 Cluster Diagrams 66

3.3.2 Strategy 2: A3 Diagrams 70

3.3.3 Issues regarding levels of abstraction 74

3.3.4 Strategy 3: focused memos with A3 diagrams 75

3.3.5 Integration of categories 76

3.4 Summary 80
Chapter Four - Grounded Theory analysis

4.1 ‘Resisting being channelled’ 81
4.2 ‘Monitoring/seeing how I go’ and ‘containing’ 91
4.3 ‘Containing’ 96
4.4 ‘Forging a path’ 102
4.5 ‘Connection through shared commitment’ 105
4.6 Summary 109

Preface to Chapters Five and Six 111

Chapter Five - ‘Turning to the literature’ part 1: conceptual literature 114

5.1.1 Introducing the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ 115
5.1.2 A snapshot of the wider terrain 118
5.1.3 A predominantly ‘social’ view of self and identity 121
5.1.4 A fork in the road: Chicago school, Iowa school 123
5.1.5 Following the ‘interactionist’ line 123
5.1.6 An interdisciplinary merger 125
5.1.7 ‘De-centring’ the self 128
5.2 Alternatives to ‘decentring the self’ 130
5.3 The notion of ‘multiple selves’ 131
5.4.1 Conceptualisation within the narrative approach 134
5.4.2 Ontological and epistemological issues 134
5.4.3 The narrative approach within empirical research 135
5.5 Ordering frameworks for conceptualising self and identity 136
5.6.1 Achieving a multi-dimensional understanding 140
5.6.2 The possibility of reconciling different conceptual positions 140

5.6.3 Wider theorising – stepping beyond the confines of the social sciences and into the wider field 141

Chapter Six - ‘Turning to the literature’: part 2 144

6.1 Introduction 144

6.2.1 ‘Self’ and ‘identity’ and mature students in Higher Education 144

6.2.2 Cohesive theoretical frameworks for ‘identity’ 148

6.3 Considering the ‘affective dimension’ 153

6.4 Students in HE settings and the connection to identity 158

6.4.1 ‘Mature students’ as a category 158

6.4.2 Researching the ‘Mature student’ group 159

6.5 Different uses of identity in empirical literature 160

6.5.1 Understood as one’s ‘changed self’ 160

6.5.2 ‘Identity work’ and inhabiting pre-existing positions 165

6.5.3 Thinking about ‘learner identity’ 170

6.5.4 ‘Framing’ an identity ‘as’ 175

6.6 Concluding remarks 178
# Chapter Seven - Reflection upon the Grounded Theory journey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Issues presented by the interpretive nature of the coding</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Issues of Grounded Theory’s distinctiveness as a methodology</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>When to turn to the literature and ‘data-driven’ concepts</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Issues encountered surrounding interviewing</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Issues relating to the writing of the literature review</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Conclusion

195

## References

202

## Appendices

7i  ‘Free-writing exercise’  213

## List of Figures

3a  ‘An example of coding alongside a section of interview transcript’  61

3b  ‘A4 cluster diagram’  67

3c  ‘A3 focused coding diagram’  71

3d  ‘A3 memo-writing example’  77

3e  ‘Diagram with memo’  79

4a  ‘Grounded Theory diagram’  110
Introduction

This study explores a second generation ‘Constructivist Grounded Theory’ methodology proposed by Kathleen Charmaz (2006). It is described as ‘second-generation’ as Charmaz belongs to a group of pupils taught by Glaser and Strauss, who convened four decades after their well known original version was published in 1967. The aim of these ‘second generation’ grounded theorists was to develop Glaser and Strauss’ version of the methodology which had come under some scrutiny over the decades. Attention to how Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology is executed forms the larger part of this thesis. Charmaz’ (ibid) methodology was an attractive proposition as it offers inroads to the exploration of the meaning-making on the part of the research participants. In particular, Charmaz utilises the methodology in order to attune to the implicit meanings generated by participants which can be discerned only through an in-depth analysis of lengthy interviews. This requires attending to the use of particular turns of phrase and the constructs evident in participants’ talk and what they seem to take for granted.

I have adopted an ‘interpretive’ approach, which lies at the heat of Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, as I wished to construct an understanding of participants’ experience. The ‘interpretive’ stance means one does not purport to have arrived at the ‘truth’, nor is it assumed that there is a ‘reality’ awaiting discovery through the use of tools which measure in the spirit of positivism. Interpretivism rejects the premise that a situation can be explained in terms of neatly defined variables, or that the truth can be excavated through minimising the effects of the researcher. Of utmost importance is that the researcher endeavours, as Charmaz (ibid) advocates, to enter the worlds of their participants. Indeed, human beings are taken as active meaning-makers which leads on to a further defining feature of the interpretive stance: the researcher learns how participants view their circumstances and attends to the meanings they create. This also involves consideration of how different interpretations may be arrived at and thinking about the data in different ways. As such, transparency regarding the construction process and reflexivity concerning how one has interpreted the data are paramount.

The thesis is organised as a chronological learning journey, delineating how I have come to understand the methodology and apply the principles of thinking about the data espoused by Charmaz. Importantly, it offers no prescriptions: the ‘constructivist’ grounded theorist must be prepared to make decisions as they explore their own data and the guidelines in texts take the form of analytic principles which need to be embraced. Indeed, one is armed only with a mindset rather than a detailed map. Having to keep to the forefront of one’s mind the
techniques central to the act of conducting a Constructivist Grounded Theory study serves only as a general orienting device.

This journey has involved the development of particular methodological strategies. These are depicted diagrammatically in chapter three in order that they can be useful for other researchers taking on the challenge of conducting a Constructivist Grounded Theory study. Perhaps somewhat unconventionally, the literature review is contained in later chapters of the thesis. Rather than the literature being consulted at the beginning of the research process, it is turned to after the ‘grounded theorisation’ has taken shape. This may seem like an unusual manoeuvre, but it aligns with the methodology.

It is due to the concern embedded in the methodology to arrive at data-driven concepts generated from empirical analysis that extant concepts drawn from literature are not developed prior to the data collection and analysis phases within this thesis. Furthermore, the nature of what the issues might be for participants and the literature they might relate to does not frame the empirical exploration. To approach the data collection and analysis phase with ready-made ideas of what the nature of the ‘problem’ is for participants contravenes the methodology. Indeed, the rationale for such a methodological approach to empirical exploration is that one should not be blinkered by ways in which others have conceived of similar phenomena under study. To do this, in Constructivist Grounded Theory terms, would mean a conceptual framework is ‘applied to’ rather than generated via the procedures central to the methodology.

The ‘grounded theorisation’ generated in this study is presented as a written narrative using headings which denote its constituent categories. It serves as the ‘data-driven’ analysis since literature has not been drawn upon in the construction of the categories. As such, it is not overshadowed by clearly defined theoretical frameworks or concepts. Chapter four presents the analysed findings as they stand before they are brought to bear upon the literature. The literature review commences from chapter Five. Once literature has been consulted, the ‘data-driven’ analysis, that is, the ‘grounded theorisation’ presented in chapter four, is examined in relation to extant concepts. In other words, the empirical findings which have been analysed in the form of a ‘grounded theorisation’ are then examined in relation to the literature. This occurs in chapter six.

The grist for this application of the methodology is ‘self’ and the ‘identity’ of the participants. Discussion around ‘self’ and ‘identity’ has intrigued me for some time. This interest has mounted in connection with what it means in relation to the experiences of learners within Higher Education. Firstly my approach to the notions ‘self’ and ‘identity’ needs to be
explained. I take them to represent complex ideas. Moreover, phrases such as “it’s just part of my identity” are used as short hand way of expressing one’s entire self, as though one’s ‘identity’ were a cohesive package containing a unified assembly of actions, ideas, visions, self-directed conversations and outward expression. However, when the implications of these rather glib comments in relation to self and identity are examined, it is evident that short, rather clichéd uses of it in day to day life obscure the intricate nature of these notions.

My eclectic educational background, which includes Fine Art, Graphic Design, Culture and Media Studies and Educational Studies, has served as the bedrock for my interest in the philosophical debates which are threaded through the conceptualisation of ‘self’ and ‘identity’. In particular, Culture and Media Studies and Educational Studies, both renowned for being multidisciplinary, contain a variety of perspectives with a discernible philosophical component. Such an amalgamation of influences is united by a particular aspect: each attends to the way people make their lives meaningful. Integral to an emphasis upon meaning-making within these multidisciplinary approaches is a strong empirical thread championing both naturalistic and more ‘poststructuralist’ approaches to understanding individuals’ lives. Having studied a range of perspectives on ‘self’ and ‘identity’ from more social-psychological and sociological angles has lead to my being acutely aware of the differing assumptions that might be held. Awareness of these has perhaps contributed to my approach to ‘self’ and ‘identity’ in the thesis. Indeed, they involve complex conceptualisation: questions of how they can be known serve as bones of contention for those with differing philosophical and often conflicting standpoints.

My experiences derived from being a lecturer in ‘Educational Studies’ have furthered my interest in ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Mature-aged undergraduate learners caught my attention as they would spend much time, more so than traditional-aged learners, conversing with me during discussion times and tutorials. Being in Higher Education appeared to affect them in ways which appeared to give rise to much introspection. Furthermore, the stories they relayed ignited my interest in connecting their experiences on the course with the ‘self’ and ‘identity’. This became heightened during a memorable episode when one learner questioned the course content. During this interchange, the learner chose to speak of their home and their library: “you only need to see what I’ve got at home, I have a whole room lined with books – I’ve read everything on education as a subject and this isn’t in it - so why are we doing this?” A sense of discomfort or change in demeanour seemed conspicuous for mature aged learners when they encountered new material which was not what they had expected. As such, I became attuned to the possibility that new ideas might conflict with previously held ideas, particularly when the learner holds them very closely.
Having access to learners with whom I had no conflict of interests on a degree programme at a Higher Education Institution provided an opportunity to inquire into questions of ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Grounded Theory as a methodology came to my attention as it is offers a way of looking afresh at the empirical world. This struck a chord and concurred with an experience during my Masters Degree. I had, for my Masters Dissertation, ‘applied’ the conceptual framework of the work of Michel Foucault using broadly ethnomethodological principles of data analysis in relation to what learners on a PGCE programme had to say about their experience. This gave rise to a realisation on my part as to just how much a distinct framework could overshadow and shape the data. Indeed, what I was observing and hearing during data collection and analysis, I felt, could easily be squeezed or ‘cherry picked’ to fit this framework.

It was as a result of these experiences of imposing or ‘applying’ a framework to the data that I became attracted to Grounded Theory. The original proponents of Grounded Theory methodology, Glaser and Strauss, developed it partly as a way to stimulate fresh ideas and theorising which did not simply slot into extant understandings which could be generated in the researcher’s arm chair. This is continued in Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology. I was enticed by the possibility of being able to explore and ‘get my hands dirty’, so to speak, in the empirical world without viewing it through a theoretical lens. Moreover, I felt less inspired by the thought of imposing a framework as it was likely to result in my seeing the world in the same way as the creators of that framework. This may also lead to arriving at similar research findings to those of others adopting the framework. In this study, there is no pre-figuring of exactly how experiences on the course bear upon self and identity prior to data collection and analysis.

The empirical data within the thesis are derived from thirteen in-depth interviews lasting from forty five to seventy minutes each with five mature learners on an education related part-time ‘top-up’ BA programme in a UK Higher Education Institution. Each learner has undertaken approximately three years of study at Foundation level prior to the eighteen month ‘top-up phase’ which has to be passed in order to qualify for a BA Honours degree. The learners are classed as part-time and much of the face to face contact between learner and tutor occurs on the university campus after working hours. I have no pedagogic relation to the learners and will not have in the future. They were interviewed individually either two or three times over a period of ten months at the university. The first interviews commenced five months before the end of the top-up degree phase and ended five months after their graduation.
The main body of the thesis is organised into the following chapters:

**Chapter one** examines the evolution of Grounded Theory methodology, from its initial conception in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss. This includes attending to the concerns which had prompted attempts to reformulate it and issues within the wider methodological field of qualitative inquiry.

**Chapter two** provides a more detailed view of ‘second-generation’ Grounded Theory methodology. This involves identifying the key principles such that one can be considered to be doing ‘Grounded Theory’ as a distinct methodology. It also addresses the philosophical issues which subtly distinguish the two key approaches which are the main constituents of second-generation Grounded Theory: Charmaz’ (2006) ‘Constructivist Grounded Theory’ and Clarke’s (2005) ‘Situational Analysis’. The chapter homes in on the practical components of the methodology as indicated in these methodological texts.

**Chapter three** delineates the methodological procedure of Constructivist Grounded Theory in practice. This is about making sense, in more concrete terms, of the principles imparted in the methodological texts, many of which are rather opaque. This includes some practical strategies which I have developed to address this particular study.

**Chapter four** presents the data-driven ‘grounded theorisation’ of this study; that is, the empirical data collected and analysed in adherence to the conventions of Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology. This ‘grounded theorisation’ comprises categories which are written in the form of a narrative.

The next two chapters represent a point within the thesis when a turn to extant literature surrounding questions of ‘self’ and ‘identity’ is made. **Chapter five** expounds the conversations surrounding the conceptual understanding of self and identity in the wider field and takes a panoramic view. **Chapter six** then turns to the use of self and identity in educational contexts with a particular focus upon students in Higher Education and empirical studies conducted in this regard. Chapter six also contains the synthesis between this literature and the ‘grounded theorisation’ presented in chapter four.

**Chapter seven** is a reflective chapter which considers the issues arising from deployment of Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology. This involves my reflection upon the methodological processes from a more experienced standpoint. This is followed by a concluding chapter which also contains reflection on the main implications of the study for Higher Education Institutions.
Chapter One

The evolution of Grounded Theory

1.1 Introduction

Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) creation of the Grounded Theory method occurred at a time when the canons of positivism prevailed. Qualitative research was deemed unsystematic and dismissed as subjective and ‘unscientific’ (Goulding, 1999). In response, the partnership devised a means of developing abstract theory about social worlds which was empirically grounded rather than speculative. The grand theories of the era, they thought, were initially conceived away from the context under study. Moreover, these largely ‘arm chair’ theories maintained their position in the field of sociological knowledge as a result of research which was predicated upon their verification in the empirical world. Glaser and Strauss’ criticism was that it was mainly old theories that were tested and retested with a resultant paucity of new or ‘fresh’ theory (ibid). With an emphasis on discovery, rather than entering the field with preconceived concepts, they proposed a method whereby theory was generated from the ground upwards. This required the researcher to analyse whilst in the field and verify concepts brought to light using procedures that checked their empirical grounding (ibid).

Mills et al. (2006) adopt the metaphor of a spiral to describe the way Grounded theory methodology has evolved since its conception in 1967. It has been pulled back and forth between the dialectic methodological fields residing in the qualitative camp. What is now known as original or traditional Grounded Theory, conceived by the partnership of Glaser and Strauss, holds a number of ontological and epistemological precepts which locate it within the objectivist intellectual tradition. In other words, the idea was that the researcher can be a neutral observer and that the single ‘reality’ of a situation could be discerned through the implementation of techniques which secured objectivity. The aspects which distinguish them depend, in part, on the extent to which they adhere to objectivist or constructivist ideals. The latter renders problematic the notion that the researcher can reflect an essential ‘reality’ in a value free manner. Moreover, as Charmaz (2006) maintains, ‘reality’ itself is a construction undergoing continual reconstruction.

In keeping with the spiral metaphor, Mills et al. (2006) stress that the differences in methodological approach are not a matter of binary opposites; rather, there is some oscillation between the two in both traditional Grounded Theory and Strauss and Corbin’s reformulation of it in 1998. It was arguably not until Kathleen Charmaz’ version that a coherent philosophical position could be discerned, or at least a more conscious attempt at identifying one. She notes
that in the contemporary field of qualitative methods, there is some discomfort with the idea that one could ‘discover something in external reality’ along with claims to ‘truth’ and possibility of a ‘neutral, unbiased observer’ (Puddephatt, 2006: 5). Charmaz (2006) believes all data should be taken as that which is filtered through the interpretive lens of the researcher.

An important issue which brings their positions into focus concerns whether theory is considered to be discovered or ‘constructed’. Glaser (1967) regards data as a separate entity to the researcher and that it is incumbent on the researcher to find ways to ‘get into it’ so as to accurately capture it. Moreover, this involves extracting the ‘truth’ from the participants, with the methods proposed for this serving to neutralise the researcher’s subjectivity. This is a point that distinguishes traditional from later Grounded Theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) are more explicit in their contention that the researcher constructs rather than discovers the theory (ibid). Thus they have moved away from objectivist precepts and further towards a constructivist and interpretive mentality whereby the theoretical rendering is not simply reflective, in a realist sense, of a main concern. Instead, they regard the final Grounded Theory as reflecting the way the researcher has assembled data in order to create a plausible account of what is going on (ibid). They contend,

Another researcher, coming from a different theoretical orientation and having another research question, might arrive at quite another interpretation

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998:146)

Thus one cannot use the method to say they have identified the truth of the social context under study. In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasise that the credibility of the researcher lies in a cogent explication of steps leading to the theory: provided the logic of this process is made clear to the reader, then one can have some faith in the research.

Charmaz (2006), in the 21st century, clearly shares this idea and her exposition of Grounded Theory demonstrates adherence to interpretivist and constructivist traditions. Charmaz (ibid), like Strauss and Corbin (1998), views the product of Grounded Theory research as the result of one’s analytic reasoning. Throughout the analytic process delineated in ‘Constructing Grounded Theory’, decisions are explicated in the all important memos – notes made to oneself capturing pivotal analytical moments. These throw light on where to look next and serve as text which expounds, often in narrative format, what appears to be happening. Memos are the sites where codes which really encapsulate or ‘crystallize meanings or actions in the data’ (Charmaz, 2006: 11) become honed and acquire the status of theoretical categories. Categories become raised to a conceptual (or theoretical) level ‘because of their theoretical reach, incisiveness, generic power, and relation to other categories’ (Charmaz,
2006: 139) and offer a more abstract insight into what is happening in so far that they make lots of smaller categories ‘make sense’ or come together.

Importantly, however, a different researcher might not arrive at or see the same conceptual or theoretical significance of a category; or, in other words, they may not identify or propose a theoretical basis for the ‘coming together’ of a multifarious collection of experiences. Whichever theoretical concept is presented, its purpose is that relationships between categories and concepts become better understood. Ultimately, the integrity of the theory – or the ways the parts interlink – betrays the attempt on the part of the researcher to produce a coherent and, using Strauss and Corbin’s dictum, ‘plausible explanation’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 146). Further, with respect to the product of the Grounded Theory research, Charmaz states that her approach ‘explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretative portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it’ (Charmaz, 2006: 10).

Glaser (1967), in his original works, puts his faith in a set of methodological procedures which, in effect, raise pieces of data from the merely descriptive to the theoretical, conceptual level. This is sufficiently abstract to encapsulate the basic social process (Charmaz, 2006). However, it may be more Glaser’s wording that renders him open to attack by constructivists. Indeed, Charmaz (2006) does not eschew the idea that there can be one basic process; however, she is more cautious in singling one out. She takes pains to acknowledge the plurality of social processes in a social world, and, furthermore, contends that any process identified has to be viewed as relative to the actors who perceive it as such. In other words, an essential process will not naturally home into view; it is dependent on an interpretation made by the researcher who must carefully pinpoint from whose ‘vantage points’ it is pertinent to (Charmaz, 2006: 20). Nevertheless, she still alludes to a process that lies at the heart of everything. A very close analysis, she appears to argue, will cut deeper and get down to fundamentals, or in her terms, ‘reveal’ the ‘most basic process’ (ibid). Thus, whilst claims to objectivity or realism are muted by an ‘interpretivist’ discourse, there is an element of establishing what the process is aside from the range of views conveyed by participants.

In the main, Charmaz (2006) criticises Glaser’s approach to the final Grounded Theory ‘theory’ for his assumption that the deployment of his comparative methods is able to yield, in automated fashion, the final product. Ultimately, she contends, Glaser regards analytical development as emergent, rather than based, as her approach advocates, on a construction. Charmaz, when discussing definitions of theory, adopts the phrase ‘imaginative understanding’ (2006: 126) which, when juxtaposed with Glaser’s more ‘positivistic’ terminology, highlights methodological tensions quite starkly. Whilst Charmaz’ language is commensurate with social
constructionist ideals, which assume that realities are multiple and fluid, Glaser’s original terms connote positivist proclivities. One might argue that, as Constructivist Grounded Theory is clearly situated in the conventions for qualitative inquiry of the late 20th Century, it is therefore less likely to adhere purely to positivistic precepts. Nevertheless, in his later works in 2002, Glaser reaffirms his more positivist predilections through the use of the term ‘core variable’ (Glaser, 2002). Thus paradigmatic trends do not lie at the heart of his decisions.

Perhaps what brings Glaser’s (ibid) philosophical position more clearly in focus is the notion of researcher as co-creator. The contention that the researcher helps construct the speech in an interview is a thorny issue for Glaser and deeply at odds with what he sees as true Grounded Theory (ibid). He advocates the passive interview-observation method, which means the interviewer does not speak that much, as a technique for reducing constructivism. Moreover, he attests to capacity of the interviewee to tell the researcher how to view what they are endeavouring to put across in the interview (ibid). Therefore, it seems that while Charmaz (2006) strives for validating what participants mean through checking things out and starting from ‘in vivo terms’, Glaser (2002) is assuming that the correct view of what is being said can be directly transmitted from interviewee to researcher. Further, he contends, the pattern or the ‘truth’ underlying all the words that come out of interviews will be elucidated through use of the constant comparative method (ibid). The insinuation here is that, provided the researcher lets the words cascade during the interview, the application of this method during subsequent analysis will ensure discovery of an essential ‘truth’. Notwithstanding, Grounded Theory is not to be regarded merely as a machine which processes the raw data or individual words; it is, after all, a human interpreting all the pieces. The mechanics of the methods, according to Glaser, lies in the ability to turn variegated interpretations into something more integrated and ‘reduce confusion into an integrated complexity’ (Glaser, 2002: 2).

Glaser (2002) betrays his positivist loyalties further by stating that integral to the method is handling –or more keeping at bay– one’s views. That is, the constant comparative technique ‘reveals’ biases. This is similar to Strauss and Corbin (1998) who suggest techniques for heightening awareness of ‘bias’ in order to provide a way of controlling it. In ‘The Basics of Qualitative Research’ it is through the systematic method of ‘microanalysis’, which affords comparisons of ‘one’s own assumptions’ against the data, that one can guard against any possibility of one’s own assumptions effectively driving the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 68). They warn that researchers will inevitably bring ‘biases, assumptions or beliefs’ though,

...there are gross indicators that bias might be intruding into the analysis, and when certain situations arise, we must stand back and ask ourselves, “What is going on here?”

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 97)
The specific techniques proposed revolve around deeply interrogating the data in terms of how it points to what the researcher is ‘seeing’ in it. In other words, if the researcher thought they saw a theoretically embedded concept such as ‘the confessional’, it is crucial to specify how the data actually point to it (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). They appear to conceive of bias as manifested in instances during the analytic process when the researcher becomes blocked to the data because of preconceived assumptions; thus the analysis will proceed down lines that are commensurate with a prior theory or idea with other elements in the data fading from immediate awareness. At least, they argue, a systematic, conscious microanalysis will ensure that all assumptions will be laid open to scrutiny as they are generated.¹

This is not greatly at odds with Glaser’s Grounded Theory as it involves a technique which is essentially ‘comparative’. However, the difference is that Glaser sees the researcher as an objective onlooker who is able to manage their own values and keep them distinct from the ‘reality’ of what is under study (Puddephatt, 2006). The separation, Charmaz (2006) argues, between values and facts which Glaser asserts is what identifies him as a positivist. Her approach, on the other hand, assumes the interconnected nature of facts and values and that ‘the observers standpoint is not an add-on’ (Puddephatt, 2006: 6). Rather, observations are shaped by the prior experiences of the researcher.

For Charmaz, ‘bias’ would be conceived in terms of the researcher’s biography or ‘subjectivity’ and how this affects the interpretive lens. She sees Strauss and Corbin’s prescription for managing this as too positivist by virtue of its technicality. So, while agreeing with Strauss and Corbin that ‘bias’ is inevitable, what effectively distinguishes her is that bias can become troublesome when one unproblematically applies ‘a language of intention, motivation or strategies’ when the data do not actually support one’s assertions,

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¹ With respect to ‘microanalysis’, Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate taking a specific word and then comparing it (as part of the constant comparative technique) across different data sets - as though it possessed a stable and therefore transcendental meaning. This type of analysis would be fairly alien to postmodern textually based methodologies. Potter (1997) (in his discussion of non-modernist Discourse Analysis) indicates that any analysis of talk goes beyond simply singling out words as signifiers of a particular thing - in isolation from its context. For example, some words such as ‘I dunno’ - unless one were to remain at a banal and superficial analysis – has to be taken as a symptom of a wider discursive system. Of course, using Strauss and Corbin’s ‘micro – analytic’ formulation, one would take this as a straightforward indicator of the speaker ‘not knowing’; this would then be used as a concept or conceptual indicator to be compared with other data; that is, to see if ‘not knowing’ resonated across the data. This is akin to Charmaz’ (2006) approach whereby you do a close analysis of the text to see if certain words can be analytically poignant; however, the methods for deciding which words to chose as and why do not constitute the theoretically cohesive framework deployed in discursive analysis.
If you reframe participants’ statements to fit a language of intention, you are forcing the data into preconceived categories – yours, not theirs…A fine line exits between interpreting data and imposing a pre-existing frame

(Charmaz, 2006: 68)

Thus the basic Grounded Theory principles of ensuring data point to concepts inferred by the researcher still hold. However, Charmaz’ (2006) approach focuses on ways ‘bias’ can intrude through the way one writes up or make sense - in narrative form - of what is going on. This is different from a Glaserian approach which conceives of bias as a distinct and tangible ‘thing’ in itself – a variable which must be controlled. Conversely, Charmaz’ (ibid) ‘Constructivist Grounded Theory’ suggests comfort with the researcher’s subjectivity. Indeed, it need not create anxiety or pose a threat to reliability, but should be an acknowledged factor to be analysed throughout the analytic process.

It is important to note that Charmaz (ibid) does not so much as dispense with the original Grounded Theory methods. Indeed, she regards the ‘practical strategies’ of Grounded Theory as useful to social constructionist oriented research, once cleansed of their positivist ‘epistemological clothing’ (Charmaz, 2006: 403). As the spiral metaphor implies, Grounded Theory has been subject to various attempts to locate it within particular epistemological and ontological frameworks which are not as quick to make naïve claims. This makes it more palatable for those who initially dismissed it as outdated (Charmaz, 2006).

1.2 Broader issues in qualitative research

Whilst Charmaz’ (ibid) methodology is arguably more philosophically coherent, and adheres more fully to constructivist precepts, the thorny issue of ‘accuracy’ appears to linger for some critics. She explicitly disavows the notion of objectivity, though, interestingly, does not dispense with the idea that the researcher should strive for a ‘careful, interpretative understanding’. Thus, as Puddephatt (2006) points out, one of the concerns when interviewing using Constructivist Grounded Theory appears to involve representing the views of the interviewee in a direct way. Of course, this is not necessarily to get down a definitive statement of what they think. Nevertheless, the intention is to get to the heart of their meanings. Charmaz (2006) defends her methodology against charges of objectivism and maintains that constructivist Grounded Theory presupposes that all, even ‘the mundane’, is an interpretation and makes no claims that what is presented is anything other than that.

In her book Constructing Grounded Theory, Charmaz (ibid) proposes certain techniques for achieving accuracy. One way is to start from participants’ own terms, or by simply asking for
verification of one’s own inferences during an interview situation. Interviews remain a useful means of collecting data for the Constructivist Grounded Theorist. One of the strengths of the in-depth interview is that it facilitates a co-created articulated experience. Therefore, what is produced in the interview is not simply a monolithic account, or something which could be simply churned out automatically. It requires a lot of thought on the part of the participant (ibid). Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) appears to use this type of interviewing a great deal, concentrating on participants’ feelings and experiences which are clearly personal and unlikely to be routinely articulated in everyday life.

While these interview techniques indicate ways of obtaining some perspicacious data, it is through the Grounded Theory methodology that meaning ‘comes out’, as one can analyse across situations and integrate fragments of experience. In other words, the researcher can attempt to cover personally meaningful material in the interview and elicit some lengthy accounts suggestive of a high degree of introspection on behalf of the participant; but it is via comparing inferences and filling out and refining categories that a process can be postulated. That is, one which travels across all the interviews and offers a plausible account. So, returning to the question of accuracy, or getting to the heart of participants’ meanings, if one wanted to pin down what the real meaning of it is, it is to be found in the codes and categories (at the conceptual level) enabled by initial coding.

Along with striving for an accurate understanding through interpreting the verbal utterances of the participants – and also comparing this with what they actions they perform – Charmaz (ibid) implies that emotions may, in fact, speak louder than words;

> The researcher may have entered the implicit world of meaning, but not of explicit words. For example, some of my participants spoke of incidents in which they told other people about their illnesses. They described these people as being initially sympathetic, but later they sensed that they were being treated with insincerity, and felt their social and personal worth was being undermined. Often the meaning of such incidents showed in the emotions they expressed when retelling the events, more than in the words they chose

(Charmaz, 2006: 34)

Charmaz (2006) proposes other ways in which processes can be signified without their being directly referred to in speech. For instance, it is in checking out ‘taken for granted aspects of life’ (Charmaz, 2006: 34) that the researcher can enter beyond that which is spoken. The argument here is that meanings which are taken for granted are not going to be signified or leap out at the researcher from a careful reading of isolated interview transcripts. Charmaz (2006), in accordance with original Grounded Theory principles, strongly advocates moving across data sets during the analytic process and provides an example of how a broad view of the situation can prompt insights into how a certain dimension such as ‘time’ can start to make
sense of what is happening. If ‘time’ seems to be pertinent to the participants’ experience, then, through subsequent questioning, this can be checked out empirically by asking questions that may not explicitly refer to, but revolve around ‘time’. In this case, the analyst is assuming a more detached view of their situation which the participants themselves are not necessarily aware of.

Another technique in line with the pursuit of accuracy involves drawing inferences from more than just interviews. Following an ethnographic orientation, Charmaz (ibid) advocates obtaining an understanding from a combination of field observations and even textual documents. This means that what participants say can be compared with what they actually do and this, she implies, is another means by which implicit meanings can be discerned. Again, this is another instance of the comparative technique. This is a more holistic approach and is acknowledged by Charmaz (ibid) as a means of enriching the Grounded Theory process. One might start to question, however, whether it would be better to do a purely ethnographic study, as this type of extended fieldwork will inevitably offer richer data. In light of this, and while stating that Constructivist Grounded Theory can follow ethnographic methods, Charmaz (ibid) contends that Grounded Theory affords more focus and facilitates sampling and data collection that answers analytic questions right from the beginning of the fieldwork. Ethnographic approaches, she asserts, can suffer from a lack of focus and a subsequent mass of data which is analysed near the end of the fieldwork phase (ibid).

Ruane and Ramcharan (2006) take the issue over ‘accuracy’ as the focus of their paper and criticise Charmaz’ Grounded Theory for failure to provide a demonstrable ‘robust method for arriving at meaning’ (Ruane and Ramcharan, 2006: 310). With reference to an overarching category named ‘inappropriate imbalance of power’, which, in turn, subsumed the smaller categories indicated by each fragment of talk, they stress that inappropriate imbalance of power was not actually stated by participants;

Rather, this applied category reflected the analyst’s understanding of the meaning inherent within informants’ talk. How did the analyst hear it this way? How can a family resemblance be detected and understood within speech acts of differing content?

(Ruane and Ramcharan, 2006: 310)

They argue that the process of abstract category generation central to Grounded Theory does not grant the researcher access to the meanings intended by the participants. Indeed, it is through the very process of categorizing through the adoption of headings such as ‘inappropriate imbalance of power’ that each fragment of talk becomes detached from ‘the speaker’s individual situated meanings’ (Ruane and Ramcharan, 2006: 311). This represents a crucial point for them. Furthermore, Grounded Theory categorisation is founded upon
meanings inferred by the analyst right from the beginning of the coding process. When analysing talk, for instance, the researcher’s inferences are mined from a stock of cultural resources which are instrumental in understanding something in a particular way. If the researcher draws on these taken for granted meanings when making sense of what a participant says, the fear is that these are so tacit they are adopted uncritically.

With these alleged limitations in mind, Ruane and Ramcharan (2006) postulate ‘Membership Categorization Analysis’ (MCA), alongside Grounded Theory methods, as a means of staying close to what is actually said and being certain about what is meant. Thus they have rendered highly problematic the idea of ‘interpretative trust’ which, they argue, underpins Grounded Theory methodology. As such, they draw the distinction between first and second order constructs; that is, what is meant by the ‘informer’ and what is inferred (on an alleged second level) by the researcher. Further, it is through the deployment of their proposed method that the researcher can arrive at ‘demonstrable “first order” meanings’ (Ruane and Ramcharan, 2006: 312), rather than those merely picked up by the researcher.

The idea is that by analyzing language one can discern what the speaker thinks in a way that goes beyond common sense interpretation. Through a systematic analysis of excerpts of talk transcript, one can identify values underpinning the very words contained therein and thus get closer to real meaning. This involves examining how participants bring people into their discourse with respect to the categories they perceive them as belonging to. This is fundamental in conferring meaning. Category membership of any person referred to is important in so far that it denotes the possibilities and limitations of their actions, or more specifically, the set of specific expectations and obligations attached to a person of a particular category. This becomes crystallised once the researcher hears other categories in a story or excerpt which place it in context. Thus the categories of agents identified can carry with them a particular meaning only in the presence of another category. So, with regard to Sack’s famous example: The baby cried. The mommy picked it up, one thinks of the category set of ‘family’ and relatedness as one joins together the baby and ‘mommy’ (Perakyla, 2005: 873). It is the contextualizing function of the mother that helps it to be heard as a sentence connoting a relationship; further, the action of picking up is directly associated with this category – as a typical or even normative action (Perakyla, 2005).

The point is that, using MCA, the analyst can gain insight into moral positions or norms through identifying the categories underlying the words that are chosen. Words, of course, can be floating signifiers and potentially belong to any category, but the meanings of an utterance can be discerned when studying the combination of categories the words belong to,
...at any event, a person may be referred to by using many alternative categories... Merely by bearing in mind that there is always more than one category available for description of a given person, the analyst always asks “Why this categorization now?”

(Perakyla, 2005: 873)

MCA could be applied to a text, in which case the analyst would ask how it is constructed to be understood or ‘heard’ in a certain way (ibid); but it could also be applied to interview excerpts in order to discern how something is put across by the speaker. Indeed, as Ruane and Ramcharan (2006) imply, MCA analysis can illuminate how utterances are constructed so as to be heard in a particular way.

This type of analysis, it would appear, presupposes that the intention or ‘first order constructs’ can be pinned down. However, the question remains as to whether the utterance of a speaker can be taken, through this particular mode of analysis, to denote an intention. Of course, a specific set of values can be inferred; but is this what the informer wished to communicate? In other words, are the underlying values equal to what the participant was intending to convey at the time? This type of textual analysis assumes that one should not attend to what appears to be said, drawing upon cultural meanings interviewer and interviewee share, but that an analytic lens needs to be deployed to show what must be meant. Ruane and Ramcharan (ibid) imply that such a close analytic method provides the revered ‘robustness’ that Grounded Theory lacks. This brings into focus the differences between textual analysis and more fieldwork based methodologies. The latter take as the flesh of their analysis the interpretation arising from interaction between two persons with cultural knowledge. Furthermore, they take a wider view across many things said and recorded in transcripts.²

Constructivist Grounded Theory does not rely on purely common sense inferences, that is, what one might infer when simply listening without any analytical lens; nor does it take things simply at face value. Indeed, Charmaz warns that doing so may result in purely ‘outsider analyses’ (2006: 49). Rather than relying purely on interpretations or intuitions occurring at the time of the interview, one conducts a close analysis of words within transcribed interviews. Certain words uttered by the interviewee, which the researcher studies after the interview, might then be taken as indicators of that which is pertinent to the participants’ experience - their relevance and pertinence becoming secured once a demonstrable to link other data is

² Many textual methods, on the other hand, take a single text – an excerpt of talk for instance - as bounded. The idea that what is contained therein is enclosed and sufficient in itself as a unit of analysis raises some complex issues. As Hammersley (2008) contends, within an entirely text-based paradigm, certain questions are raised surrounding where the selected text begins and ends; how much contextualising information is needed; who has selected this excerpt and the extent to which one can generalise beyond this.
made. Thus, again, analytic inferences need to fit the data (Charmaz, 2006). However, Charmaz (ibid) appears to be saying that close analysis of a transcript, whether word by word or line by line, facilitates a fresh view of the data. It seems that by going over the data again and comparing words across contexts one starts to ‘see’ things differently rather than perhaps getting too ‘immersed in your respondents’ worldviews’ (Charmaz, 2006: 51). The distance is afforded through zooming out from the specific sentence and not attending to single interactions. This removal from context, as previously mentioned, is what advocates of MCA took issue with.

1.3 Questions concerning structure and process

The methods advocated in Constructivist Grounded Theory are commensurate with constructionist principles in that the primary concern is to identify the way reality is constructed for those under study. However, it is necessary here to identify the relatively subtle differences between those methodologies which work from a social constructionist framework.

Constructivist Grounded Theory is concerned with identifying structures that underlie participants’ utterances and things observed in fieldwork; though, importantly, these are not seen as stable or fixed. Indeed, when considering the background assumptions of broadly ‘interactionist’ approaches, the term ‘structure’ is subverted by ‘organization’, a word which has less static connotations (Clarke, 2005: 29). Interactionists regard organization as inseparable from actors and the way that they conduct their lives. Furthermore, they view it as something that needs to be examined through studying the way participants live their lives (ibid).

Charmaz’ Constructivist Grounded Theory focuses, to a large extent, on psycho-social phenomena – perhaps more than on what could be termed the ‘social context’. Her approach stresses individuals’ objectives and sequences of actions. This might be in terms of an individual going through stages or ‘phases’ in dealing with a hardship, for example (Charmaz, 2006: 136). It must be noted, however, that she does not wish to concentrate solely on individuals; rather, the onus is on the experiences that emanate from a number of individuals’ stories. Thus she gains a wider view of psychic processes existing in a set of circumstances shared by a group of individuals (Charmaz, 2006).

Despite this emphasis on more ‘internal’ human processes in her own work, Charmaz (ibid) praises Star’s method of identifying how certain systems of thought have been built up and
who they might favour. Charmaz (ibid) highlights Star’s concern with demonstrating how certain arbiters of truth, in the medical institution, for instance, deploy tactics which convey authority and expertise. Thus the analytic gaze is directed beyond purely individual, internal perceptions to include aspects that constitute what might simply be called the ‘external’ world. Such an approach does not stray far from Charmaz’ Grounded Theory: primacy is still given to action and how the dialogues (or discourses) are always in flux. Star is focusing on how a certain medical truth, for instance, is maintained and how it achieves hegemony. Rather than being fixed and immune to destabilization, there is the possibility that one discourse will subvert the other. Thus, one is presented with the idea of negotiated meaning – something congruent with a Symbolic Interactionist mentality. Symbolic Interactionism permeates many qualitative methods that study how a social reality is actively built by a set of actors (Denzin, 1992).

The more discourse oriented or ‘discursive’, principally text-based methods (of which there are many), while not particularly regarding ‘structure’ as separate from people and interactions, are more likely to consider its constraining elements. Here, discourse is not conceived of purely as speech occurring in a dialogue; rather, it refers to the ways objects are conceived of and hence talked about as a reflection of a specific socio-historical context (see Rabinow, 1984). These methodologies are derived from Post-structural philosophical and theoretical frameworks which regard human action as constituted by that which the social world makes available. Michel Foucault is a main contributor, particularly with respect to his genealogy of historically contingent discourses (ibid). This largely philosophical approach disavows the more ‘modernist’ conception of agency and works from the structuring conditions to the individual who enters into discourse or how historical representations shape micro-interactions (Potter, 1997: 147). They do not emphasise agents who are empowered to take their own course of action according to their interests; instead, they work from the assumption that certain subject positions are made available in societal discourses—micro and macro— for the individual to take up. As such, they study what makes some courses of action possible and not others. These are chosen, not out of a range of possibilities that serve the interests of the individual, but from a constrained set of options. However, these constraints are not regarded as ‘constraining’ by the individual. Indeed, taking a Poststructural mentality, consciousness or

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3 Potter speaks of ‘species’ (1997: 144) of Discourse Analysis to indicate the multifarious analytic approaches and possibilities. This is due, in part, to its deployment across a range of disciplines. It can be conceived as a way of analysing patterns of interaction in speech transcript; analysing the way different speech units ‘cohere’. A further approach departs from the latter’s more mechanistic characteristics to focus on how the production of a text helps to constitute a recognisable reality. This also involves tracing the lineage of these representations through a genealogical approach.
agency is consigned to mere ‘subjectification’ (Rabinow, 1984) – an illusion whereby the individual sees themselves as acting as though from ‘within’ or from an essential inner core.

Discourse Analysts regard the things participants say, not simply as a piece of information to take at face value, but as providing a window into how ‘the social phenomena they portray are constituted in these accounts’ (Hammersley, 2008: 102). So, like Grounded Theory, the focal interest is in the socially constructed nature of their realities. The group of approaches that homes in on the language within text excerpts (whether extant textual documents such as a policy document, a case study of the behaviour of a ‘deviant’ individual, or excerpts of recorded talk) emphasises the conditions that lead to a particular perception of reality and how it came to be constructed as such. Thus, something which one might think of as person-orientated, such as an ‘attitude’, is, in fact, located in the discursive practices available rather than within the individual. Put simply, there are certain discourses available that allow one to act as someone displaying, say, ‘distaste’: without this possibility, this distinct expression will not be heard or ‘realised’. This same individual can take up a position in another discourse and express what is possible there – thus there is no stable identity to ascribe to the individual.

It might seem that these Poststructuralist - oriented textual, rather than ethnomethodological, methods are prioritizing structure and consigning everything to social and cultural, with very little space left for the ‘empowered’ individual. Hammersley (2008) argues that this paradigm is not entirely sufficient in itself to capture the complexity of social situations. Added to that, there is a danger that the purportedly non-objectivist Discourse Analysts come to assume that discursive structure such as thought systems about, for example, ‘deviant’ individuals, are more ‘real’ or obdurate than that which occurs in interaction between persons (ibid). That said, he does not postulate any single paradigm capable of catering for all a researcher wants to do when studying socio-cultural phenomena - in a non-positivist spirit. Indeed, a related methodology, Conversation Analysis, neglects ‘the social’ and, more so, the wider context within which the conversation is performed (ibid). Thus qualitative researchers may indeed be left wondering whether any paradigm, with all its related methodologies, is perfect. Further, there appears to be a need to integrate them in order to gain the best of all worlds.

Miller’s (1997) notion of bridging offers a technique which essentially synthesizes constructionist paradigms. She sees potential in Conversational Analysis, Discursive Ethnomethodology and Discourse Analysis for analysing complexity. By this she means the capacity to capture contradictions, overlapping discursive elements and ways individuals can use the subject positions available to them for their own benefit. This, she appears to argue, facilitates examining agency and the enduring debate surrounding agency and structure in
social theory. So, by ‘bridging’ – and not ‘blending’ so that each becomes diffuse- these three methodologies, the researcher is equipped with a set of tools for examining contradictory elements so often found when probing deeply into social arenas (ibid).

These three methodologies that Miller (ibid) works with are united in their focus upon the ways some things are preserved and maintained as representations of reality – a reality that is continually under construction and not one that can simply be ‘captured’, as more anthropological researchers would have it. It is important to note that the interactional competences under study or ways of viewing the world a particular way are ‘provided by social settings’ (Miller, 1997: 26) and not independently conceived by the agent. These more discursive methods, it must be remembered, are derived from a philosophical premise that takes the view that constructed ‘reality’ could always have been constructed otherwise, hence the slight preoccupation with how things are constructed. This, in turn, adds a more critical dimension which stresses how certain definitions of a situation may overshadow others ‒ perhaps to the detriment of certain subordinated groups (Miller, 1997: 29). They all focus upon how things are constructed and examine the way ‘social realities are ‘built up’ and sustained’ – thus they point to a constructionist mentality (Miller, 1997: 34). Conversation Analysis and Discursive Ethnomethodology share more of the Symbolic Interactionist mentality where agency and empowerment are emphasized; while the more Foucauldian inspired Discourse Analysis stresses ‘constraint over human agency’ (Miller, 1997: 37). However, any strict distinction between the active agent and social constraints is not deemed important in Miller’s (1997) work. She believes her technique of ‘bridging’ can integrate both analytic commitments.

- **Social Constructivism or Social Constructionism**

Perhaps a neater way of distinguishing the approaches within the social constructionist framework is to see approaches as either constructivist or constructionist. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, there is a slight difference. A constructivist mentality prioritizes the participant’s ‘inner world’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008: 297). It is rather more closely related to Symbolic Interactionist sensibilities which favour the active individual or the ‘knowing subject’ (see Clarke, 2005). Social constructionism, on the other hand, focuses on social conditions and elements ‘exterior’ to the individual. So, ‘self-construction’ would be regarded as constituted in the discourses that make up the social situation. Though, again, any divide between ‘the social’ and ‘the individual actor’ is not to be overstated.
1.4.1 Situational Analysis

Adele Clarke (2005) offers another approach to Grounded Theory known as *Situational Analysis*. This is presented as a means of facilitating deep analysis of data and, as Mathar (2008) notes, encourages the analyst to embrace complexity, contradiction and uncertainty. Rather than replacing the Grounded Theory technique, it builds on data that has already been at least ‘partially’ coded through the key methods of traditional Grounded Theory (Clarke, 2005:84). Situational Analysis is deployed well into the analytic process - just before there is any degree of reduction, or attempts at smoothing typical of earlier Grounded Theory methodology. The idea is that by literally ‘mapping’ the full socio-cultural context, one achieves an understanding of the complexity of a social situation. However, Clarke does not strive to distinguish or separate context from interactions (Mathar, 2008). The three maps she proposes do not constitute final analytic products; rather, they help the analyst embrace variation, contradiction and, most of all, they help the analyst to be surprised by what they see.

An overriding aspect of Clarke’s thesis concerns the need to push Grounded Theory fully around the ‘postmodern turn’ (Clarke, 2005: xxiii). She views Charmaz’ constructivist Grounded Theory as almost round the turn though regards it as stuck in that it remains wedded to the conception of the ‘knowing subject’⁴. Clarke’s (2005) approach represents a change of focus whereby the researcher attends to the whole situation, rather than just the processes that are peculiar to an individual’s perspective. This entails delineating or ‘mapping out’ the multifarious perspectives that are constitutive of the situation (ibid). She sees potential for examining ‘structure’ in the work of Strauss and Corbin, though modifies it so it sits within a Poststructuralist, rather than solely pragmatist, framework (Mathar, 2008). Strauss and Corbin (1998) proposed methods for identifying the boundaries and possibilities within a setting as a way of gaining insight into actions and their consequences in the social world under study. Clarke (2005) draws parallels between this and discursive approaches which work with constraining elements or pathways which individuals, often unknowingly, traverse. So, in effect, Clarke (ibid) is transposing an analytic procedure rooted in a Pragmatist paradigm into one which, whilst still broadly constructionist, works with a de-centred rather than ‘knowing’ subject. In some respects, it could be postulated that this represents an

⁴ The notion of ‘the knowing subject’, particularly in relation to the social sciences, has sparked much debate towards the end of the twentieth century. According to Prior (1997), emphasis on what an individual can self-report provides a limited view of social relations and offers less of an opening for studying how phenomena have come to be represented a certain way than constructionist approaches.
analytic shift: rather than seeking to construct a plausible account of the reality constructed by
the individual (in relation to which many of their acts and beliefs are enacted), the new focus is
on a situation which contains many of the elements that help individuals construct their world
view.

Interestingly, Clarke appears anxious to adhere to postmodern maxims and postulates the
phenomenon of empirical study in ‘postmodern times’ (Clarke, 2005: 33). Her argument is that
research must fit the historical era and associated intellectual trends. However, one must
question sentiments that appear predicated upon a desire to keep up with trends in theory
and research. It is now necessary to examine how Clarke’s version of Grounded Theory
analysis serves as an improvement on approaches which she deems incompletely round the
postmodern turn. She does not devote much attention to Charmaz’ developments of
Grounded Theory, but bundles all previous mid-20th century approaches into a category
characterized by fundamentalist thinking, hopes for ‘theoretical transcendence’ and ‘universal
cures’ (Clarke, 2005: 18).

According to Clarke (2005), the first enhancement that postmodern-inspired Situational
Analysis presents for pre-postmodern Grounded Theory surrounds the capacity for handling
complexity. She contends that the whole situation, in all its ‘messiness’, needs to be depicted.
That is, all the discourses circulating therein need to be identified and mapped (ibid). This
allegedly negates any danger of the researcher simply analyzing data from within an
unidentified discourse or set of assumptions that they are not aware of. In other words, the
researcher may be blinded by the values and assumptions underlying the way they themselves
see people. She provides the example of the ‘normal curve’ whereby individuals or cases are
distributed around a norm which, she stresses, often remains uncritically examined. If, on the
other hand, one were to start examining such assumptions, then it might become possible to
see, perhaps, the relativity of peoples’ respective positioning (ibid). This reflects a strong
Foucauldian influence, a theoretical perspective recurrently alluded to as Clarke justifies her
methodology.

Perhaps the enhancement this brings is that the analyst can start to become attuned to more
nuances in the situation than could be discerned through attending to the perspectives of the

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5 Despite its positivistic flavour, traditional Grounded Theory is based on broadly on Symbolic
Interactionist principles, and is therefore not fundamentally objectivist; however, this influence
becomes blurred through attempts at doing good science. This, she contends, is particularly apparent in
Glaser’s version (Clarke, 2005:17). As a student of Strauss, she remains faithful to his Grounded Theory
methods after the Glaser and Strauss partnership. She regards Strauss’s Grounded Theory as broadly
compatible with Postmodern precepts (Clarke, 2005).
individual. However, one might ask how the analyst would know when they had identified all
the discourses in a situation. Rather than seeking to create a reflective picture of what is
‘really’ there, Clarke regards her approach as only able to represent ‘what can be seen by a
particular analyst in a particular time and place’ (Clarke, 2005: 30). Therefore, it would seem
she narrowly misses the realist trap she wants to avoid of assuming one can provide a simply
reflectionist account of a situation. The insinuation here is that what is represented reflects
what the researcher has attended to through their ‘discursive’ analytical lens.

There are a number of techniques which Clarke (2005) proposes that help the researcher
define a person’s actions in terms of possibilities, consequences, contradictions and so forth;
and through theoretical sampling one would hope to fill out any gaps in the situation. This
technique is explicitly borrowed from Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) conditional matrices. However, Clarke maintains that,

...the Straussarian conditional matrix failed to adequately situate the phenomenon of interest

(Clarke, 2005: 299)

Thus, for Clarke, the act of ‘situating’ is paramount when providing a postmodern rendering.
In other words, the analyst should carefully depict the conditions or socio-historical and
cultural conditions of a situation. This would include dominant intellectual paradigms,
knowledge systems, environmental conditions and the technology available (Clarke, 2005).
Therefore analysis is taken beyond a subject who is an active agent.

Situating the phenomenon of interest, according to Clarke (ibid), means that one can see how
something acquires its status as ‘natural’ or ‘common-sense’. Her argument is that if a view of
the systems of knowledge that underpin definitive statements is acquired, it becomes easier to
gain understanding of how certain groups might be silenced, or how some versions of reality
prevail. Indeed, the ‘messiness’ seems comparable to the complexity Miller was alluding to in
her discussion surrounding the ‘bridging’ of methodologies. Arguably, what the mapping
technique does enable is a broad view which is not pinned entirely to individuals. Moreover,
multifarious discursive threads, which may contradict one another and confuse an analyst
hoping to reach some kind of coherence, can be delineated. A Glaserian Grounded Theory
analyst would be bent on reducing this ‘confusion’ into something more manageable.
Postmodern approaches, on the other hand, would undoubtedly relish contradiction and not
strive for a reductive rendition, or one which has had the incongruous elements smoothed out.
1.4.2 The emphasis on discourse

Clarke’s Situational analysis (ibid), as previously noted, is directly inspired by Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) conditional matrices, though she draws from ‘Postmodern’ vocabulary, particularly that emanating from Foucault’s works. However, one might start to think that there are many methodological traditions becoming blended, or, at worst, blurred. As soon as a Poststructuralist mentality is used, factors such as power or inequality of groups of people become invoked. Thus a very critical gaze is cast over the situation, particularly with respect to Foucaultian approaches. Indeed, as Perakyla (2005) indicates, examining texts can provide insight into how humans are divided and classified and that it is the job of the analyst to try to ‘pin down the assumptions and presuppositions that the texts incorporated’ (Perakyla, 2005: 872). The point here is that it is a very theoretically loaded collection of analytical tools. Perhaps it is all too easy for the analyst to start to force data down fairly well-trod paths. For example, with respect to the subject of examinations (medical or pedagogical, for instance) Foucault has already expounded - in great detail - the way people become objectified through being measured, classified, and otherwise scrutinized according to doctrines that forgo critical examination. They remain unchallenged and maintain an illusion of authority or ‘expertise’ as it is in the interests of institutions and the knowledge systems contained therein (Rabinow, 1984). The unfortunate objectified human caught in this web of control has little ‘power’ or agency. This is a criticism also made by Mathar (2008) who regards Foucaultian theory as heavily bound up with power, particularly concerning the relative lack of power on the part of the ‘underdog’. Indeed, he states,

...in his early work, he means this power to be purely negative, repressing and humiliating

(Mathar, 2008: 58)

Mathar contends that Clarke’s thesis is founded partly upon her recognition of a link between ‘interactionist thinkers’ and later Foucaultian theory surrounding the potential for agency. Foucault’s later work does not contain a particularly clear account of how agency can be worked into discourse, particular as he died shortly after his works turned towards the idea of resistance in the face of power relations (Rabinow, 1984). If it is Foucault’s earlier works that are invoked when it comes to the study of situations where people are examined, classified and so forth, then there is already a well-defined theoretical framework ready to accommodate the findings - something which is not especially commensurate with Grounded Theory precepts. Indeed, if the actors in the situation are ipso facto conceived as the ‘underdog’, then might this start to have a large influence on what the Grounded Theorist sees? Furthermore, this particular framework, although it could be classed as a ‘sensitising
concept’, already has an ‘agenda’, namely, to show how the ‘underdog’ is controlled. Thus, as Charmaz (2006) also acknowledges, the question remains open as to how far the researcher can adopt sensitising concepts without their shaping the analysis. Indeed, using this early Foucaultian framework, one could become lazy and the analysis could start to get predictable. It is perhaps when the Foucault – interactionist synthesis postulated by Clarke is embraced and probing questions about agency and interaction alongside or intertwined with conditions are posited, that the analysis becomes much less predictable. In this sense the analysis would have moved on from a preoccupation with the unfortunate, objectified individual.

The Foucault –Interactionist synthesis is also alluded to by Denzin (1992). In particular, he makes the link between Foucault and Interactionists focus on,

...how structures, ideology, and power interact in concrete interactional sites and locals to produce specific forms of subjectivity, emotionality, and lived experience

(Denzin, 1992: 62)

He counters any contention that Interactionists are less concerned with structure through noting similarities to Foucaultian principles. The Foucaultian analytic lens does handle issues of power and structure, though it does not work with what could be termed ‘macro’ theories. To a greater extent, it examines ‘micro – power relations’ (ibid) or the ways power operates on a more day to day level. Put simply, rather than power or structure acting as simply a backdrop, it permeates all interactions.

 Strauss and Corbin’s influence shines through - and seems clearly comparable to Foucault - when discourse is treated as something which sets certain ‘conditions of possibility’ (Clarke, 2005: 160). Clarke (2005) contends that these conditions are set by institutions which perceive phenomena in a certain way. For example, in the field of medicine, a disease comes into existence once it has been conceptualized and seen as a ‘real’ disease, perhaps appearing in a classification matrix. Following a Foucaultian mentality, this would be something directly observable, like a set of external symptoms, rather than something metaphysical like ‘witchcraft’, to use Clarke’s example. The point is that a person with a disease will be labelled as a ‘patient’; they will enter a discourse which will position them in terms of medical need; this will affect how they are talked to by the ‘experts’ with medical knowledge and these experts will see a certain set of possibilities as open to them. The discourse analyst’s task, therefore, is to examine the talk or extant texts relating to a ‘patient’ with a view to elucidating

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6 Clarke states that this discourse of ‘real’ diseases is not necessarily constructed around science and medicine, but perhaps drug trials with a distinct capitalist agenda.
relatively implicit values and rules (Perakyla, 2005). Though these values and rules will arguably affect what happens to the patient, the patient will also have ‘internalized’ these and incorporated them into their own perception or construction of reality. This is where it gets very ‘messy’ - particularly as the individual is no longer simply the unfortunate, objectified pawn caught in a web of power-relations. Now the individual (or subject) makes decisions which are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the situation.

In Clarke’s (2005) Situational Analysis, the aim is to identify which constraints an actor might face (this is an extension of Strauss and Corbin’s ‘conditional matrices’); how individuals or groups might be perceived by authoritative bodies; what might happen if they do ‘x’ and how they negotiate these structures – perhaps in a way that does not overtly quash their action. Thus the analyst is presented with a mixture of structuring elements and the fruits of interaction, if, indeed, there is such a distinction.

One criticism of Clarke (ibid) is that she seems to want to get to the heart of everything. Not only does she want to achieve an almost bird’s eye view of the situation and the routes open and shut to the individual (from a discursive perspective), but also the way these routes have been constructed. One could then argue whether this is, in fact, muddying the situation rather than allowing room for complexity. She appears to relish the ‘messiness’ and her solution is not to reduce it into a simplified rendition of a situation, but to offer three types of map as the basis of her methodology. So, rather than the analyst drowning in a sea of discourses, they look at different types of discourse. She points out that it would be too simplistic to maintain the divisions between the three as they are all to an extent intertwined. The idea is to help the analyst to theorize. Like Charmaz, Clarke (2005) stresses that the aim of her own approach is to enable the analyst to begin to theorise rather than to produce a neat, or unified theory. The maps offer a way of opening up the situation so that the analyst can start to construct theory based on a view of all the elements within a situation. These elements and their pertinence to activity and identity will appear in these maps.

1.4.3 A brief account of the 3 types of map in Clarke’s Situational Analysis

The first type of map is called a Situational Map. Here, the analyst looks at literally all the elements indicated in the data through interviews, documents and so forth, and plots them relative to one another. These elements are all the things that matter in a situation ‘as framed by those in it and the analyst’ (Clarke, 2005: 87). An ‘element’, according Clarke, can be; a thing which has important implications in that it will ultimately constrain actions or decisions
(perhaps moral, emotional); a non–human thing such as a piece of equipment, set of procedures or policy that ultimately needs to be negotiated or factored into the way actors deal with the situation; a set of expectations or duties; a particular perspective. The reason they are brought together in one map and rendered visible is that one gains insight into how all - down to even the most minor interactions - are shaped by broader conditions. The relations between these elements are constantly in flux. Simply put, through constructing a situational map, one is gaining a broad view of what actors have to contend with in a situation. If the analyst wishes to consider a way an actor deals with something, they can see the ‘situatedness’ of it from having constructed this type of map.

The second type of map is a Social Worlds/Arenas Map. This is where the analyst delineates actors’ ‘commitment to social worlds’ (Clarke, 2005: 110) and the way actors cope with a situation. Different collective interests will be circulating in a situation and these can be represented in terms of the highly abstract ‘social worlds’. In other words, a collective viewpoint shared by actors as they do ‘x’. As Clarke (2005) contends, these viewpoints often have to be maintained in the eyes of actors as ‘necessary’ and require representatives to both justify and defend them to others and also themselves. Furthermore, it is important to note that an actor may partake in several worlds. This is an idea commensurate with postmodern precepts of the de-centred subject, and, to a lesser degree, Charmaz’ (2006) commitment to delineating perspectives and processes rather than concentrating on the individual. In short, Social worlds/arenas maps show how people respond to what they have to contend with and this is translated into certain (largely collective) perspectives or ‘social worlds’.

Thirdly, Clarke (2005) proposes Positional Maps as a means of explicating positions that groups of actors can potentially take in a situation. These are ‘social sitings’ (Clarke, 2005: 126) conceived of independently of persons who might occupy them: the emphasis is on the possible positions in a situation, regardless of whether they are actually taken up. The intention is that the analyst does not become drawn into representational conventions or ways of seeing things from how they may be presented by actors. Ultimately, it would seem that Positional maps depict positions that particular discourses point to in isolation from the voices or perspectives of the actors. However, one must also consider whether this is getting dangerously close to seeking ‘objectivity’, particularly as it is suggestive of a level of detachment. Clarke (ibid) acknowledges its somewhat formulaic and technical qualities, though she contends that what plotting all the possible positions does enable is a view of what ‘could be’. It may be that there exists a position which remains ‘unarticulated’ in the data, with the insinuation being that it represents a ‘silenced’ space (ibid). This raises a pertinent point with regard to philosophical coherence as it effectively presents an element of salvage and
emancipation on the part of the researcher which would carry with it the risk of becoming entrenched in an agenda commensurate with a ‘Modernist’ rather than postmodernist philosophy. Indeed, Strauss and Corbin (1998) originally proposed conditional matrices as merely a practical tool for thinking deeply and remaining flexible and aware of one’s analytic process.

It is this last map in particular that appears to be stretching the methodology to its limits. Mathar states that Clarke’s methods, though ‘elegant’ are somewhat over-ambitious and that she ‘promises too much’ (Mathar, 2008: 4). Clarke bravely takes up Foucault’s invitation to use his theories as a box of ‘tools’ (Clarke, 2005: 304) with which to approach social phenomena creatively\(^7\). Thus the researcher has no rigid formulae or research design; rather, a set of options that one can pick and choose from depending on the issue in question. Knowledge of the Foucaultian philosophy and theoretical framework – admittedly with its preoccupation with issues of power - then facilitates selection and implementation of a range of techniques or tools for studying action, constraint, negotiation and struggle. It is the utilization of maps that visually lays out the discursive threads which abound in the situation to orientate a researcher. They are used iteratively alongside memos to guide one’s analysis. As such, they present a more concrete and ‘visual’ alternative to Charmaz’ (2006) more narrative approach – the theory coming together and prompting the researcher to think through the act of mapping rather than the act of writing. It must be remembered, however, that the initial motivation for developing Grounded Theory was to avoid imposing a framework.

Therefore, a large degree of reflexivity is paramount with Situational Analysis if one wants to remain ‘sensitised to’ rather than ‘steeped in’ theoretical concepts.

1.5 Summary

In sum, Grounded Theory has undergone varying adaptations over the course of the last four decades or so. These are generally aligned with evolutions in qualitative intellectual trends which have focused on epistemological and ontological premises of research. Grounded Theory has been subject to attempts at answering the complex questions that contemporary

\(^7\) It must be noted that Foucault’s work cannot be easily translated into a set of methodological steps for the empirical researcher to take (Prior, 1997). Furthermore his work is oriented towards the text rather than the thinking subject behind it (ibid); this highlights another paradigmatic peculiarity – one which is at odds with one seeking to harvest (Potter, 1997) data from the knowing subject in the research interview. Rather, the primary concern in Foucaultian approaches is to ‘investigate... the innumerable accidents and myriads twists and turns of human practice that have brought the text to its present form’ (Prior, 1997: 66).
qualitative debates have spurred. Both Charmaz and Clarke, themselves pupils of the original proponents of Grounded Theory, have taken Grounded Theory to places in this intellectual field that were not ardent when it was originally conceived. Charmaz eschews technicality or the use of rigid formulae. Clarke, on the other hand, while avoiding step by step prescriptions, utilises a degree of technicality derived from Strauss and Corbin and reworks it to a fit the logic of discursive analysis. One might argue that some of these later modifications stretch Grounded Theory beyond recognition. However, as contemporary Grounded Theory advocates maintain, the basic principles such as coding, categorising and memo writing remain relatively intact. It is more a change of epistemological clothing which is fundamental to Charmaz’ Constructivist Grounded Theory, while Clarke’s Situational Analysis takes one’s theorising to a level whereby one can see the ‘situatedness’ of discursive elements, or anything in the situation which is instrumental to the actors’ construction of reality.
Chapter Two

Doing Grounded Theory: second generation Grounded Theory approaches

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the practical procedures for implementing Grounded Theory methodology. It aims to offer clarity in relation to the somewhat abstract guidelines contained in the texts of authors identified as second-generation Grounded Theorists (Morse, 2009). Attention will be focused upon the work of two authors who appear central to the second generation Grounded Theory impulse, Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) and Clarke (2005). They share a similar interpretivist stance and are attuned to issues pertaining to how ‘reality’ is constructed for their research participants. Clarke’s Situational Analysis and Charmaz’ Constructivist Grounded Theory rely on some core principles and analytic devices that have survived the reconfiguration of Traditional Grounded Theory. However, as discussed in chapter one, they set about this task using different philosophical lenses. The different logic guiding both Constructivist Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis will be examined and related to specific procedures embedded within each approach.

2.2.1 Differing logic and preoccupations underpinning each approach

Charmaz’ (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory, whilst having attended to epistemological issues which, she contends, formed the basis of much critique of traditional Grounded Theory, is not as radically different in terms of procedure from Traditional Grounded Theory. Situational Analysis, on the other hand, departs from Traditional Grounded Theory further. It places more of an emphasis upon paying tribute to the messiness of the situation under study rather than striving for coherence. The most conspicuous difference between the two approaches is that Charmaz (ibid) champions the subjective experience of the participant who is impacted on a personal level by the nature of their predicament. For Clarke (2005), on the other hand, the focus is the situation itself and the elements which constitute it. Clarke (ibid) posits the difference between the two approaches as a matter of whether or not they champion what she terms the ‘knowing subject’. Indeed, Clarke (ibid) purports that using Situational Analysis, one is able to analyse beyond what the subject knows of and would be able to offer in research interviews. In other words, her interest is directed beyond what
participants would be aware of on an individual level. Situational Analysis is slanted to the way institutional forces shape how participants come to see their circumstances or concerns in the ways that they do. As such, it is not confined to gaining the views of participants or their accounts of what is occurring.

2.2.2 Charmaz’ focus upon meaning-making on the part of the participant

The way meanings are constructed on the part of research participants is of primary importance for Charmaz (2006). Adopting a constructivist mentality, she sets out to discern the meanings that ‘shape individuals’ attitudes and actions’ (Charmaz, 2009: 144). Whilst not explicit in this regard, her approach could be considered phenomenological as she endeavours to capture reality as it appears in the experience of the subject (Hammersley, 2008). Conceiving of the site of study as ‘an area to probe’ (Charmaz, 2009: 142), Charmaz deploys ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and in-depth interviewing. These particular devices are used to help form an understanding of participants’ lived experience.

A researcher adopting Charmaz’ (2006) methodology can endeavour, through talking to participants, to understand the basis of their actions and the perceived ‘reality’ towards which these actions are oriented. In other words, her lens is bent towards elucidating how participants actively deal with a set of circumstances; moreover, how they adapt their actions so as to fit their understanding of how life seems. The more ‘hidden’ assumptions embedded in participants’ talk, which play a role in shaping the beliefs of participants, are also analyzed. This is achieved by considering what must be thought or taken for granted in order for the subject to reach a certain conclusion. Charmaz (ibid), like Clarke (2005), is attuned to the social structures that the substantive study relates to in terms of the wider macro conditions from which assumptions that shape beliefs and actions are derived. However, the main interest for Charmaz (2006) is to provide a conceptual analysis of what exists within the subjects’ awareness or ‘radar’, so to speak.

2.3.1 Clarke’s focus on the ‘situatedness’ of the participants’ predicament

According to Clarke (2005), it is only a slight shift in emphasis from Charmaz’ approach based upon ‘the knowing subject’ to one based more upon analysis of the discursive elements present in the situation. These elements underpin participants’ actions and beliefs and
effectively shape what can be done in the situation. In other words, the emphasis changes to the more conspicuously Poststructuralist project of how the participants’ way of orienting to reality has been constructed. This concern requires taking a wide angled lens, as explained in chapter one, in order to achieve an understanding of the situational elements, including discourses, which condition a certain pattern of action. Indeed, the situation itself is regarded as providing the viewpoints taken by those within it, rather than these viewpoints being attached to individuals. The wider situation of concern therefore becomes the unit of analysis, with the focus less upon the individuals within it. All the perspectives circulating within or that are constituent of the situation are identified and located in relation to one another in a visual way.

Importantly, the concern is not exclusively on gaining an understanding of how participants view their situation, but to a view of why things might appear a particular way to them. For Situational Analysis, this is enabled by the cartographic delineation of those perspectives which under-gird decisions about what happens to individuals in the situation. Furthermore, a primary motivation for the construction of Situational Analysis maps is to build up – empirically - a view of the forces operating in a situation and those which ultimately affect those participants in the study (Clarke, 2005).

2.3.2 Attention to structural elements within the Situational Analysis maps

Early Chicago School maps which were the source of Clarke’s (2005) inspiration sought to depict social action and interactions in a central ‘bubble’, with the wider ‘structural’ conditions radiating outwards and the most formal on the outer edges. They traced the interplay between micro and macro – or how the macro percolated inwards through these layers to affect the micro. Clarke (2005) makes a point of taking issue with two aspects of this analytic device used by the Chicago School: firstly, that the micro-macro with lines of ‘conditional influence’ traced from the centre outwards place too much emphasis on whether things are ‘close in’ or ‘far out’ (Clarke, 2005: 71-2); secondly, that those on the periphery, rather than being detailed empirically, were formulated in an overly abstract and speculative manner. Situational Analysis requires what is present in the situation and, more pertinently, what operates as conditions, to be empirically discernible and traceable within the data. In this way it is discernible how these conditions have a presence ‘make themselves felt as consequential’ (Clarke, 2005: 72). For instance, wider conditions are not to be regarded as at the perimeters – they are set squarely in the immediate day to day experience of participants.
A further component of Situational Analysis which helps delineate, visually, what is constitutive of the situation is the creation of maps depicting ‘social worlds’. A notion initially developed by Strauss (Clarke, 2005), a ‘social world’ can be taken as the way a set of individuals feel they should act in light of a collective concern. Through mapping a ‘social world’, one can see how its presence might be felt in amongst other perhaps competing worlds in a larger ‘arena’ – a site or space wherein multiple ‘social worlds’ coexist. Certain ‘social worlds’ can literally be seen as having an effect upon or conditioning what happens in another ‘social world’, perhaps affecting decisions made and what is deemed tenable or possible, for instance. A ‘social world’ is similar, in a sense, to what may be understood in layman’s terms as a particular ‘world view’. It is organised tightly around a set of assumptions, practices, agendas and ideas about what should be done, what is right, what makes sense and so forth. A ‘social world’ which one discerns in the data could be a powerful or dominant player in the arena. Alternatively, it might be one of lesser significance which may come to be a major force to contend with or ‘negotiate’\(^8\) in the future.

The mapping process also requires consideration of discourses circulating within the situation. Indeed, a position or stance emanating from a particular discourse will have consequences for which course of action is decided upon. What this means is that it provides the basis for a lot of things that happen to an individual in the situation. Thus, for Clarke (2005), it is crucial to place these in the foreground. It is important to note, however, that, like all the other elements that are plotted on the Situational Analysis maps, discursive constructions are fluid and liable to change. There is no sense of identifying or tracing paths (through levels of structural conditions) as Strauss did. This perhaps detracts from the technicality associated with Strauss’ Grounded Theory methodology.

2.3.3 How are these procedures put into practice?

Situational Analysis handles some largely abstract ideas. This leaves one wondering how this might be put into practice. Careful examination of Clarke’s (2005) text yields the following:

\(^8\) Symbolic Interactionism is very much involved with the notion of negotiation as a way of people working things out together (see Gergen, 2009).
2.3.4 Creating Situational maps

The construction of this type of map enables a broad view of the situation and all which makes a difference within it. Maps, much like the emerging categories of Traditional Grounded Theory and also Charmaz’ (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory will undergo adjustments in light of new data and new ideas. Indeed,

...the situational map can and should be constructed and reconstructed over time to specify the major elements in the situation of concern about which data needs to be gathered, analyzed and written about.

(Clark, 2009: 234)

Thus, at first, the researcher needs to have a view of everything that makes a difference or is potentially consequential in the situation of concern. In this first map, which represents an early stage in the analysis, the researcher places anything which can be discerned in the data on to the map, whether this is from interviews or documents. It is akin, as Mathar (2008) notes, to a brainstorming exercise. Included are the elements of a situation, as framed by those within it. In other words, what is construed or referred to as ‘real’ by participants. This also includes what is taken for granted and discernible at a more tacit level. However, as Clarke (2005) does not wish to limit agency to human actors, she includes objects such as medical equipment on the map. Her argument is that these ‘non-human’ elements still need to be negotiated. Anything which might be construed as discursive is also placed on the map so that it is in sight, (though discourses are analysed in more detail in ‘positional maps’).

The next stage in the analysis is to specify relations between the various elements on the Situational Map. At this point, these relations are simply between the ‘things’ themselves before the analyst has assigned them to, say, a particular ‘social world’. Any sort of linkage is depicted, whether this is about dependency, similarity or in fact any kind of consequence that one element poses for another. Memos written alongside the maps explore relations that are tentatively forming and any questions they might raise. For example, relations can be discerned from nurses’ talk about a new service for patients and how it would change aspects of their practice. From witnessing such talk, whether in ethnographic field notes or interview transcripts, the researcher would be attuned to the effect this new service would have. Clarke (ibid) implies that, in addition to ethnographic data, literature or documents would serve as a further data source that could specify relationships and patterns. Significant relationships could be explored further through searching for a specific set of participants who are most likely to shed light on it. Alternatively, the researcher could merely adjust interview questions
with the participants they had already so they were oriented specifically towards finding out about this particular relationship.

2.3.5 Creating Social worlds and arenas maps

These maps specify ‘the key social worlds’ (Clarke, 2005: 112) of a situation. A key reason for constructing this map is that one develops ‘a dense understanding of the perspectives taken by all the collective actors, the social worlds in that arena’ (Clarke, 2005: 113). A broad, comprehensive view of those ‘social worlds’ operating in the situation and the arena(s) they relate to means one is really ‘interrogating’ one’s data (Clarke, 2005: 115). Furthermore, analytic memos can examine a social world’s ‘commitments, ideologies/discourses, work organization, technologies’ (ibid).

Once this type of map is made and the major ‘social worlds’ and arenas are delineated, the researcher can focus on the processes within each ‘social world’. These will be strongly related to the key perspectives of that world. In effect, each ‘social world’ becomes the unit of study as the researcher aims for a more comprehensive understanding in terms of actions taken therein. In addition, attention is paid to how it defines itself in relation to other ‘social worlds’. The way the researcher can discern how a ‘social world’ might define itself seems to be a matter of identifying consistency across interview data and extant documents produced by those within that particular ‘social world’.

2.3.6 Creating Positional maps

Positional Maps are deployed in order to denote positions within a discourse. This involves identifying a discourse which can be discerned from ethnographic or textual data. The motivation for this type of map is to avoid regarding a particular group of people as having a discourse that belongs exclusively to them; indeed, Clarke (ibid) maintains that people can be a part of multiple and possibly contradictory discourses. This represents one aspect of the complexity and ‘messiness’ that Clarke (2005) continually alludes to. Discourses, or the positions they render possible, are taken and mapped on their own terms, by their own integral logic.

A particular concern may be regarded as emanating from the way participants refer (in ethnographic or textual data) to a phenomena. The researcher could seek to identify the
range of views in relation to this, or, in other words, the range of ways it is talked about. However, it must be noted that a Positional Map is just one way of representing what the data suggests and, in accordance with central Grounded Theory tenets, needs to be tried out on the data to see if it provides a sensible fit. A map denoting a discourse can be instrumental in understanding the possibilities for action it supports. Thus, again, Situational Analysis maps provide a means of depicting the way action has stemmed from what is actually possible for participants.

The Positional Map is perhaps the most radical out of the maps since the first two have much in common with the ecological maps developed by Strauss. In regard to this third map, Clarke (ibid) wants the researcher to avoid being merely carried along by representational politics associated with a particular concern which they might unknowingly abide by. The idea is that, by taking a step back, the researcher can see, literally, the logic of a discourse and what it renders possible. By representing a concern through axes and plotting positions therein, one can start to consider which positions are actually ‘taken’ as indicated by ethnographic or textual data.

None of the maps outlined above are intended as final analytic products, nor do they constitute a model of the situation. The reason three maps (Situational, Social Worlds/Arenas and Positional) are used and not just one map which would conveniently squash them all together is that Clarke (ibid) does not wish to conflate social actors with discourses. Furthermore, the maps are not intended as forerunners for a totalizing or integrated diagram of how the situation ‘works’. Rather, each map is meant to serve as a device for picking apart conditional influences. They are instrumental in expounding how what is indicated in ethnographic data has actually come to be. Ultimately, they are deployed to stimulate thinking around what is behind certain phenomena and to keep these structuring or conditioning aspects firmly in mind as data are collected and analysed in the situation under study.

2.4.1 Core Grounded Theory tenets regardless of whether one is conducting Constructivist Grounded Theory or Situational Analysis

This section will examine the core principles and analytic devices of Grounded Theory, regardless of which type. This plays a key part in the more practical procedural aspects of it which will be examined in section 2.5.
Anselm Strauss, whilst being the most prescriptive of the Grounded Theory proponents, maintains that Grounded Theory cannot be regarded merely as a set of techniques, but rather a methodology and philosophy ‘package’ (Legewie and Schervier-Legewie, 2004). This is strongly corroborated in the works of both Charmaz (2006) and Clarke (2005). Clarke (ibid) refers to her approach as a theory-methods-package rather than a formula or set of specific steps for the researcher to follow. The ‘theory’ aspect of this theory-methods package is not the reductive, causal model of positivism; rather, it alludes to the ensemble of ontology and epistemology, the ‘non-fungible’ elements (Clarke, 2005: 4) which also yield a set of practices. Denzin and Lincoln (2005), in their exposition of qualitative inquiry in general, speak in terms of a ‘net’ or ‘paradigm’ which the researcher brings to research containing particular ‘epistemological, ontological and methodological premises’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 22).

The philosophical precepts and practices of Second Generation Grounded Theory are founded in Symbolic Interactionism, and, in Clarke’s (2005) Situational Analysis, ‘Foucaultian theory’ is used alongside Symbolic Interactionism. Both frameworks harbour a distinct, though arguably complementary, set of concepts pertaining to reality construction and how it can be studied in the concrete. Clarke (ibid) works to integrate the ontological and epistemological precepts of Symbolic Interactionism and Foucauldian theory to form what she regards as a conceptual toolbox that both serves and renders possible the approach of Situational Analysis.

Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008), perhaps unsurprisingly, both stop short of specifying exactly what the researcher should do when deploying their type of Grounded Theory. This is echoed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) who attest to the need for flexible thinking and independence when deploying Grounded Theory. However, both Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) provide some examples of studies which have selected from the theory-methods-package in a way that suits the way that particular study unfolds. The idea is for the researcher to be able to make decisions commensurate with the research focus, whilst simultaneously remaining true to the philosophical framework. The need for the researcher to be independent becomes apparent when reading Clarke’s (2005) guidelines in so far that one has to make reasoned decisions about the steps taken in data collection and analysis according to its fit within the theoretical framework. This is deeply reliant upon a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and the practices associated with these frameworks. The decisions reached throughout the research are largely connected to the concern to be philosophically coherent (Clarke, 2009). Perhaps Morse sums it up most succinctly by stating;
Grounded Theory is not necessarily a collection of strategies. It is primarily a way of thinking about data.

(Morse, 2009: 14)

2.4.2 Particular analytic strategies deployed by any Grounded Theorist

Whichever ‘type’ of Grounded Theory one is adopting, in order to be practising Grounded Theory, as distinct from other qualitative approaches, there is a consensus between Strauss and those of the second Grounded Theory generation that there are key things which need to be carried out (Morse, 2009). Strauss, in an interview in which developments of Grounded Theory were the object of discussion, states that one needs to ensure that certain core analytic devices are conducted in order to be following Grounded Theory. These are the making of comparisons, conducting theoretical sampling and developing theory (Legewie and Schervier-Legewie, 2004).

2.4.3 The making of comparisons (the analytic strategy of constant comparison)

Simply put, comparison involves juxtaposing two or more elements in order to identify relative similarities and differences, from the minute aspects of coding to the more abstract processes further on into the study. Comparative analysis is a key principle when creating, defining and refining categories so that the way in which they relate to one another and what effectively distinguishes them is made clear. In Charmaz’ (2006) constructivist Grounded Theory, how comparison is central to the formation of categories is illustrated fairly clearly.

Comparison also comes into play in Situational Analysis, though less so in relation to inductively generated categories. For instance, the researcher might wish to investigate whether or not a certain phenomenon is occurring in another set of circumstances, perhaps shedding light on the situation at hand and thus ‘provok(ing) analysis’ (Clarke, 2005: 170). In what are described as ‘founding studies of the Grounded Theory method’ (Legewie and Schervier-Legewie, 2004), Strauss discovered that what he was essentially engaged in, when studying psychiatric ideologies in a psychiatric ward, was the identification and subsequent comparison of divergent perspectives of doctors, nurses and patients. Such founding studies could be considered the site of conception of the comparative logic which underpins all Grounded Theory methodology.
2.4.4 Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling guides where the researcher goes next in the data collection process. It identifies or highlights questions which still need to be answered in order for the researcher to understand what is happening better. It occurs when the theory has started to take shape, at the stage when the researcher has begun to take coding to a more abstract, conceptual level (Charmaz, 2006). For example, an analytic diagram which best describes participants’ actions or fundamental processes might be starting to take shape, though still presents the researcher with some niggling questions. In Charmaz’ (2006: 48) language, these are the ‘gaps’ in the research which still need to be addressed. Further sites or participants will be indicated and theoretically sampled in order to enable the researcher to answer such questions. In Clarke’s (2005) Situational Analysis, one can glean from the construction of the maps the areas which require examining further as there will be visible gaps.

2.4.5 Theory development

Finally, the act of theory development means the product of Grounded Theory transgresses mere description or piecemeal assemblage of chunks of the ‘reality’ one hopes to ‘capture’. Indeed, as Charmaz (2006) reiterates, Grounded Theory was formulated to provide more than simply documentation of that under study. Hammersley (1995) also attests to the necessity of maintaining the distinction between mere description and other types of research product;

...we can distinguish amongst descriptions, explanations, evaluations and theories. The first two are concerned with particular sets of phenomena existing in particular situations and at particular times. Descriptions document features of those phenomena, while explanations indicate why they have those features. Evaluations go beyond this in adding a value judgment about the desirability or undesirability of some of the features described. Finally, theories refer to the generative principles by which particular types of phenomena are produced, in whatever circumstances they occur.

(Hammersley, 1995: 62)

Implied here is that the defining quality of theory, as distinct from other types of research, is that it does more than simply ‘describe’ what goes on in a setting. With respect to Situational Analysis, taking Hammersley’s (ibid) notion of ‘generative principles’, it is the particular setting (situation) that generates or ‘produces’ the phenomena. Thus, rather than resulting in a more modernist ‘unitary theory’ (Clarke, 2005: 29), the idea is to theorise. Indeed, since what the researcher tells or attempts to explain is deeply and intricately connected to a particular set of circumstances, it becomes problematic to speak in terms of a transcendental causal
mechanism which could be used universally, as would be the case in modernist projects (ibid). The overriding aim of Situational Analysis is not to produce a ‘formal theory’ as in the modernist project which strives for ‘a science parallel to the natural sciences’ (Clarke, 2005: 28). Instead, in keeping with the postmodern mentality Clarke (2005) aligns herself with, the idea is to enable one to pull out various stories to tell about the situation – contradictions abound - with an emphasis on its historically contingent nature.

Charmaz’ (2006) understanding of ‘theory’ is that it comprises a set of categories whereby the relationships between them are delineated. She alludes to the notion of integration and the building up of an account of what is going on expressed as a set of major categories that are most pertinent to that under study. These will be generated from data from interviews and ethnographic field notes. The notion of the core category featured in traditional Grounded Theory is not explicitly mentioned. Furthermore, in keeping with Charmaz’ (ibid) epistemological stance, there is little sense of an idea of a core category ‘emerging’ or coming into focus automatically, as though the crux of the situation eventually reveals itself. Instead, the researcher ends up with an assembly of categories interconnected in such a way that they bring everything together – albeit in the form of a schema which reflects the researcher’s sense-making.

2.5.1 The process of starting the fieldwork and the use of ‘sensitising concepts’ within Constructivist Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis

Although not always documented in methodological literature (Corbin, 2009), the Grounded Theory process starts off being rather ‘messy’, so to speak. The researcher may not have a clear focus and the research questions can start off being very sketchy. DeVault and McCoy (2003) compare the qualitative research process to that of trying to find a thread in a ball of string - and then teasing this thread out. Similarly, Maxwell (2005) maintains that a feature of qualitative inquiry is that there is an emergent quality: one has to do some exploration before settling for some more refined research questions. In a similar vein, Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate doing some sort of preliminary exploration into what should be the central focus of

9 Clarke (2005) does not take the reader from the early stages of deciding on and ‘entering the research’ or the teasing out of that first thread in the metaphorical ball of string. Instead she begins her guidance from the point of data analysis onwards; that is, when a one has already embarked on collecting data. Charmaz (2006), too, provides relatively little guidance in terms of a research question or interest. This lack of prescription may be due to their affiliation with the non-positivist camp.
the research. This involves the researcher attending to the concerns of participants and attempting to discern what is relevant to them in their circumstances. This is intended as a form of safe-guard against launching into research which is not relevant to participants’ experience,

This acid test of paying attention to respondents’ concerns is the key to where the focus of a research project should be

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 38)

According to this line of thought, when one starts the research, there is large degree of tentativeness. Like Strauss and Corbin (ibid), Charmaz (2006) implies that one may simply not be getting at what is important to participants. Therefore, the researcher may have to abandon initial hunches and research questions that are not found to be relevant. Indeed, following the argument that Grounded Theory is meant and was initially envisaged to produce theories constructed empirically from the ground upwards, there is a self-conscious concern echoed through Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) work with following what is empirically ‘there’. Although expressed in a more constructivist cast, Charmaz (2006) emphasizes that the researcher makes a concerted effort to follow leads that can actually be defined in the data. It may be the case that the researcher finds other things that were not expected and pursue these as well as the initial research interest (ibid).

Although it may appear that Clarke’s (2005) approach means that the researcher is presented with the situation as a conveniently bounded or packaged research scenario, it does not merely involve depicting or creating an inventory of what constitutes it. This would be an overwhelming project, even for a very large scale piece of research. The Traditional Grounded Theory approach assumes that, regardless of the point at which the researcher enters, the essential, basic process underlying the whole setting will be revealed. However, this does not befit the philosophy of Situational Analysis. Indeed, Clarke (ibid) does not believe that the complexities of a situation become pared away to reveal the fundamental condition – the core category or variable - at which the researcher will inevitably arrive. Her approach assumes that, rather than the ‘truth’ of the situation - or the most fundamental process - simply homing into view, the researcher requires a few more conceptual tools or ideas that will serve as a ‘loose frame’ to the initial research interests (Charmaz, 2006: 16). The examples of Situational Analysis which Clarke (2005) provides indicate that there is a quite a distinct focus or slant on the research. There are certain things of interest in the situation and in some cases a

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10 This does not imply an objectivist truth searching project, but a commitment to showing or providing a good argument that what one is saying has come from the data.
conceptual framework for it deployed from the outset. There is little sense of the researcher entering the study as a ‘blank slate’, a myth associated with inductive research which Alheit et al. (2009) deems obsolete\(^{11}\).

### 2.5.2 The use of Sensitising Concepts

The term ‘sensitising concept’ is used to refer to a general concept which stimulates the researcher’s thinking around the topic of interest. As Bowen (2006) explicates, the term ‘sensitising concept’ was originally developed by Blumer who distinguished it from a ‘definitive’ concept:

> A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or benchmarks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances

(Blumer, 1954; cited in Bowen, 2006)

Clarke provides an example of how a sensitising concept might be used with reference to research conducted by her colleague, Deborah Bone. In her research in the field of medical nursing, Bone used a particular concept developed in a different professional context in order to ‘frame’ (Clarke, 2005:91) the research. ‘Emotion work’ was transposed from research on the professional demands placed on airline stewardesses (ibid). Clarke contends that, in Bone’s project, ‘emotion work’ did not so much prescribe what to see as suggest where to explore and who to interview. From this early conceptualisation of that part of nursing involving interpersonal interactions between nurses and their patients as ‘emotion work’, Bone proceeded to explore nurses’ views on their interaction with patients. These nurses were ‘recognized by their peers as highly skilled at and valuing of emotion work’ (Clarke, 2005:103), and thus chosen as interviewees. As such, Bone had a clearly defined set of interview participants to start with. In line with Situational Analysis principles, Bone simultaneously worked to situate the study ‘in its broader situation’ (Clarke, 2005: 119), thus invoking a wider scheme or configuration of conditions that impacted the substantive setting. Otherwise, in contradistinction to Situational Analysis philosophy, the study would float without a historical, temporal and situational grounding. The product of her research depicted emotion work as sharing space with other social worlds and discourses and showed how the nurses felt themselves to be ‘squeezed’ (Clarke, 2005: 92).

\(^{11}\) Alheit et al. (2009) contend that it is naïve to assume that a situation under study will speak for itself if it is allowed to. The researcher will bring prior theoretical premises to the data; thus the theory will not emerge as is often thought.
For Bone, the ethnographic component whereby she conducted interviews and participant observation was located within a ward of experienced nurses. As they were the people who practised the actual work of nursing, they would, she anticipated, feel discourses relating to emotion work acting upon them. Indeed, Clarke (2005) contends that discourses will be felt deeply in the situation and, whilst she does not wish to overstate the terms micro-meso-macro, they can be mapped as part of wider social worlds in the situation. Bone interviewed and observed these particular nurses to gain an understanding of how they managed this particular aspect of their profession and how they talked about changes brought about by management. Their reporting, reflections and actions in relation to this part of their work would provoke insight into what was salient to emotion work and what made a difference or was consequential for it. From interviewing in the substantive context of the nurses’ ward, Bone’s understanding of what was happening became more incisive as ‘social worlds’, discourses and all the conditional elements of the situation started to come into view. Interview data will speak to or serve as indicators of social worlds, discourses and all the positions taken therein (ibid).

Although the issue over forcing versus emergence is unresolved (Charmaz, 2006) and is a debate which lies beyond the scope of this chapter, Bone’s use of emotion work raises certain questions for Situational Analysis. One could argue that, as discussed in chapter one of this thesis, Bone had an agenda – to rescue or conduct a ‘salvage ethnography’ (Clarke, 2005: 92) of ‘real’ nursing from the grips of the bureaucrats. Following the philosophy of second generation Grounded Theory, the researcher cannot remain neutral and, moreover, that it is important to be reflexive about this. Clarke (2005) proposes, though does not particularly illustrate, a technique whereby the researcher renders their own stance visible on the maps and, in effect, lays their own cards on the table to be analysed along with everything else. Thus, for Clarke (ibid), the ‘Nurses as angels’ element, which Bone appears to be an exponent of, would need to appear on the maps as a stance taken and not reverberate implicitly in the background.

A further question remains regarding the manner in which Bone’s sensitising concept shapes the research. Perhaps ‘emotion work’ is such an open concept that it does serve simply to focus the researcher, rather than determining what is ‘seen’. Bone evidently decided to attend to everything in the nurses’ job to relating to making contact with patients. This could be the aspects most concerned with personal judgment, intuition, or in other words, those more intangible and infrequently documented in the nursing literature. Thus, rather than ‘forcing’ the research, it could be concluded that it directs one’s gaze to one type of activity that is part of the nursing profession – albeit a key part. Importantly, the exploratory component, which
would be expected with qualitative enquiry, appears to relate more to discerning the views of the nurses and how nurse-patient interactions are managed in relation to other elements that might impinge on it. Thus, through interviews and observations, an understanding is built of what is pertinent to nurse-patient interaction from the perspective of those who actually do it.\textsuperscript{12}

Bone’s research provides an instance of the way a sensitising concept provides a firm conceptual handle on the research. She has already isolated the part she wishes to explore and has already identified it as a likely pressure point. This knowledge has come about as a result of prior experience and extensive knowledge with in this field. It appears that Bone and Clarke are already in touch with issues and perspectives and as researchers and practitioners, perhaps have a position in relation to them. However, this familiarity with the literature is not regarded by Clarke (ibid) as a negative aspect. Clarke (ibid) makes the point that the field of nursing and associated academic literature is rich in these types of qualitative study. Furthermore, she contends that in current times, in contrast to when qualitative enquiry was in its infancy, there are vast amounts of empirical research on nursing. Therefore, she advocates the researcher being relatively cognizant of the literature to an extent in order to avoid travelling down well trodden paths in this field. Furthermore, her examples do assume that the researcher is already well-acquainted with the concerns and politics of the arena.

Charmaz’ (2006) examples of sensitising concepts, on the other hand, denote a somewhat ‘looser’ approach. Perhaps this occurs when the researcher does not have such an intricate knowledge of that which they are studying. Sensitising concepts, Charmaz (2006: 17) contends, provide ‘points of departure for developing, rather than limiting our ideas’. Furthermore, they will be discarded if they prove to be irrelevant to the study. Therefore, a sensitising concept like ‘emotion work’, for instance, will become subverted by other emergent concepts if it does not appear salient to that under study. That is, if it does not help the researcher to develop codes and categories or have any role in connections between these then it is not of use.

Charmaz (2006) does not imply that one has to start with a particular sensitising concept, nor should this sensitising concept be mined from a body of qualitative research studies. In other words, a focused scanning of the literature prior to data collection and analysis is not indicated. While her position regarding use of literature differs from that of Clarke (2005), Charmaz (ibid) does not explicitly argue that a researcher will be able to ignore ‘background

\textsuperscript{12} That said, discussions with the nurses will not only provide a humanistic or subject centered view as their ‘talk’ will provide indicators of discourses that can be traced to wider social worlds and arenas.
assumptions and disciplinary perspectives’; in fact, she contends prior knowledge will ‘alert them to look for certain possibilities and processes in their data’ (Charmaz, 2006: 16). Indeed, these prior interests are to a greater or lesser extent reflected in the codes generated (Charmaz, 2003: 319). On a similar note, Goulding observes that,

...as a rule, Grounded Theory evolves from a tentative literature base to begin with

(Goulding, 2005: 164)

Goulding contends that the researcher would start reading very generally around the topic of interest and this would bring some guiding ideas to the research. Thus the implication is that the research, from initial conception of a research interest or problem, to the later parts of the analysis is influenced by the researcher’s prior education and what they have read. However, this is not clearly expounded and is given little attention in Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) and Clarke’s (2005) methodological texts. Coding, on the other hand, takes prime position in these texts, particularly that of Charmaz’ (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory.

2.5.3 The practice of ‘coding’

Coding, which is conducted once the researcher has gathered some data, occurs in every type of Grounded Theory. Despite there being some relatively prescriptive guidelines on coding procedure, it is to be regarded as a flexible device or set of tools with which to sort, synthesize and make sense of the data. There is little that is mechanical about coding: ultimately it reflects the way the researcher has made sense of the data. Both Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) and Clarke (2005) are less technical in regard to coding than Traditional Grounded Theory texts such as Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) Basics of Qualitative Research.

Coding represents the first part of the systematic analysis of data one has gathered around their research interest. It does not signal the closure of data gathering, but is integral to the development of analytical ideas. Such ideas subsequently need to be explored through further data gathering and is intertwined with theoretical sampling. Coding will occur throughout the

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13 Constructivist Grounded Theory does not ‘assume that impartial observers enter the research scene without an interpretive frame of reference. Instead, what observers see and hear depends upon their prior interpretive frames, biographies, and interests as well as the research context, their relationships with research participants, concrete field experiences, and modes of generating and recording empirical materials. No qualitative method rests on pure induction – the questions we ask of the empirical world frame what we know of it. In short, we ‘share in constructing what we define as data’ (Charmaz, 2005: 509).
analysis and enables the researcher to gain some sort of interpretive, conceptual handle on pieces of data gathered from interviews, participant observation field notes and documents. The researcher will possess a number of interview transcripts or field notes from observations and this is typically the first object for coding activity.

Initial or open coding, which represents the first phase in the coding process, involves assigning a label to a piece of data. A code represents the way a piece of data speaks to the researcher, though at this early point the idea is to remain open to all the things it could indicate or mean. As such, there are not too many analytical commitments at this stage. All proponents of Grounded Theory advocate word by word, line by line and section by section coding. Charmaz (2006) points out that deciding what to take as a single unit of meaning is ultimately a rather arbitrary exercise. It is a matter for the researcher to decide which pieces of data are pertinent, be it a word, utterance or segment of a story told by a participant (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This is when one is reminded of the fact that, rather than a machine making sense of the words in a transcript, a person is seeing each phrase in context and aware of the wider meaning of the whole text.

Once initial or open coding has been undertaken to explore all the possible phenomena that the data might indicate, the researcher will be attuned to certain ideas that appear to be recurrent. Focused coding is the next level of coding whereby the most significant codes generated through open coding are taken forward in the analysis to address larger segments of data in order to get a handle on what is happening. Out of these focused codes, one or more might stand out as able to ‘cut across’ (Charmaz, 2003: 322) a range of data sets. Further, if the focused code is able to categorize a number of pieces of data and ‘represent a recurrent theme’ (ibid), it spells the beginning of a category. Thus there is a sense of condensing the data to make sense of them on a more conceptual level (Charmaz, 2006: 59).

Categories are a key feature in Traditional Grounded Theory coding. A category has to encompass a range of activity. A category which may only have been tentatively posed early on when the researcher first started working through early transcripts, perhaps starting off as a code, becomes more defined in terms of specific properties. The researcher can seek new data to obtain a more nuanced or textured picture of its properties so that it becomes ‘dense’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 158). As such, categories will undergo a process of adjustment. Through continually comparing new data against it, one decides whether the category’s name, or more the concept it points to, requires adjusting over the course of the analysis in order to fit the data. Memoing, as a type of on-going narrative, aids the researcher in experimenting with developing codes into fully fledged categories. The goal is to understand what is under
study on a conceptual level which is afforded through the formation of categories which offer as nuanced a portrayal of the major processes as possible.

It is pertinent to note that whilst ‘stages’ are implied in the analytic process, it is not a linear process. There is much movement back and forth between all the procedures of Grounded Theory and a sense of overlap (Baszanger, 1998). That is, the research involves ‘deliberate reciprocal movement’ between collecting data, coding and drafting memos (Baszanger, 1998: 372). It is not the case that the researcher proceeds to shuffle codes into categories once they have collected so many, nor is it a case of determining a specific point whereby it is appropriate to start forming categories. In her guidelines on the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, Charmaz (2006: 71) contends that Grounded Theory is not a matter of simply ‘sifting’ and ‘sorting’ to make the data more manageable, as would normally be the case in much qualitative coding procedures. Rather, conceptual and theoretical possibilities will have been kept in mind from early on (ibid).

Categories also serve to create a skeleton for the theory. In traditional Grounded Theory, and to an extent in Charmaz’ (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory, these categories will form the basis of the theory - or ‘theorising’ - in so far that linkages between them delineate a cohesive picture of action. In other words, it is a matter of making distinctions between them to show how they subsume certain things and not others. For instance, two seemingly related categories may be distinct in that they speak of different consequences for actors. Thus the researcher might deem it necessary to create the two categories in order to cater for the variation found in the data. Charmaz (ibid) seems to imply that an understanding of the phenomenon under study will be constituted of and reflected in a set of major categories which provide the backbone for what is happening.

In the case of Situational Analysis, there is less emphasis on creating categories which ultimately need to cohere. Clarke (2005) does not specify that the analyst even uses categories. However, coding plays a fundamental role in the analysis. The codes generated by pouring over transcripts and field notes are, in effect, put to work in the Situational Analysis maps. In order to advance a set of initially coded data to a conceptual level, the researcher needs to start thinking in terms of ‘social worlds’, perspectives and discursive positions. Thus, rather than aiming for the integration and linkages between categories to show what people are doing, the researcher thinks about – from the outset - what people do as inextricably linked with situational elements. Moreover, it is not the case that the wider conditions then start to be investigated once the researcher has deciphered what people ‘do’.
In Situational Analysis, the researcher still uses memos to explore emerging ideas and these will provide the basis for theoretical sampling. Indeed, the researcher will still be collecting data alongside the analysis, though this is more directed by the developing ‘theory’ which map making facilitates. The maps stimulate thinking around conditional aspects whilst simultaneously having to fit with the data and help make sense of it. The arguably technical nature of the three maps does, of course, make Situational Analysis vulnerable - as Strauss and Corbin were - to accusations of applying or ‘imposing’ a framework onto the data (Clarke, 2005). In spite of this, Clarke (ibid) insists that this amount of technicality serves to stimulate rather than narrow ones insights.

2.6 Which approach to use?

Both Constructivist Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis adopt an interpretivist philosophy and propose strategies for gaining an in-depth understanding of that under study. However, there are different emphases. Clarke’s (2005) Situational Analysis provides a way of keeping sight of the wider aspects of the situation of interest. The assumption for Situational Analysis is that it is important to consider the wider contextual elements which shape individuals’ actions rather than focusing purely on how things seem to participants. What participants say in interviews, notes from participant observation and the experience they might indicate forms an initial part of the analysis. There are other elements to be considered rather than the data collection and analysis merely beginning and ending with what lies within participants’ ‘radar’. This then paves the way for the mapping procedures which help to situate or place this in context. Although Clarke (2005) does not specify an exact point when the construction of the visual maps enters the analysis, the idea is that mapping is deployed early on whilst the elements of the participants’ experience are being explored. Otherwise, she contends, the conditioning aspects would appear to be an ‘add-on’, so to speak, rather than being entrenched within the situation. As such, their early integration into the analysis is necessitated so they do not become a mere afterthought. Charmaz’ (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory, on the other hand, when compared against Clarke’s Situational Analysis, focuses primarily on the experience and ‘awareness’ of the participants.

Both Constructivist Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis, despite differing emphases, operate on some core Grounded Theory tenets. These are the logic of comparison, theoretical sampling, theory development and the use of coding procedures. Furthermore, they both proffer their approaches as advancements which ‘update’ Traditional Grounded Theory.
However, Situational Analysis could be considered the most far removed from Traditional Grounded Theory. A particular element which distinguishes it is that Clarke (2005) wishes to reveal, or at least make explicit, the forces which might go unnoticed. As such, she would approach the research with a concern to emancipate the repressed and take a critical theoretical view of the situation. Indeed, she is bent on putting certain beliefs and participants’ perceptions of reality into perspective, as though they ought to be laid bare for all to witness. This, it could be argued, represents the overlaying of quite a distinct framework, a matter that she does not particularly examine in her text.

Delineating the procedures within the Situational Analysis approach has exposed a number of features which, perhaps, would seem to render it more befitting of a conceptually focused piece of research. Adopting a Situational Analysis approach would mean accepting that a critical tone will flavour the findings. This critical tone reflects the concerns of the theoretical perspectives within extant literature which have directly influenced the creation of Situational Analysis. These perspectives are predicated upon drawing attention to the notion of constraint in the situation and the way this shapes participants’ experience of that situation. As such, questions concerning whether Clarke’s (2005) approach is effectively a form of discourse analysis become raised. Clarke (ibid) does concede that Situational Analysis might be regarded as a rather rigid framework to be applied by virtue of its technicality. However, importantly, she does not extend her discussions in this regard to the theoretical perspectives which are strongly connected to the framework and the implications of this for Grounded Theory methodology.

While Charmaz (2006) does not claim the researcher enters the research *tabula rasa*, what distinguishes her in this regard from Clarke (2005) is that she advocates taking the research in a direction guided by what interviewees say rather than what the researcher had already decided. For instance, as mentioned in section 2.5.2, the adoption of Clarke’s Situational Analysis involves the deliberate importing of concepts within extant literature such as ‘emotion work’. It could be argued that, while Clarke (ibid) deems them to be sensitising rather than definitive, interview data might consequently be seen in this light of such concepts. As such, this appears to have quite a driving influence on the data. However, taking note of the points made within both Charmaz’ (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) and Clarke’s (2005) methodological texts, this issue appears unresolved.

The intention for the Grounded Theorisation generated in this thesis is to observe the principles of coding, comparison and theory development which serve to make it Grounded Theory. Situational Analysis might be tempting as a way of conducting an in-depth analysis of
the situation which examines how elements within it have come to be. However, there are aspects which appear rather vague, despite the techniques being scrutinised within this chapter. Charmaz, on the other hand, while the practical implications for the use of a sensitising concept are less than definitive in her work, offers further guidance regarding how data might be coded. Further, her examples illustrate how the exploration takes shape and how the researcher might observe the technique of comparison when confronted with their own data. While Situational Analysis does align with the core principles expounded in this chapter, it seems to involve importing theoretical perspectives which departs from the original intentions of this study. As Charmaz’ guidelines seem to delineate in the most detail how interview data will be interpreted, her guidelines will inform the approach taken in this thesis. The next chapter delineates the procedures as they unfold in practice.
Chapter Three

The Grounded Theory journey in practice

3.1 Introduction

The methodological procedures observed in the current study are most closely associated with Constructivist Grounded Theory as proffered by Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008). This constitutes an approach rather than a series of technical steps to follow. It offers a methodological framework for a range of possibilities encountered when the researcher is confronted with their own particular research participants and data. This chapter delineates the analytic strategies employed using a distinctly ‘constructivist’ as opposed to ‘objectivist’ Grounded Theory philosophy. Certain strategies have been developed for the present study, though these abide by the central principles of Grounded Theory which were outlined in chapter two. Strategies for data analysis devised in response to the practical matters encountered through data collection and analysis are outlined and examples of memos and diagrams pertaining to data used in the current study are provided. In particular, they concern the process of focused coding during analysis which presented the greatest challenges for the practice of Grounded Theory. Indeed, it was only through immersion in the data collection and analytic processes that a better understanding of the Grounded Theory methodological process in practice was reached.

3.2.1 The context for the empirical study

A part-time undergraduate programme enrolling students whose path into Higher Education has followed non-traditional lines served as a specific site for the research. This particular programme was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it was assumed that a programme oriented towards education would be a likely arena harbouring practices associated with introspection and personal reflection. Secondly, that the wealth of experience they were likely to bring as older students, might possibly lead to a degree of tension surrounding the reconciling of ideas encountered through course content with long-standing beliefs. This was a tentative supposition which stemmed largely from the researcher’s experiences as a lecturer and surrounded particular observations from teaching mature students on an Educational Studies undergraduate degree programme. It seemed that, for the mature students encountered through teaching, certain aspects of being in Higher Education held significance in relation to self. For instance, they seemed more overtly questioning of content which they had not
expected to study. Moreover, they chose to relay accounts of previous understandings and
couched their questioning of course content in terms of personal meaning and prior
experiences.

The commitment to empirical exploration rather than reliance upon literature to guide the
process is germane to Grounded Theory methodology. Importantly, this aspect, coupled with
its orientation to the delineation of complex patterns of meaning-making and actions, renders
it suitable for the research interest. Indeed, Strauss and Corbin (1998) note that a feature of
commonality for Grounded Theory studies is their centring upon phenomena involving
tensions or contentious issues which require active negotiation by setting members.
Furthermore, the methodology befitted a study which sought to embark upon an exploration
of the subjective experiences of participants with a focus upon meanings generated amidst a
set of challenging circumstances. Participants’ handling of these circumstances served merely
as a point of departure for the data collection and analysis as issues and concerns the
participants would voice during interviews were not known at the outset.

Despite the broad, tentative starting point, some initial questions to pose during the first
interviews were drawn up. An area for initial exploration surrounded participants’ reasons for
studying on the course, perceived challenges and how they approached these. These very
general themes were deemed appropriate points of departure for in-depth conversations
involving their reflections upon issues and concerns occupying them at the time. Ultimately,
however, it was what participants chose to bring to the conversation that guided subsequent
questions. Ideas about ‘self’ and ‘identity’ guided the interview process and were not
deployed as definitive terms, but, rather, ideas to which the researcher was sensitised. They
were not sensitising in terms of being mined directly from literature, as discerned in the work
of Clarke (2005). Rather, their use in this study aligns more closely with Charmaz’ (2006) use of
sensitising concepts whereby they would merely suggest places to look rather than prescribing
what to see. How they connect with students’ experiences and where they would manifest
themselves were not pre-fabricated in this study prior to data collection and analysis.

3.2.2 Ethical considerations

It was deemed preferable for the research participants to be students whom the researcher
did not teach in order to minimize conflicts of interest. It was not deemed ethically prudent to
approach students whom the researcher had taught, assessed or supported. The researcher
had no prior access to details of the students as part of her post at the university and no
involvement in the degree programme in terms of teaching, administration or assessment. Furthermore, to involve one’s own students might involve the student feeling pressurised to acquiesce which runs counter to ethical tenets. The students approached as potential participants did not know the researcher prior to the research. Although the researcher’s staff profile was on the University’s website, she worked on a satellite campus and within a different department to that housing the degree programme in question.

The researcher’s position as an employee within the university meant she was already cognizant of the values and practices within the wider faculty. This proved useful in negotiating with gate keepers and maintaining their trust and good will. Ethical protocol was observed and details of the research were sent to the university’s Ethics Committee for approval. It was only once ethical consent had been granted by the Ethics Committee that gatekeepers in the institution were approached. Once permission had been obtained from the programme leader, the researcher was enrolled on the university’s ‘Virtual Learning Environment’ (VLE), thereby enabling online communication with all students enrolled on the degree programme in question. The VLE served as a medium for initial contact with prospective research participants.

Once the university’s ethical protocol had been followed and consent from gatekeepers obtained, an electronic letter was posted on the VLE which explained the nature of the research and invited students to participate in up to three in-depth interviews at a time and place to suit them. Although it was recognised that, on ethical grounds, participants needed to receive sufficient information regarding what they would be entering into when asked for their consent, adherence to the broadly inductive model underpinning Grounded Theory methodology meant it was not practicable to state precisely the focus or the title of the doctoral research. Indeed, this was simply not known at this early stage. Seven students out of a student cohort of twelve replied through the messaging system on the VLE, expressing their interest in participating in the research. Five proceeded to commit to a time and venue to suit them. It was recognised that the interviewer would have to be highly flexible regarding the time of the interviews as the students within this cohort were already extremely stretched in their schedule.

Once each participant had indicated interest via email correspondence with the researcher using the messaging application on the VLE, a time and venue were arranged to suit them. The interviews represented the first time the researcher met each participant face to face. Upon arrival at the interview venue, the participant was handed a paper copy of a consent letter. This re-iterated the nature of the research, what their participation would involve, the
potential outputs of the research, along with the promise of confidentiality and right to withdraw at any time. The participant signed this letter to indicate their understanding and acceptance of it, returned it to the researcher and kept a copy for themselves. Each participant gave consent for the interview to be audio-recorded and was advised that the recording would be deleted if they decided at a later date that they would like to withdraw from participation. It was made clear in the initial message on the VLE which invited their participation that their permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded would be sought, but that they were free to change their mind at any time.

In order to remain ethically sensitive, the names of all participants in the research have been changed. Names of geographical locations or other institutions which could potentially identify them have also been changed. In addition, it was deemed respectful to preserve the anonymity not only of the students interviewed but the staff at the university. Any staff name mentioned by the students during the interviews was obscured in the transcripts and the final presentation of the findings. Further, in order to reduce immediate identification of staff in the presentation of the Grounded Theorisation, they were referred to in gender neutral terms as she/he or her/his.

3.2.3 ‘Intensive’ interviewing

In line with Charmaz’ (2006) guidelines for constructivist Grounded Theory, the type of interview adopted was that of the intensive interview. Unlike the structured interview, the intensive interview possesses more conversation-like qualities and is purported to yield rich data which can be analysed for tacit meanings. The interviewees’ talk, that is, what they decide to share with the interviewer and the way they talk about such phenomena provides valuable insight into values and assumptions which may be more tacit in nature (ibid). This, of course, sets it apart from the concerns of objectivist Grounded Theorists who, Charmaz (ibid) contends, would primarily be interested in extracting facts from the interviewee pertaining to the ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ associated with information disclosed during the interview.

Intensive interviewing involves attending very closely to what the interviewee is expressing and formulating successive questions in response to this. Close attention, in a constructivist sense, means making an interpretation in regard to: how they are saying things; what they seem to emphasise or be reticent about; any non-verbal cues given out; responding empathetically to what they are saying (ibid). Such ‘intensity’, Charmaz (ibid) suggests, can only be enabled in a lengthy interview lasting about an hour, though it is incumbent on the
interviewer to create an atmosphere conducive to divulgence of that which is personally meaningful. It must be remembered that in the context of this study participants did not know the researcher, but were going to be in a situation where they would be invited to talk about themselves in a relatively candid way. Although those who agreed to participate were happy to be recorded and share their thoughts and feelings with the interviewer, establishing trust was factored into the data collection plan through holding a second and third interview. This, it was hoped, would help to foster rapport, or at least increase the likelihood of the interviewee feeling more relaxed when meeting the interviewer for the second or third time.

A further factor for consideration when approaching the interviews was how to arrive at a topic that held significance for the interviewee. As mentioned in chapter two, the reader enters Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines at the point when she actually has in her possession a set of transcripts of emotionally intense accounts of physical and psychological pain reported by interviewees. Lamentably, Charmaz (ibid) does not detail how interviewing procedures led up to such issues. Circumstances involving illness and adaptation to life-alter ing conditions, one might argue, will be talked about by the interviewee in a different way from those circumstances surrounding studying on a degree course. The significance of the difference between the two contexts, however, is less about one being likely to yield more emotional intense accounts than the other; rather, that it would be easier to arrive quickly at something the participant feels strongly about when it is a matter of health. The point here is that someone with an illness is not only identified by their diagnosis, but is likely to be preoccupied with the immediacy of a physical symptom; however, a student whose circumstances are not known in advance does not present the interviewer with such a focus.

As a focus could not be predetermined, questions for the interviews, following Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines, were open and designed to encourage interviewees to speak freely about what was pertinent to them and what was in their mind at the time of interview. The logic in this technique was that the interviewee would offer leads in their initial accounts of, say, how they would describe being a student at the institution and these could be followed up during the course of the interview. This largely unstructured approach, as advocated by Charmaz (ibid), demands much from the interviewer as questions need to be formulated during the interview in response to participants’ responses. Indeed, as one of the reasons for the inductive method is to avoid imposing prior ideas and to come to learn about participants’ concerns, it seemed important to take leads from the interviewee. For the present study, this involved giving interviewees freedom to speak about what their concerns were rather than their simply responding to preset questions based on the researcher’s prior concepts.
As Grounded Theory is not equivalent to a case study approach or the construction of discreet pictures of individuals, a key aspect of the analysis is to examine themes which transcend the individual (ibid). One technique suggested by Charmaz (ibid) to facilitate this is to build up a view of particular issues pertinent to all participants, or at least to build an understanding of issues that unite or divide participants. It seemed that this process would start from the first participant who might have divulged something personally meaningful; the interviewer would then pose an inferred theme derived from this to the next interviewee to gauge its applicability or perhaps become attuned to a new dimension of it. Thus, it would seem to bring about a comparative logic right from the beginning of the data collection. This process was adopted for the present study. A factor to be borne in mind when deploying this process, however, is that the first interviewee, to some degree, will set the stage for successive interviews. In other words, the course of the interviews and the types of question posed might have been different had a different participant been interviewed first.

3.2.4 Analysis of interview data

While it was possible to achieve a good sense of how the interview went – perhaps feeling the more verbose, flowing interviews implied that something personally meaningful had been hit upon in the interview – it was not until the examination of the transcripts that an idea of the meaning participants held towards their experience became fine-tuned. Indeed, Charmaz (ibid) does state that it is necessary to ‘push hard’ (2006: 49) for meaning. In other words, one has to probe deeply into the data. This appears to align with Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) predilection for microanalysis, particularly in the initial coding stages, whereby one selects either single words or phrases to deconstruct at the micro-level. The dictum to be borne in mind, when faced with one’s own transcripts, is that there is no particular rule concerning when certain words require micro-analytic treatment. Indeed, Charmaz (ibid) proffers it as an analytic tool to be used, for instance, when examining the reason for the interviewee’s adoption of a specific word or phrase over another and what it means specifically in relation to the concern or event they are talking about. Alongside close attention to words used, Charmaz (ibid) advocates the act of memo writing to enable the researcher to log the thoughts provoked as a result of coding the data. She recommends that strong themes are noted in these memos, along with hunches, and the researcher’s general impressions. At this stage, Charmaz (ibid) contends, memos are to remain tentative, merely suggesting possible analytic pathways to follow.
3.2.5 Understanding the coding process

From conducting the intensive interview as part of the present study, the amount of concentration required to derive meaning from the interview transcripts could be appreciated, particularly as Constructivist Grounded Theory involves looking for more than surface details. Although Charmaz’ (2006) guidelines provide the reader with excerpts of transcripts which have been coded, these pertain to discreet topics with no indication of what has gone before and after them. This was when the problem of ‘units’ of meaning became highlighted during the analysis. It was through working with the data of the present study that the fluidity of the meaning units could be appreciated. A unit of meaning is ultimately a matter involving the researcher’s interpretation. There were times when reading the transcripts that a unit of meaning could be construed as residing in a few lines of transcribed speech. For example, as seen in Figure 3a ‘An example of coding alongside a section of interview transcript’, the meaning resides in quite a defined ‘chunk’ of transcript. This example depicts an excerpt of transcript with codes in the left hand margin (the focused codes are shown in bold):

**Figure 3a: ‘An example of coding alongside a section of interview transcript’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not letting it impact me</th>
<th>E: Oh it doesn’t ..I just let it go like that (laughs)....I can’t worry about it one of the girls didn’t even have a supervisor so I thought you know at least I’ve got one he may not understand what I’m doing but I’ve got one (laughs)...you know so no I don’t worry about it I can’t I just can’t let things like that worry me because...you know I just get on with it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having ability to ward off worry</td>
<td>Knowing worrying would stop me getting on with it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In such cases, the focused coding guidelines provided in Charmaz’ texts (2003, 2005, 2006 2008) could be followed relatively easily. Focused coding, following Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines, means taking a few lines of transcribed speech, examining the initial codes generated from them (the initial codes are written alongside in the margin) and deciding whether any of these
could be adequate at the next level of abstraction. It might be that a new code needs to be generated to envelop all of these initial codes. Often, a gerund is selected as a label (code) that resonates with what is being expressed in the meaning unit identified. The label might even be a word used by the interviewee or one which the analyst regards as most capable of capturing what they are saying (ibid).

In addition to meaning units residing in chunks of text - whereupon the meaning can become defined by the topic the interviewee is talking about at that particular point in the interview – Charmaz (ibid) contends there are those which are spread across transcripts in a more diffuse way. When reading the transcripts in the present study, codes came to mind that served to address earlier aspects of the transcript which remained more in the background on first reading. This is another factor which calls for a large degree of interpretation to be brought to the text and is achieved through being immersed in the data and remaining flexible. For example, following Charmaz’ (ibid) recommendations, it was deemed important to allow early ideas to change and be prepared to modify the apportioning of units of meaning. Ultimately, when applying Charmaz’ (ibid) principles to one’s own data, it could be appreciated that it is not simply about dividing text into objective units of meaning or of generating codes directly from words by relying on their literal meaning. Furthermore, diffuse meaning spread across a transcript was not especially amenable to the coding procedures illustrated in Charmaz’ (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) texts.

Whilst the researcher can code events, incidents and observations, Charmaz (2006: 55) emphasises line by line coding as it can help one to ‘see the familiar in a new light’ and avoid arriving at ideas prematurely. Furthermore, it serves as an ‘excellent heuristic device for the initial coding of intensive interviews’ as they reach into the fundamentals of the words used and bring to light ‘more directions to consider’ and ‘already expresses emergent links between processes in the data’ (Charmaz, 2008: 164). The implication is that line by line coding serves as an opening up device which may be neglected when relying purely on surface impressions. This becomes all the more useful when faced with an entire transcript which may appear

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14 This was a key reason behind the decision to conduct coding manually rather than relying on software. Charmaz appears skeptical about it and notes that it has been accused of ‘short-changing the analytical process’ (Charmaz, 2006: 179). Moreover, computer aided analysis used for qualitative coding may not necessarily be amenable to Grounded Theory procedures; indeed, Richards (2002) contends when considering the association between Grounded Theory methods and Qualitative Data Analysis software (and that the code and retrieve aspect considered to be its defining feature), has ‘very little affinity with Grounded Theory techniques’.

15 Strauss and Corbin, it seems, imply that one can literally ‘fracture’ the data and micro-analyse these tiny pieces which will have in them objective or essential meaning – this is to be contrasted with Constructivist Grounded Theory which does break down but the fractured pieces are (re)constructed in a more interpretive way.
unremarkable upon first reading. As such, line by line coding was deemed a process to persevere with.

While it was very challenging to endeavour to follow Charmaz’ instruction to ‘push hard with your coding’ (2006: 49) at the line by line level, it was kept in mind that line by line coding is designed to yield further possible indicators of concepts to compare against indicators obtained from other data units. In other words, it is intended to enable comparison of meaning derived from one mode of analysing data to complement meaning derived from another, such as; reading over transcripts as a narrative; reading for a general impression or notes made after the interview; logging intuitive observations of the person and how they appeared at the time of interview; attending to particular words or turns of phrase used to refer to certain issues. The latter, Charmaz (ibid) contends, is useful for considering how the participant feels about it, perhaps indicating in vivo codes\textsuperscript{16}. In the current study, an example of such an in vivo code might be ‘not letting one another fall’. This relates closely to the phrasing within one of the transcripts. Such codes pertain to implicit and the more tacit meanings which can be explicated through the adoption of Constructivist Grounded Theory.\textsuperscript{17}

The notion of labelling codes or concepts with ‘telling’ words, whether these are words used by participants or not, in so far that they have resonance for what is being expressed, reverberates throughout Charmaz’ (2006) coding procedures. It is instructive in relation to developing codes at both the initial and focused stages. In the later stages, where major categories are developed, choice of label - which might be traceable right back to an initial code - can speak of all the elements the purported category subsumes (ibid). For instance, in the present study, ‘not letting one another fall’ started as an initial code, appearing in the margin of a transcript during the practice of initial coding. It was then proposed later on in the analysis as a category due to its ability to subsume other aspects within the data. However, as addressed below, this was not a straightforward process and these were not readily identifiable, nor were they ubiquitous in the data of the present study. Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines in regard to the generation of categories parallel, in a more interpretivist register, the procedures of objectivist Grounded Theory, such as that of Strauss and Corbin (1998), whereby categories are defined through properties and extremes of variation in the data along

\textsuperscript{16} An in vivo code is one which is volunteered by the participant and reflects their interpretation of the situation poignantly (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2003).

\textsuperscript{17} When reading Strauss and Corbin’s ‘basics’ text in the hope of a little more prescription, the possibility of isolating single words as units of analysis evoked some suspicion for the fact that in a syntactic chain words derive meaning in relation to others. This rather mechanical single word coding remains as food for thought and was subverted by Charmaz’ technique of looking for processes implicit in the wording whether a sentence, expression or choice of word in relation to something.
certain axes. Although it is devoid of the overt technicality associated with Strauss and Corbin’s (ibid) methods, Charmaz’ (2006) approach implies applying comparative logic to words and scrutinising their capacity to express what the category is about.

Once initial codes are generated and the researcher prepares to conduct focused coding - which is a much lengthier process than Charmaz’ (2006, 2003, 2008) texts suggest – it seems there is little sense of having reached a stage when everything falls into place or that one is required to do less ‘digging’. In the context of the current study, which contains several research participants, it was necessary to attend to codes which transcended the various participants’ interviews. There are, however, no direct prescriptions of how this might be conducted. Indeed, Charmaz’ (2006) exemplars deal primarily with generating focused codes from a discreet paragraph of text which has previously been subjected to initial coding and relates to just one individual participant. When faced with a set of transcripts from a number of participants, it was not immediately obvious which codes could be developed in order to, in Charmaz’ (2003: 322) words, ‘cut across’ the interviews and ‘carry the weight of the analysis’ (Charmaz, 2008: 164). This represents the point when the reader is effectively abandoned in Charmaz’ (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) texts. In order to deal with this in the present study, several strategies to address this were experimented with and these are delineated throughout section 3.3.

3.3.1 Devising strategies for analysis based on Constructivist Grounded Theory logic - strategy 1: A4 cluster diagrams

The first task in order to obtain an overview of salient codes, which would work for all the data, was to collate the ‘focused’ codes generated from each participant’s interviews on a blank A4 page. These were positioned into groups or clusters according to what appeared at that stage to be salient - albeit loose – themes from that participant’s interviews. This served as a putative system of organisation at this point. These focused codes had emanated from compression of the initial codes generated from line by line coding and were developed as distinctly ‘focused’ rather than ‘initial’ codes as, following Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines, they served to subsume the initial codes appearing in the margins of transcripts most incisively. Clustering them into loose, tentative themes represented the first time the focused codes were taken away from the margins of the transcripts and placed together on a blank page, as illustrated in Figure 3b ‘A4 cluster diagram’. Such coagulations represented a very tentative way of starting to make sense of the data pertaining to each participant. Furthermore, it was
deemed premature to adopt these clusters as potential categories at this early stage in the analysis as the focused coding process was felt to be only partially conducted.

Figure 3b: 'A4 cluster diagram'

- Feeling responsibility/weight of role
- Just somehow managed to juggle
- Preparing what I do as special/different
- Demanding aspect of specialty/profession
- Defining what I do as special/different
- Accumulating "all sorts of training bills"
- Seeing link/relevance of course to vocation role?
- Questioning necessity of social aspect in face of key aim
- Falling back on peers when uni doesn't deliver
- Surprise at peers actually answering your questions
- Enjoying getting others up to speed
- Coming across new ways of understanding young people's behaviour
- Knowing the key to getting pupils engaged
- Help people progress to where they want to be!
- Helping those who are stuck or don't see possibilities
- Feeling pupils' achievements to be my achievements
- Tutor bringing material to life
- Relating to stories tutors tell
- Having to pick from what's available
- Maximum effort into it—your heart and soul
- Trying to give them what they're looking for
- Wanting to fully demonstrate skills
- Trying to get these essays in'
- Not wanting to say I'm at the end
- Being sure there's always more
- Appreciating/recognising scale of information not yet known
- Distinguishing self from those who see expertise as simple/superficial
- Knowing my essential weakness
- Wandering about true capacity for achievement
- Going in deeply
- Going/delving in
- Opting for breadth/increased scope
- Seeing knowledge as infinite
- Accumulating knowledge/discovering
- Being sure there's always more
- Being sure there's always more
- Appreciating/recognising scale of information not yet known
The next step was to think about the data in terms of threads which effectively traversed the data and could be representative of the concerns suggested by all the data and not just those tied to individuals. In fact, two opinions held by two individuals could initially appear to be indicators of separate categories. For example, one expression in the data might be being anxious to reach a goal in time; another might be being very cautious and ready to say ‘no I’m not doing it’. However, using Constructivist Grounded Theory coding and extending the analysis beyond thematic explication, it might be the case that they represent the polarities of an axis within one category. Such an axis would speak of the essence of a category and the two opinions would then be related along a dimension peculiar to such a category. In the case of the above example, the act of ‘containing’ might bind them together. Axial coding is an analytic tool suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), but honed in a more interpretivist vein by Charmaz (2006: 139) as a stimulus for thinking about categories which could ‘carry’ the ‘weight’ of the analysis. It was utilised as a way of thinking about how to incorporate variation within categories, though the idea of a single axis with two opposing ideas at either end was not upheld in the technical manner espoused by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Of course, coding for more than mere description is not a new element peculiar to focused coding; indeed, initial coding is predicated upon labelling phenomena for process rather than general topics (Charmaz, 2008). The point is that constructing categories in terms of themes or general topics, particularly if conducted merely to shuffle and organise a mass of data by their labels, will yield rather flat and limited analyses (Charmaz, 2006). As line by line coding encourages coding for process rather than simply themes or topics, the focused codes generated from them also speak of process. Put simply, they indicate what the participant was ‘doing’; for example, what ‘action’ could be discerned in even the smallest pieces of data. In the current study, action could be captured in terms of the gerunds; ’defining’, ‘limiting’, ‘controlling’, ‘needing’ and so forth. In other words, they pertained to the act of, say defining and so forth. For Charmaz (ibid), a focus on action facilitates the construction of categories suggestive of what is carried out in response to circumstances. These then become defined as the category is developed and honed.

When deciphering which categories could potentially, as Charmaz (2006: 139) proffers, ‘carry’ the ‘weight’ of the analysis, one particular strategy devised for the present study involved starting with an individual participant, selecting one particular cluster on the page and then trying to determine its reach across the other participants’ clusters. Codes were deemed worthy of selection on two counts: firstly, that they were able to envelop others appearing in

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18 She explains this clearly in a later text, Charmaz (2008), and highlights the difference between general qualitative coding and line by line Grounded Theory coding.
the same cluster (for that individual); secondly, that they coincided with impressions noted in memos regarding what really stood out during interviews with that individual. However, in order to develop codes which worked for all the participants, comparisons needed to be made between this cluster and the clusters pertaining to the other participants. It was through looking repeatedly back and forth across the documents depicting the clusters that the codes which ‘cut across’ large amounts of data could be identified.

When examining a particular cluster of codes appearing on one individual’s diagram, the researcher was faced with constructing a focused code which spoke for all in the cluster. This involved subjecting the focused code to a process of refinement or re-labelling in order to ensure it was inclusive of all the codes that constituted that cluster. Alternatively, rather than devising new wording, the label of one code in a cluster may have stood out to the extent that it effectively worked for the rest of the codes appearing in that cluster. When looking across the diagrams for each individual, there were also instances when the wording of a code such as ‘defining window for study time’, which originated from an individual participant, might, in fact, turn out to work for – or subsume - codes of other participants. Choosing to start with a code which stood out, or that seemed poignant, was one strategy developed in order to make a start with focused coding. It seemed commensurate with Charmaz’ (2006) contention that codes developed early on in the coding need not be dropped or modified as they can actually be particularly incisive with the capacity to endure through to the more conceptual, abstract levels of analysis. Thus a general concept such as ‘defining a window’ could be seen to be taking shape as an understanding of the data was constructed.

While initially seeming to provide a means of analysing across all participants’ diagrams, the act of starting with a code from one individual’s diagram and seeking to transpose it across all participants’ diagrams proved to be problematic. It meant the analytic direction was determined somewhat prematurely as what was essential to the category under construction was effectively decided upon at the very point the code that ‘stood out’ was selected. In short, it became a matter of bringing it to bear or, perhaps, forcing it on to the other participants’ codes. As a consequence, it was a struggle to write memos about proposed categories as one could only think about it in a rather narrow way. For example, once ‘defining window for study time’ was selected and proposed as a category it became difficult to show how the other codes from other individuals really did relate to it, or, more pertinently, how the data actually lead to this. Perhaps this was why more gaps than points of coherence could be identified in the early parts of the analysis in the present study. In fact, it seemed that elucidating the nuances of the category relied more on imagination than that which emanated from or was ‘grounded’ in the data. With a putative concept like ‘defining window for study time’ in mind, it became all too
easy to become fixated upon its connotations and rhetoric and simply write a story which served to fill in the gaps.

This particular strategy, devised to obtain a degree of control over the data and conduct focused coding, required further development as it did not particularly help to define or fill out categories. Any framework these categories pointed to was so loose and contained so many large gaps that analytic direction was halted. One contributing factor was deemed to lie in the very process of compiling the focused codes purely from the line by line codes. Indeed, the focused codes that were lifted from the margins of interview transcripts only condensed initial codes within individual transcripts and were therefore not those which ‘cut across’ participants. Thus, focused codes were, to a degree, committed to and organised visually in clusters before they were shown to condense the data laterally, that is, across all the participants’ transcripts as a whole. Although this would appear to comply with Charmaz’ (2006, 2003) rather cursory guidelines in regard to focused coding, such a procedure satisfies only a part of the focusing coding process. Much more attention needed to be paid to coding across the data set and thus arrive at some focused codes.

3.3.2 Strategy 2: the construction of A3 diagrams to aid analytic memo writing

In order to address focused coding so that premature arrival at proposed categories was avoided, it seemed necessary to render transparent the coagulation of codes across participants. Transparency means tracing exactly how and rendering explicit in a visual manner how coagulations might work to represent a focused code. To begin with, codes indicating analytic ideas which appeared to pertain to a concept were grouped together loosely so that they represented putative properties of a category that, as yet, lacked a definitive label. Figure 3c ‘A3 focused coding diagram’ provides an example of this and shows ‘defining a window’ as emanating from one participant’s focused code in the centre. However, ‘defining a window’ was taken more tentatively and was considered liable to change. The idea was that it remained fluid and still in progress as a visual picture was systematically built up around it. Moreover, at this point, moving coding to the focused level was deemed to be still in progress as workable categories that transcend individuals were sought. Therefore, up to the point when some categories capable of carrying the ‘weight’ (Charmaz, 2006: 139) of the analysis – across participants - could be taken for close analytic refinement, it seemed fluidity was requisite.
Figure 3c: 'A3 focused coding diagram'
To begin with, each proposed facet of this focused code was arranged around the name of the focused code to represent its potential properties if it were to be settled upon as a particular category. The properties of the category were demarcated by lines radiating from the centre of the page to aid comparative analysis between them and denoted the definitive boundaries between them. Indeed, the establishing of boundaries between properties was considered central to the process of defining what the category was about. The task was then to array other data units, not exclusively those purely generated from line by line coding, around each ‘facet’ of this central code to explicate its meaning and provide its texture. Indeed, this empirical detail is crucial to the act of memo writing which would become denser as the analysis progressed. As such, the idea that only the focused codes from the margins of the interview transcripts could be used was abandoned: initial codes which may have been submerged when deploying strategy 1 were also included. The more data units (line by line codes, events, incidents) that were brought to bear on the property undergoing construction, the more definition it acquired in Grounded Theory terms. In strategy 1, it was only the focused codes, which condensed line by line codes in interview transcripts, that were in view and this generated a limited and sparse picture. In strategy 2, on the other hand, more detail and thus definition was afforded.

Employing the strategy - devised for the current study - of adding initial codes to the diagram also served as a form of check on the decision to take codes as focused codes, or at least a way of rendering these decisions more transparent in a visual manner. For instance, inclusion of an initial code may help one to scrutinise the adequacy of the focused developed to subsume it, or, conversely it might serve as a ‘fly in the ointment’, so to speak, which adds another dimension to the focused code. It was not so much that the process of initial to focused coding conducted on the interview transcripts was mistrusted, but that these focused codes had been constructed from initially small segments of text within an individual’s interview transcript and would therefore benefit from having their constituents placed on a larger picture. It was more if one wanted the fine variations or ‘detail’ – often found in initial codes - to support analytic ideas that bringing initial codes on to the diagram was advantageous. Furthermore, this definition is crucial if one wants to write a nuanced narrative about what the category is about in a memo commensurate with the tenets of Charmaz’ (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory.

Writing thoughts next to data units on a visual diagram prompted analytic direction more effectively than trying to write in memos about very early categories that were so patchy one was left floundering. Charmaz (ibid) does not explicitly advocate such a visual rendition at this stage, though it would appear to be functioning in very much the same way as that of her early
memos. Indeed, she weaves her codes into the continuous prose - or ‘storyline’ - of the memo so the reader can discern the way the writing is founded on the empirical data and codes. In strategy 2, rather than writing as much as one can, which might lead to imaginative leaps from the data, codes and other data units were continually brought onto the diagram. However, these were connected visually at this early stage rather than through sentences within a storyline. They were to precede the development of narrative memos which form the basis of the final presentation of the grounded theorising.

As the properties were elucidated on the diagram (these are represented as the spaces between the spokes radiating from the centre of the A3 diagram), the label of the potential category, depicted in the central ‘bubble’ of the diagram, could then be subjected to refinement. The idea was that properties were compared both to the category and each other. For instance, starting from one property such as ‘demoting course’s significance in life’, one could then take the next putative property (‘coming to identify what is really necessary’) and determine, through looking at the codes and data units around them, whether it actually worked as a separate property or if it should be merged with the one in question. This meant discerning what made it similar or different. Moreover, this was deemed to align with the principle of comparison at the heart of Grounded Theory methodology.

Thus far, the A3 diagram technique dealt with a category one was fairly sure about; that is, a category which seemed to stand out clearly from looking across all the A4 cluster diagrams and which was alluded to in early memos. ‘Defining a window’ (Figure 3c) is an example of one of these categories. However, a variation on this was to experiment with ideas which seemed to point to a process or concept whose label remained, as yet, rather undefined. This would arise when the researcher looks at all the A4 cluster diagrams and identifies a relationship between clusters taken from across all the participants. Such a relationship may be merely intuitive and emanate from the impressions derived from interviews, but the researcher is not able to give it a specific label. Putting them together on an A3 diagram meant it was possible to decide and flesh out (with codes, incidents, thoughts) whether they could potentially unite under a major category as its components. It was hoped that putting it to work in the A3 diagram would help establish whether this category was grounded in the data.

In sum, focused codes emanating from condensing initial codes in interview transcripts would be identified and written in the margin in larger type than the initial codes. In order to achieve an overview of the data for each individual, the researcher extracted all the focused codes from the margins of the transcripts for each participant and placed them in ‘clusters’ or coagulations pointing to issues for that particular participant. Some clusters, in a visual sense,
would be large, some small, some tightly bound and others a bit looser. At this point, a number of A4 diagrams presenting a picture of each individual participant were accrued. In order to achieve a view of issues cutting across individuals, A3 diagrams were constructed to create a visual map of any coagulation that was thought to cut across participants. This type of map contained codes (whether initial or focused), incidents, events, short memos, and direct quotes from transcripts. Essentially, this afforded the identification or examination of the adequacy of a code to capture a large chunk of data which may transcend the individual participant.

3.3.3 Issues regarding levels of abstraction

Pertinent to the consideration of assignment of categories is the issue of levels of abstraction. Charmaz’ (ibid) Constructivist Grounded Theory does not imply that one moves through successive levels from the substantive through to the conceptual in an automated manner. Instead, as detailed in chapter two, the researcher could identify, at the initial coding stage, a code which is conceptual and not essentially substantive or concrete in nature. Of course, the purpose of theorising, in a ‘grounded’ sense is to make some progression towards conceptual understanding, though this is not achieved through permanent graduations to higher levels of abstraction. However, such a non-linear process does have implications for the construction of the theory or ‘theorising’. The researcher, faced with many directions and perhaps some categories which seem to capture a lot of data effectively and some that ‘float’ somewhat, is faced with questions concerning how to develop a framework. Indeed, questions arise concerning where one category starts and the other ends and the issue of category overlap.

If one were to adhere to the comparative logic at the heart of Grounded Theory analysis, it is the perpetual comparison of data and codes that leads to the construction of categories which can carry the weight of the analysis. In other words, through the splitting, refining and subsequent reassignment of codes and categories, some fairly stable categories can be arrived at. Therefore, adherence to such an approach is less about having to make a decision as to the framework that could be used to hang a mass of un-integrated data and codes upon: instead, the framework appears to become consolidated through comparison and being tested for its adequacy in representing what is going on in that under study.

With regard to discerning levels of analysis, Wasserman et al. (2009) attest to the absence of a clearly defined way of building up to categories. Although not wishing to take a clear epistemic stance, and indeed demoting the significance of the interpretivist – positivist dichotomy,
Wasserman et al. (ibid) seem to want Grounded Theory procedures to provide a ‘systematic way’ of navigating through levels to arrive at integrated categories,

At the crucial point where real theory begins, it provides no such systematic or transparent way of gaining insight into the conceptual relationships between emergent concepts

(Wasserman et al., 2009: 356)

This perhaps highlights one of the most intractable issues for Grounded Theory, particularly if one is seeking a degree of certainty or reassurance. Wasserman et al.’s (2009: 363) solution is to deploy the fractal analytic technique whereby codes assume a certain ‘level of scale’. It is the concentration upon scale, that is, from the local and substantive to the conceptual, along with the notion of a linear process of conceptualisation, which defines their approach. Their primary concern is to construct an approach by which analysis can be ‘surely explicated’ (Wasserman et al., 2009: 360) in order that integration is not ‘based merely up musings of the individual researcher’ (ibid).

Wasserman et al.’s (ibid) search for an approach which seeks certainty is understandable at the point when the researcher needs an idea of where they are going. Conversely, Strauss and Corbin (1998) maintain an interpretivist logic throughout. It is, however, their text (the third edition of ‘Basics of Qualitative Research’, 2008) which addresses more explicitly the act of determining the adequacy of categories representing a large set of data. Furthermore, in keeping with an interpretivist philosophy and comparable with Charmaz’ (2006) guidelines, they contend that the researcher will have a feel for what was important for the data they have become immersed in. Issues concerning the beginnings of integration are addressed in the next strategy concerning constructing focused written memos emanating from the view of the data that the A3 diagrams provide.

3.3.4 Strategy 3: starting to write focused memos with the aid of A3 diagrams.

If focused codes are indicated by the A3 diagrams, the writing of focused memos was useful in pinning down what these codes (potential categories) were about. This involved looking at the diagrams for codes that captured or subsumed much of what was immediately around them. At this point, it seemed a matter of identifying constellations made up of initial codes, incidents, notes and thoughts at various places on the A3 diagram. Importantly, these possible focused codes would merge data across individuals. Now, in order to demonstrate its ability to do this and thus its suitability as a category, it seemed important to start writing.
In order to facilitate theory building or theorising, the onus was on clarifying what this category stood for in conceptual terms and how it functioned in the wider picture of ‘what is going on here’. This entailed identifying the properties of a code or category which helped demarcate it from others. The act of writing, in tandem with looking at the visual diagrams, helped to ignite ideas and connections to start forming a storyline that needed to make sense. Figure 3d ‘A3 memo-writing example’ provides an example of how memo writing emulates the process of splitting and refining categories in an inductive manner. It demonstrates how writing is integral to the clarification of ideas. ‘Grounding’ in the data was demonstrated through being able to weave in codes as part of the sentences which, for clarity, were placed in bold to stand out in the writing.

3.3.5 Integration of categories

Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) remains very tentative in her guidelines surrounding how one determines how categories might relate and integrate. However, in order to address the specific needs of the current study, the decision was made to continue to diagram how codes and categories might work together in a wider scheme denoting links through arrows, lines and circles. This served as an orienting device and complemented the writing process in so far that the wider scheme was kept in mind as the finer detail was elucidated.

It is at this point that an analytic framework such as that proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) or Clarke’s (2005) ‘Situational analysis’ would certainly have been of service in finding ways of linking codes and concepts. However, this type of approach, as Charmaz (2006) notes, means that one is applying an analytic framework which contravenes her approach to a certain extent. Nevertheless, crucial decisions needed to be made as to the boundaries between codes and categories (which speak of concepts) and the application of a loose framework would have helped advance what had been brought together already. However, Charmaz (ibid) suggests that, in the interests of methodological coherence, it is preferable to be able to progressively define constructs through a process of defining and subsequent splitting of categories.
Figure 3d: 'A3 memo-writing example'

The category 'Welcoming a connection' - properties/characteristics defined

'Desiring more face to face contact'

Is this about needing contact with a staff member? Not wanting to receive remote orders/prescriptions points to a desire to have it explained. "(You just do what they say in the book); "There is a little booklet but you need somebody to talk to about these things") (being just a number in the eyes of the uni). It is necessary to be able to have the opportunity to discuss rather than just reading standardised comments on a feedback sheet (not respecting standard marking comments; just wanting to discuss comments 3). There are times when actually being able to discuss through dialogue rather than just going by comments on feedback sheets is desired. Written comments can seem personal at times, especially when the student feels they have followed the assignment criteria.

Being set up to be let down (P) seems to indicate that they are lead on and that the tutor creates hope! "(because now I feel like not only have I failed myself but I failed everybody else but that's coz that's me...you know we don't have time and our tutors don't have time to get to know us or for us to get to know them)." Here, tutors make comments that students really hang on to, but are essentially a bit vacuous. (That relates to both being recognised/acknowledged and desiring more face to face contact). The substantive instance whereby the student has felt set up relates mostly to one individual (P); however, the notion of hanging/looking onto is more transcendental; for instance, students feel that the tutor can make them want to do it. Tutors can also inspire motivation/hope.

They prefer to have help tailored to the individual as some things are not relevant or can't be related to. Tutors are deemed really supportive if they take personal responsibility for ensuring support is given.

The idea of being face to face is slightly linked to this notion of the tutor bringing the module alive—using humour. Also, feeling unconnected speaks of literally not being connected through email/VEE and losing out on collaboration. Feeling unconnected also means being a bit isolated from peers. Therefore, it's not only about the tutor-student connection. The peer group as a support network carries a lot of importance, though they are quite happy to converse online ("we won't let each other fall but I think that support comes from more what we do in the student body than it does from...). So, is it more about needing that contact with the tutor? What do they get from face to face sessions?

Pinpointing tutor's use (Z) in a collaborative discussion is a matter of limiting or sharply defining where the tutor needs to provide instruction/interpersonal knowledge (Being enlightened rather than being told (n-c)). "(you say sort of what do I get out of it - I get out of it the recognition from people who I respect as having greater knowledge maybe in a narrower field than I do the fact that I am gaining some of those insights and understanding)." (This points to gaining recognition more then needing more face to face contact, perhaps?). This means there is a definite need for tutor input at specific times, if the tutor does not fulfill this expected role (this needs fleshing out) then the student will withdraw and stand firm for what they know from experience.

The need for guidance through the hoops (declaring need for guidance through the hoops) is stated as a specific need— the feeling is that if there are set things that one must cynically abide by, then detailed help is needed as these goals are elusive to me. That said, it's not about wanting to be spoon-fed. Enrichment does not come from "being lead through a string through the nose to the answer".

Struggling with being able to express without being malignated suggests it's important to maintain a certain impression in the eyes of tutors. (Is impression management relevant to all participants? If so is it related to wanting to be recognised?)

'Being recognised/acknowledged'

There is a need to be acknowledged for the knowledge and wisdom one already has. If face to face contact is obtained, it provides an opportunity to show ability and play a part in professional dialogue. Showing what one is worth—is it about looking good in front of tutors or about proving to oneself privately? I think it's more about not being swayed as in addition to the code 'wanting one's wisdom acknowledged' is the code 'being acknowledged' (but not necessarily congratulated) for one's specialist expertise. This concerns wanting the tutor not to try and sway them when their knowledge is not as deep or specialised. So, on the one hand, it's about wanting one's wisdom not to be relegated/ignored/overlooked or seen as subordinate to course input; on the other hand, it is about feeling so sure of one's own knowledge and perceiving lack of expertise on the part of tutors that one won't be swayed. [Wanting to be validated vs knowing what I want (and this tutor isn't giving it)]

Also, it's welcomed when a tutor checks that they are understanding session material. Here, the tutor ensures that the session won't simply move on, leaving them behind. It is helpful if a tutor can pay particular attention to a piece of work. In this sense, it's about receiving guidance and not being overlooked. This adds a further dimension to being recognised/acknowledged in terms of no wanting to be overlooked/left behind or treated just as a group.

This notion of wanting recognition occurs when:

- one has knowledge that is derived from experience and this should not necessarily be seen as lesser than that of tutors/course materials.
- one has specific expertise (more so than the tutor) which has been accrued through working in a professional position. This should be respected and it should be recognised that one may know what 'will' or will not work as they do this everyday (and the tutor cannot relate to this reality)

Other characteristics of wanting recognition are:
- feeling appreciative when one isn't treated as one of the mob but is asked in sessions if they are following it. This counterbalances the detrimental effects of being told you'll be left behind if you don't work at it.
- there is a link here to the idea of being recognised as a certain individual and "not 18" and being entitled to make a decision.
In the current study, such an admonition, or at least the possibility of building up to concepts without the need for a prior framework, can be appreciated. For example, as shown in Figure 3d, ‘welcoming contact’ was thought to be a category which could house the codes; ‘desiring more face to face contact’ and ‘being recognised or acknowledged’. Prior to this, a tentative category was constructed which encompassed issues surrounding wanting a connection with tutor. However, as memos were written and properties delineated, the data seemed to point towards two subcategories; ‘desiring more face to face contact’ and ‘being recognised or acknowledged’. In the writing of the memo, it seemed prudent to distinguish between that particular desire for ‘face to face’ interaction from the data pertaining to having that ‘recognition or acknowledgement’. However, this demarcation still had to work within the larger category ‘welcoming contact’, if welcoming contact was to be kept as a category. Therefore, a boundary was sought in order to contain all that which spoke specifically of the notion of ‘welcoming contact’ rather than another putative category such as ‘controlling impact of study’.

Such a process of clarification and definition of categories also aided when discerning connections with other major categories. For instance, through having to make such decisions about the data it became apparent that, although minor categories were still important, there were perpetual links to a certain category – in this case, ‘making an individual choice’ – which heralded the beginning of the integration of categories. These links were discerned through a combination of visual diagrams, illustrated in Figure 3e ‘Diagram with memo’, which, following Charmaz’ (ibid) recommendations, denoted the weight and comparative position of categories on a blank piece of paper and also the writing of detailed memos. As part of this iterative process, the act of writing in the memos, which, in Figure 3e, is shown below the diagram, helped the researcher to see how far an idea could be taken. From implementing Charmaz’ (ibid) broad guidelines on memo writing, it became apparent that the act of writing forces one to commit to ideas as when it appears as a sentence in the form of a conjecture, for instance, one can determine its logic. Furthermore, it helps to pin down ideas and create precision in what one is saying. This can, in turn, prompt a change or adaptation of the emergent skeleton of the analysis depicted visually in diagram form.
Accompanying written memo: Why does making an individual choice appear to be fairly central?

It’s about standing firm (rather than just literally making a selection), there is an element of having the right and that one will fall back on this strong position when pushed.

So what’s actually happening here...?

A stand is taken and expressed as such when it gets to the point when demands made by the course go too far (this is important to the idea of it happening at a specific point)—encroaching into family time.

Standing firm means not giving in when one knows better—how can another know when they haven’t been there? I’ve later concluded that this relates more to an enduring need for the profession (SEN) to be recognised/respected

Making a stand means not wanting to be overlooked or to just be another number in the eyes of the uni.

However, it can be about showing this (i.e face to face confrontation), or the making of a silent
decision and withdrawing (having to ‘let it drop as it would have eaten me up otherwise’)

So, how is making a stand connected with making an individual choice?

It’s about self-reliance choosing when to fall back on one’s own resources. Is there some cynicism here? i.e try to make a stand but then realising the reality?

When do students collaborate and turn to the peer support network? Are there certain types of occasions when this happens?

If help is sought directly from teaching staff it is when there is no clear guidance about how to get through them. It’s like there’s a specific point when one gives up and puts it back in the hands of the tutors.

Are students concerned about being an individual or being part of the student body? (What does being individual mean—‘I’ll have to look into this more carefully if I’m to keep it)

Other ideas….Is there a sense of having an expectation? NB: I’d made the connection to ‘a choice made independently’, but at this point (23rd Nov) I had overemphasised the stroppiness and the cynical side on the part of the students. I think now it only induces confrontation when one’s original motive is attacked/questioned, In a way it’s less about making an individual choice than choosing when to show integrity or when to accept it and adjust. ‘Accepting’ leading onto ‘adjusting’ seems important. (I think I’m starting to force links here, though).

3.4 Summary

This chapter has expounded the actual practice of Constructivist Grounded Theory when faced with the needs of a particular study which yields data from a number of participants. Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines were employed regarding the adoption of the intensive interview technique and, particularly, the need to build successive questions upon interviewees’ articulation of their experience. The ‘initial coding’ procedures she advocates helped build up a skeleton of potential categories or concepts which focused coding could then explicate. However, several strategies were experimented with in order to satisfy the notion of ‘focused coding’ as proposed by Charmaz (ibid). Indeed, this aspect – to develop codes that transcended the individual - is rather muted in Charmaz’ (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) texts. The strategies delineated in this chapter helped to define large amounts of data and to scrutinise the detail which supported the concepts they indicated. This expedited the writing of analytic memos which, Charmaz (2006) maintains, form the basis of the eventual presentation of the Grounded Theorisation.
Chapter Four

Grounded Theory analysis

(Any text in italics represents the actual words of the participants. Key codes are denoted by bold text).

4.1

The central category ‘operating within constraints’ subsumes the subcategory: ‘resisting being channelled’ which is delineated in this section.

Introduction to the sub-category ‘resisting being channelled’:

The ‘channelling’ concerns the feeling of being coerced into a certain way of being which generates a feeling of being oppressed or squashed. This occurs as only certain ways of being, it is perceived, are accepted and validated by the university. However, the self that is felt to be authentic or unique remains strong and fights to be accommodated. Integral to this is a subjective experience of ‘not being recognised’ (this is understood as a matter of being misunderstood, one’s knowledge not being endorsed and a feeling of not mattering).

One option is to merely settle for and yield to the set of pressures imposed by the course. However, this option brings about an experience of self—or way of being—that is at odds with the original vision of the self studying at University. Thus a certain tension arises which fuels the ‘resisting’.

Pauline, the first participant interviewed, is the student who largely inspired the creation of this subcategory.

‘Resisting being channelled’ in detail:

For Pauline, the course seems to be manufacturing or procuring a way of being which Pauline describes as ‘single minded’. This way of being entails: having to tune out others and their needs and limit the extent to which she is available for others in the various other roles she has,
P: “…to be single-minded enough to have the time is very difficult I think particularly on a course like this because as I said before I don’t think in education you know you should be so single minded because if you are you’re diminishing all that’s going on around you and education is people work

Interviewer: Yeah

P: So we shouldn’t ever just be looking at those in front of us it should be about all the things around us so I think it’s I find it terribly difficult to be single minded and not distracted by the needs of people who and if I say on the periphery it makes it sound awful but you know on people who aren’t actually involved in the studying process like my son like my you know elderly poorly father like my mother like my siblings I they have a crisis like my staff at work if they need me like my line manger at work if he suddenly needs me to switch and do something…like colleagues at work you can’t all the time be so single minded and say no I can’t do that I’ve got to do this

Interviewer: Mmmm…I think it would be very hard to do that coz those are the normal demands of life aren’t they

P: Exactly - and you can’t you know you can’t do that so the thing that I find does give will sort the only person it impacts on if I don’t do this is me..so this is what I find gives way to all those other... needs and demands

Interviewer: So this is the thing that gives – the course?

P: It has to because you know if your children need you they can’t you know mine are 21 and 17 now and if they need – I mean my son’s been in Afghanistan for this last summer…coz all these competing things…”

Having to make decisions which align with a ‘single-minded’ approach is experienced as alien and uncomfortable: it takes her away from her ideals about education which can be seen in the excerpts below. Therefore, rather than accepting the channelling, Pauline commits to a self that resists. Indeed, this resonates through all three of her interviews. This ‘bloody-minded’ self which persists through ‘stubbornness’ and ‘belligerence’ marks a response to the constraints.

The ‘bloody-minded’ (‘maverick’, ‘belligerent’, ‘stubborn’) self is one that faces the constraints, though in a way that resists having to be the way that seems endorsed by the practices and rituals associated with the course. Such practices might be, for instance, making students feel they ought to simply be harsh with themselves and attend an evening session regardless of
extraneous circumstances. The self having to navigate and perhaps put a personal spin on – that is, to try to decipher reasons for the constraints imposed - reverberates throughout. This is illustrated in the following quip:

“Sometimes I just think sod ‘em I’m going to do it just because you don’t want me to – you can’t want me to do it otherwise you’d have answered my email”.

Further illustrations connecting to ‘self as resistant’, but which run a little deeper, can be discerned in statements such as,

“As a part time student you are only not invisible when you kick up a fuss...and also get top marks”.

This was voiced by Pauline in the third interview, after graduating, when she reflected on her time on the course. It not only remained consistent with her talk throughout the interviews which were flavoured in a similar way, but, pertinently, provided a glimpse into the dimensions of ‘not being recognised’ that, on an intuitive level, was starting to form as the interviews with her went on. However, this aspect is given specific treatment at a later point in section A.

Succumbing or having to adapt and make compromises which the university advocates (for example, to be realistic and accept that these are challenging conditions) is a way of being that does not fit in easily with how Pauline presents herself in the interviews. As I listened to her talk about her past, I pieced together a picture of a person who followed a path from a position of ‘naivety’, when first making decisions about her career, through to empowerment; from having to merely ‘settle for’ to then becoming more agentic. Her story portrays a person who, after merely settling for nursing, had finally accepted she could do it. Embarking upon the degree in her mid forties, it would seem, is a way of enacting or formalising this realisation or epiphany. The act of getting the qualification is a way that she can ‘prove’ to herself that she ‘can do it’.

“I’ve got a good job whether I get my degree or not I mean I got the job without the degree there’s no requirement on me to have the degree...I want the degree because I want to prove that I can do it...to myself”

As gleaned in her account, she was in a position, having left school at sixteen, of doing what most people did which was to go and get ‘a training’. In her instance, this was nursing,

“I wanted to be a nurse or a teacher and I settled on nursing because we nobody in our family had been to university – we didn’t understand how the grant system worked we didn’t know who to ask or...I was very naive as a teenager and you know there wasn’t that level of
awareness that there is now you know......that kind of stuff wasn’t available nearly sort of 30 years ago...so I went straight into nursing and you know it was different then you didn’t do a degree you went straight onto the wards and ........became a nurse the practical way....”

She was ‘naive’, as she put it, and did not know what her options were or what she ought to aspire to and this coincided, she feels, with coming from a non-academic background. A key motif that came across in her interviews was of ‘unlocking’ (doors); ‘it’s almost like unlocking doors’ is expressed by Pauline as a metaphor for trying to get ‘in’ the club of academia which uses specialist language, for instance, as a barrier,

“...you know some of them are it’s just it is it’s like a secret language...coz we don’t want you in our club.”

This feeling is consistent with her talking about having to ‘dig’ for information or being kept in the dark in terms of having the information she needed to make important choices. ‘Digging’, as well as ‘unlocking’, appears to be pertinent, as though information was submerged or in other ways inaccessible. Her sense of herself as a professional, as she is in her current occupation, comes across vividly,

“...and I think that’s why I do what I do now is because...there was no information out there for people like me who hadn’t got an academic background...”

“...one of the reasons I do what I do is to try and make that information as widely known as possible so they don’t have to go through...those difficult...places that I went through because they can find out about the information coz it’s there for them to find y’know you don’t have to be digging for it all the time”

It would appear that certain aspects she talks about in relation to the self that she brings to the university environment – that is, a self that has ‘gone through a messy divorce’ and ‘fought with her children’s teachers’ – does not hold any currency or weight in the university environment (or is misaligned with what the university stipulates as a viable way of functioning). The university seems to have no overt way for both the ‘recognition of’ and ‘accommodation of’ her needs. The demands made by the course are high. Furthermore, this is symbolised in a once and for all, sweeping statement. For instance, a specific statement of expectation made to the class in the first taught session when the tutor said ‘you can all get firsts’ is felt by Pauline as setting a precedent or a minimum to achieve. Pauline refers in all three interviews to this particular statement and speaks of its effect in pressurising her: indeed, she states that she is a person who ‘can put enough pressure on myself, never mind
from someone else’. It is as though the statement represents a further tightening of the screws.

In this scenario brought about by ‘constraints’, Pauline feels channelled in a certain mode of operating – that of ‘hoop jumping’ and following a preordained path laid down by the course. She is made to follow rather than discover. ‘My education’, as she refers to it, (stressing the contrast between ‘hoop jumping’ procedures and her vision of herself as student) is quite personalised. We see her description of ‘hoop jumping’ as follows,

“...I don’t like being told you have to jump through this hoop in that way and you have to tick this box or put a cross in this box – I mean or you need a circle around that one. I really don’t like that I find it very frustrating and very restraining...em so whether I will continue in education, my education, I don’t know because...I know there is so much I don’t know but I don’t want telling people telling me how to know it.”

“when you’re in your mid forties and you’ve raised a family and you’ve taken on quite high level jobs and...you don’t need to jump through hoops.”

Pauline implies she does not need step by step prescription, which she describes as,

“It’s this this and this and you’ve got to do it like this this and this...”

Nor does she wish ‘to be led by a string through the nose to the answers’.

**The changed tack** - However, the constraints from demands made by the course and pressure to get through actually engender a ‘changed tack’. Pauline has had to take on a way of managing the situation and has had to abandon her ideals. These ideals and ‘the joy’ and ‘the glee’ of learning, as she describes it, will have to be deferred to another time when she is not being constrained by ‘hoop jumping’. At a moment of despair when she had ‘lost’ her ‘mojo’ (in her second interview which took place a month before the final assignment submission date), she speaks of actually wanting to be shown the ‘hoops’ in order to get assignments done in the face of increasing pressure:

“...she/he (the tutor) tried this time to have em a sort of round robin but I think we’re all so pressured now that we just want guidance...you know we’ve got to the stage now where actually you want somebody to tell us what you want what which are the hoops and how do I jump through them.”

This approach is simply about getting to the end – this is an illustration of the ‘shelving’ of ideals rather than particularly changing these ideals. It seemed to suggest that, in her mind, a
divide is formed between herself as ‘coper’ (and particularly one who does not simply yield to the course’s requirement) and herself - which she presents in other parts of the interview - as being ‘enriched’ and ‘empowered’. This is gleaned from the third interview, largely.

In Pauline’s interviews, there is not a clear sense of obtaining the degree being matched with a feeling of enrichment, however. This is inferred in her third interview held four months after graduation. Indeed, it appeared that she also does not wish to enter a new situation – enrolling on a Postgraduate Programme – armed, so to speak, with her first class degree as a reflection of her accomplishment. Even though procuring a grade seemed to be a marker (in her first two interviews) of personal achievement, this did not emerge when speaking about engaging in further study. She relayed how she had initially been approached by a Masters Programme leader, but had not taken up the offer to have an informal chat about going onto the course as she ‘hadn’t heard anything from them since’. Furthermore, approaching another institution was not spoken about with confidence. Pauline relayed shortly after this that she wasn’t ‘a proper student’,

“And my mother said that’s what it was..you you weren’t a proper student”

The lack of ‘properness’ that she invokes seems to reflect a lack of fulfilment.

When speaking retrospectively about having graduated with a first class degree, she drew on her mother’s opinions again, (something that other respondents elected to do when speaking in evaluative terms about their achievement in the final interview),

“She (her mother) said ‘of course you did...of course you got a first’...well I wish you’d blooming well said that twenty years ago...”

All participants did, in fact, chose to relay how others (particularly parents) spoke about their graduation first when asked how they felt about their achievement.

As mentioned above, there is a lack of congruence between the agent that is presented through her accounts and the self that has to submit to the ‘constraints’ and ‘channelling’. Her vision of being at university, now in her forties rather than at eighteen, is of not feeling pressured to compromise. Her drive emanates from within. She recounts that she did not have anyone egging her on in her youth, but the time seems to be right now – as though it is all starting to come together now. There are aspects of her life that she would like to be able control such as the time she has, but she states that these are not within her control and she is quite accepting of this. Nevertheless, making concessions for herself is not part of her vision of herself doing the course and does not fit with her original motives. In the second interview
(prior to the final assignment submission date) when she relayed her fears about not getting a first she said,

“I wanted it to be the best I can be not the best I could be, not the best that I could be under these circumstances..and I do feel cheated because of that”

Saying she has done her best ‘considering’ or ‘under these circumstances’, means she has not proven to herself that she can do it. This ‘caveat’, as she puts it, devalues the degree.

In the interviews prior to graduating, Pauline takes the view that a key part of studying for the degree is formal affirmation of accrued knowledge and dispositions. Again, she only has to ‘unlock’ the right doors to gain acceptance. I infer that it is as though university represents a time for taking stock and getting due recognition for wisdom. As well as this pre existing knowledge, she takes stock of new insights she has picked up from dialogue with those she respects as ‘having greater knowledge in a narrower field’ than she does (referring to academic staff).

“...when I’m being taught something and it’s something I don’t know I do actually know it because when I was you know we were talking about the subjective thing I think yeah I know that I’ve known that since I was 6 and my sister and I saw the same event and we both went and told it differently and I got a clip around the ear for lying and I wasn’t lying I saw it from round the corner and she saw it full on...so you know you saw different things – you have different allegiances and so I understood what they were saying it’s almost like I’d always known that but somebody was explaining to me something I’d always known but didn’t know what it was or didn’t know why I knew it if you see what I mean...

Not being recognised is a notion that occurred repeatedly in my analysis - on an intuitive level - and stood out right from the first interview. However, after toying with it as a category, I decided it was difficult to place: it seemed to some extent part of all the other categories, but I could not quite put it in a specific position in the schema. This is why it is interspersed through the analysis above. It seems to surface when Pauline expresses frustrations, about being overlooked by the university, that is, as a part-time student.

Not being recognised seems to need breaking down analytically. Perhaps one aspect of it relates to **endorsement**; that is, her knowledge being endorsed by academics. Pauline speaks (as shown above) of an experience in her youth which made her a competent thinker – though it just needed endorsement or the right academic terms to couch it in,
“... they (academic professionals) think that it’s this superior thing well I grew up the child of a convict, experiencing all these things and but not having the language..to deal with them and that’s where the elitism comes in because of this use of –and I’m a great one for words and I’m forever being told off for using big words and I love words and they slip really easily into what I do and what I’m talking about…”

She emphasises the use of language further,

“...that’s what I’m saying about having these discussions with the teacher there as facilitator because the teacher knows the words...in discussions I’ve had with other people is we know and we’ve actually said this to our tutors we know it but we don’t know the special academic word for it and it’s this that and the other because we haven’t got that...academic...we’ve not got that...we’re not encultured we’re not within the academic culture all the time so...”

Due recognition is further threatened by the watering down of the status of the degree in public discourse. She laments the fact that some say they have done a degree when what they are actually referring to is a Foundation Degree, not a BA.

**Not being recognised** perhaps also relates to a sense of ‘not mattering’. Indeed, being the ‘bit on the side’ is poignant in her first interview in particular,

“You know I refer back to my comments about full and part time students because it’s just well we’re not worth it... it’s almost we’re not...... we’re the little bit on the side...

... you know I really think the university misses a trick with not being geared up..only catering for full time students”

The university is dismissing or not even noticing part-time students who often come on to campus in the evenings. She is quite literally ‘shut out’, as Pauline relays,

“Here, it hits half past three or 5 o’clock and everywhere shuts....

...the only (cafe) that’s open is that grotty one next to the library – you know you can’t even get a proper cup of coffee and have like there’s nowhere to go and have a cup of coffee and we miss so much of that student experience I mean we did that for through choice and circumstance and whatever through not going to university but you so much of the student experience in those interactions outside of the classroom with your fellow students...”

As well as feeling a sense of not mattering, **being misrecognised or misunderstood** also comes to the fore. Pauline feels the university does not always appreciate the real you or your true intentions. For instance, for Pauline, built into the practice of referencing is the premise that
students actually want to plagiarise. Pauline feels students’ clumsiness or naivety over referencing is construed by the university as intentional cheating.

Whilst the ‘bloody-minded’ self has arisen in response to constraints, there is still a sense that she is looking for an opening, as inferred through her ambivalence regarding whether to resist feeling guilty about not having done the reading for this evening’s session. However, there appears to be some ambivalence over wanting to resist on the one hand (to resist the channelling) and wanting to deliver on the other (which seems slightly at odds with much of Pauline’s narrative as a whole which is about knowing what she wants, being clear about her needs and wanting to be accommodated). This slight ambivalence can be glimpsed in the following,

P: “I’m enjoying what I’m reading but I haven’t done all the reading we should have done for tonight’s session because just I haven’t had time – I’ve done what I can

Interviewer: Yeah...

P: -and I’m not going to beat myself up over about it

Interviewer: Does anyone check to see if you’ve read it?

P: Well if she/he checks I’ll say I’ll just say I haven’t had time

Interviewer: And what would they say if-

P: I’m not looking forward to that because I find they can be quite critical and not very helpful ‘well you need to do that in order to understand’, ‘well you need to give us more time’ then we you can’t expect us to they cannot expect us to study full time and work full time and to get this first that she/he keeps blurring on about you know ‘I want you all to get firsts’.”

There is a strong sense of Pauline disliking generalised academic conventions as they represent yet further actors in squashing her agency and growth. Things like referencing squash personal insights and the very act of having to find others to reference when she presents her ideas is experienced as being scrutinised by ‘the thought police’. Furthermore, the convention of referencing is yet another means by which ‘academia’ seeks to maintain exclusivity. As Pauline relays, you are not ‘treasured’ for a having ‘unique insight’, unless,

“...you refer to 25 other people who said the same thing and where is the joy in finding a unique insight coz it certainly at this level you’re not treasured for having a unique insight into something and isn’t that what learning’s supposed to be all about and you think of these great
insightful erm, you know eureka moments that people have had and you think well in this system they would be quashed because they would have nobody to reference.”

She appears to be presenting the notion that the tutors may not be ready for what she can bring – in terms of her opinions and readiness to challenge rather than to just passively accept. A glimpse of her perceived effect on the staff was thus,

“I’m challenging because I have opinions”

“They’re not geared to deal with I don’t think strong minded em older people”

Furthermore, “the quiet, shy, yes miss no miss” is how she expresses her vision of the typical eighteen year old student which she contrasts with herself.

I keep returning to the sense of ‘looking for an opening’ in terms of still wanting to be the good student and wanting to give more.

“We’ve had one oral presentation thing which I do every day of my working life but which I find challenging to do in this (university) environment and that’s because...the reason why that’s so challenging is was because it was so special ...and we don’t get the opportunity to broadly interact a lot or to deliver to each other”

This inference was not continued (that is, it was not developed into a category), however, as it was difficult to specify. Moreover, as a construct, the ‘good student’ did not chime with the data. What it pertains to mostly is the self that perhaps Pauline wanted to realise during her time at university. Here, not having the opportunities to interact with peers and be how she wants to be represents a constraint.

In summary of the subcategory ‘resisting being channelled’:

Resisting is associated with a self that has to deal with the constraints. This is also a matter of working within the parameters of what the university provides and the selves or ways of being that are accommodated; that is, what can you ‘be’ there and what will be recognised or validated. There is much complexity surrounding being what ‘they’ (university tutors) want and matching up to their expectations, whilst simultaneously being how one wants to be.

The box below shows the bare bones of this category that have been fleshed out above. I considered the representation of the sub category resisting being channelled as too complex for a pictorial diagram. In terms of where it fits in the wider Grounded Theory schema, it
speaks of Pauline’s responses to constraints. These are largely emotional responses, though certain practical strategies are discernible: to shelve one’s original hopes and meet the constraints with a self that is defiant and resists.

4.2 A subcategory of ‘operating within constraints is ‘monitoring/seeing how I go’. This also relates to the notion of ‘containing’

One element of the monitoring/controlled approach is ‘containing’. For Julie, containing is a necessary measure when there is a danger of the course taking up more time than it ought to. This involves keeping study time within strict parameters in order that it does not start to encroach into the time allocated to her family. As Julie relays,

\[
\text{J: “...I try to do from 7 til 9, but sometimes it’s like 8 til 11 coz you get on with something and you don’t want to stop and you carry on... so it’s an increase in hours here...and I try not to dip into their time...I’m conscious of it not taking over their life it’s taking over my life but I don’t want it to take over theirs.”}
\]

Interviewer: “Yeah so you want time – the same time you had before?

\[
\text{J: “Yeah as much as possible yeah – we have Saturday and we do our thing on the Saturday”}
\]

For Julie, there is a decision to be made regarding how much time study time ought to take up. Going beyond a certain number of hours brings about feelings of guilt about her impact upon her family. Julie’s ‘life’, as she puts it, is expressed in terms of that portion of time she has for herself (that is, when she is not with her family and

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<th>Resisting being channelled</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings of being channelled into ‘single-mindedness’, for instance, bring about a certain tension.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Channelling is also about feeling one is not being recognised for one’s needs and the way one wants to be.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The resistance associated with such tension brings into play a self that holds out for what one wants and resists.</td>
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needing to fulfil the role of collection children from school and having ‘family time’). Julie is mindful that finding time to study can become a matter of borrowing or ‘dipping into’ their time - something that requires judicious monitoring. Study time, whilst she is at home, needs to be kept within its ‘box’ so that it does not change or impact upon her children and spouse.

The emphasis, for Julie, is on practical strategies. These are generated in order that she does not get beyond the point where she feels competent or knowledgeable about one bit or one ‘box’,

“...I literally have to literally sit down and I have to put things into boxes...and then I have to organise them and put them back in”

One ‘box’ being ‘wrong’, or getting beyond what she can manage (for instance, the house being untidy) would have a knock-on effect on the whole picture of her daily living. Without the strict regimen, it is possible that ‘everything will just go boom’. Julie relays,

“...I’ve learnt a lot about myself over these five years as in I can’t work under pressure I can’t...I can’t function”

One instance of things starting to go wrong in a sphere beyond studying at home was finding she could not understand an aspect of a research methodology module. She describes support from tutors in terms of their recognising this need to block off that which is extraneous. In the instance that she describes, this was the details and understandings which extended beyond what she needed to do for now. For instance, one tutor reassured her (in an offered one to one tutorial following a group session she did not understand) that there was material that she did not necessarily have to master for the assignment. She relayed that, at first, she ‘just didn’t get it’,

“I was sort of going home crying after the third lecture...

...I rang (her/him) and said I just don’t get it don’t get it and she/he said don’t worry come in...

...what (he/she) did was ‘you’re going to do this so you don’t want to do quantitative and...you’re going to want to do interviews and you want to do observations so she/he said let’s concentrate on that and let’s focus on the things you are going to do and not necessarily things that you aren’t going to do although you do need to research that a bit to tell us why you’re not doing it’”
There are certain ‘protective’ aspects to Julie’s containment, also. Strategies in this regard consist of taking reassurance from others (her friend who also mentored her). This involves not seeing completion of the assignments for the course as ‘a big picture’. In fact, her ‘determination’ – something she ‘never knew [she] had’ - was something that surprised her,

“I got a mentor and my friend mentored me and she said stop looking at it as a big picture like three years don’t you..you just look at it as a year – look at it as this week I’m going to write about this this week and then don’t think about it til the end of this essay and then you’ll think about the next one and she helped me........and here I am!”

Her account of her transition onto the course, as glimpsed in the above excerpt is one of ‘see(ing) how I go’ (which also has a protective element). I pieced together a picture of Julie being coerced into enrolling on the course at a time in her life when she was ready for change (as detailed below). The birth of her second child marked the time - in her accounts of her decision processes prior to enrolling on the course – when she realised she would not go back to what she did before which was a time when she was ‘very into food’ and worked in a deli,

“I was very much into food, but then I stopped when I had the children – certainly with the second one, stopped work and ...I did – I knew I wouldn’t go back to it I needed something different...that would fit in with us and I did want to do something different, but I was ready for a change”

The opportunity to get a job as a Teaching Assistant at her local school precipitated the decision to enrol on the course as she needed to get a qualification for it. ‘Seeing how I go’ is also pertinent here as she took a step by step approach. At first, she merely needed to get the experience – then she needed the qualification. It seemed that each step was rather a surprise to her, or a leap into the unknown. For example, getting on the course only to realise the level of writing required - ‘I have to write like that’.

Julie conveyed a certain tentativeness regarding enrolling on the course. It was after hearing about it from friends that she recalls thinking “I would quite like to be qualified to do something”. Julie recounts her decision to go on to the Foundation Degree whilst attending an open evening,

“erm one of the guys asked me when I was enrolling do you want to be a teacher one day... I said ooh I don’t know...so I sort of said maybe and he said why don’t you do this course this Foundation Degree because...em you’ve got the option then of topping
it up and then becoming a teacher and I was like...thought okay I’ll have a go and when we started it was like oh my goodness...(whispers) I have to write like that...”

Each step in her accounts appeared to be associated with ‘having a go’, along with an element of testing the water. Others whom she already knew reported that it was okay – they ‘came back raving about it’ (this is another glimpse into the cautious approach) which offered Julie some reassurance. Ultimately, it seemed, group pressure compelled her to go into it. She laughs when she says she was ‘conned’ by those promoting the course, but also speaks of her friend being ‘happily dragged’ into the other course (the QTS route). This humourous framing, which suggests a sense of harmless too-ing and fro-ing, is also discerned in her use of certain language, namely, her friend having been ‘bullied’ into going on the course.

Part of containing and being cautious about where the course is taking her is reflected in her talk about the future. She has a lot to factor in when contemplating taking her qualification further and doing a GTP (which would mean having to give up her present TA position and go to another school). There is a sense that she knows her options and the implications of changing what she is doing now. The change to a new job in a new area means having to leave behind a cherished aspect of her life,

“To give up my job even as a teaching assistant and go and be a teacher somewhere else will be really difficult because I love my job and I leave it at work and I don’t bring anything home...I mean I do work at home but I don’t worry but I’ve got nothing to stress about and so it’s really nice having that time after work where I can leave it all behind and enjoy walking the children home through the village in the afternoon”

There is a sense that she has made the decision to keep things where they are and for the balance to be maintained. ‘Maintaining the balance’ is part of ‘monitoring’. This decision is something Julie has hung onto. It represents a major part of getting through and first came to light, she relays, in her conversations with a favoured tutor at the beginning of the five year ‘journey’.

Julie recalls that right at the beginning, on the three year Foundation course, her peers and herself had ‘no inclination to continue’. One particular tutor who really ‘wanted us to do well’ did, however, provide some incentive,

“She/he was just fabulous – really really supportive so out of those three years she/he was just like the shining light at the end if you like – I mean there were ones in between that were good, but she/he will just stand out to me forever.”
This ties in, to an extent, with ‘seeing how I go’ and testing the water. Julie knows it is ultimately a matter of choice. Indeed, she keeps in mind that she could let the course go completely and have back ‘her life’. Her ‘life’ is something that she does not have to change; however, she is mindful of the possibilities or opportunities that lie ahead. This difficult decision-making process is reflected in the following:

“...I had people say you give up give up and they’re saying give up you know this is your life and all this...”

Accounts of interchanges with her husband reveal the firmness with which she hangs onto and defends her choice to not continue to Masters level. She recalls saying,

“I said I’ve made up my mind no I’m not doing it...I don’t want to talk about it anymore I said”

However, at the same time, there is a degree of ambivalence in her reflections; she imparts that she knows there is not anything tangible that is stopping her. Initially, after the first part of the Foundation Degree, she relayed she ‘never intended on going any further’...‘but I knew I could if I wanted to’. She implies it is a matter of making her own decision,

“I thought well I’ll give myself a month and if I still feel like this by the end of the month I’ll give it up and I didn’t I got on with it pulled myself together and got on with it”

She continues by verbally chastising herself in the interview for not taking up a clear opportunity (‘pulling’ her ‘finger out’ and ‘stop messing about’). She relays a ‘thing’ that ‘she kept in the back of’ her mind was the death of her friend’s young child a few years ago and says,

“y’know she (her friend’s child) would never be able to become what she wanted to do and em why don’t I pull my finger out and do what I’ve always wanted to do and stop messing about?”.

This represents, she says, a private thought and ‘a grim thing to bring up’, though she pointed out that she had not shared with or reflected on with anyone else. ‘Pulling her finger out’ is a different mode of speaking as she addresses herself quite harshly. This harshness is reflected in the conversations she has with herself, so to speak, as opposed to those with her husband.
4.3 Containing: Kerry’s experience of it

Containing (as expounded above in relation to Julie) for Julie, is about keeping an eye on/monitoring adaptations and alterations in her routine and family life. This category is not only pertinent for Julie, however. As an entire category, some types of containing are about being careful about change in terms of upsetting a balance that at present is comfortable (family and well-being). Julie’s containing is thus about taking it a bit at a time so it does not become too much. Another participant, Kerry, also engages in containing. However, Kerry’s containing is largely about a commitment to getting over a hurdle.

I initially toyed with the idea of ‘controlling’ to reflect such matters, and to pose it as an aspect of ‘containing’. However, I decided ‘containing’ subsumed more of the nuances contained in the data. ‘Controlling’, I thought, had connotations with a description of a type of person and was too strong for the data that I had.

‘Containing’ for Kerry is about reaching this ultimate goal (graduating) which needs to be reached quickly. It seems to coincide with a particular mindset. I inferred an ‘I can’t let it – I’m responsible for it and it all rests on me and my future’ (in terms of catering for my children) mindset. Kerry needs to be in control of time; indeed, she comments ‘I’ll be forty soon’.

Decisions appear, for Kerry, to be cut and thrust as they have big implications for matters pertaining to her financial security. In this situation, Kerry needs to take time out to consider her life and where it is going. Containing, in this scenario, is about drawing a line and having to brush things off in the interests of efficiency.

Kerry has to literally ‘stop’ when more fundamental concerns relating to health impinge. For instance, realising her child has a health condition. These are the times when she has to really deliberate over what is important for her. She frequently alludes to what others say, that is, ‘you need to look after yourself’ and ‘are you ok you look terrible’.

In the third interview, she spoke mainly in terms of others’ expectations in relation to her future. After not getting the job she spoke about conversations with her mother and others about what she should do with her degree.

“My mum thinks it’s all written in the sand – she doesn’t see that I have to leave a secure job to take on a contract under the GTP...”
For Kerry, the job position taken in relation to the GTP will only be a three month fixed-term contract and then she “may or may not have a job”. The problem then would be that she would have to find another teaching job. The dilemma was,

“...do I suck it and think I’ve got a degree and not bother to do anything else....but then it would be a waste of my degree”

But, ultimately, there is a sense that decisions ultimately stop and end with the future of her (as a recently divorced, single parent) and her children.

Due to these types of impending decisions, it is important for Kerry to contain. Containing is done in a way that protects her original aim. Kerry appears to block other surplus issues out because she simply has to. As inferred from her interviews, she perceives doing the degree as her last chance: she has financial circumstances to consider wherein much is at stake and is something that only she seems to appreciate. Like Julie, Kerry has a tightly defined window for fitting study and family commitments in. She also had boxed or compartmentalised to an extent in order to fit things in. Kerry’s containing (and, perhaps, protecting?) is slanted largely to techniques for blocking out certain stressors. It seemed Kerry was happy to be blinkered to minor annoyances, but anything that got in her way and threatened her goal to get the degree in July caused great frustration, as voiced in all three of her interviews. In the third interview, she reiterated her emotional reaction to the possibility of not being able to graduate in July with her peers due to the assignment not being able to make the boards in the summer. She relayed in her third interview a conversation with her tutor about having an extension due to the tutor not being available in the weeks approaching the assignment deadline and stated,

“I’ve worked too damned hard for this I said to her/him - and this was the obnoxious part of me coming out - I wanted to make sure I graduate in time and if it meant I’d miss out on the last tutorial then so be it. So I’ll never know if I could have got those extra few marks. But my mum said ‘you’ve got a 2:1 – that’s better than your brother did – he only ended up getting a diploma when studying for his degree’.

A category I had originally created was ‘making a stand’, though I decided later that this was is a bit too literal. The standing up for oneself aspect (though there was a sense of really putting one’s foot down as I listened) is part of something more fundamental. Kerry makes a stand (or stands firm for her values and defends) as she feels impeded. This is about tutors not understanding the reality of a SEN setting – her area of experience and expertise - and represents another frustration which is one that she described in the third interview as ‘a real bug-bear’ for her through the course:
“...a lot of my essays I’ve had to put a great sort of bit at the beginning about explaining my school and what it is and how the children are and exactly what they’re about you know in the hopes that they understand...”

She speaks of an instance when she wanted a tutor to really understand the intricacies of an SEN setting:

“...and I’ve stood there I’ve stood there in lectures and argued til I’m blue in the face that it’s completely different I actually stood up one day and I em one of the tutors was saying something that and I was I put my hand in the air and I said I’m sorry I have to disagree with you and she/he was like ooh and yer know when you say it and you think oh I don’t think I should have said that (laughs) and she/he said ok justify what you’re saying – so I did I stood up I said you know I said I appreciate what you’re saying..I said but what you’re saying is very orientated to mainstream settings I said but I said in a special school you know and she/he couldn’t grasp what I was saying because she’d/he’d never had that experience and I had to end with her/him saying look you know I think we’re going to have to agree to differ but if you want to see what I’m saying my head teacher will welcome you into the school for a day to visit...

...and she/he came and she’s/he’s the only person who came she/he came...when she/he visited and she/he said I accept now what you were saying and I thought hallelujah you know and she actually wasn’t I say she/he wasn’t a lecturer at the university she/he obviously was but she worked came from an outside agency and er and I just thought hallelujah you know somebody’s actually listening”.

There are times when standing firm and resisting being swayed by tutors is important for Kerry. She recounts an attempt to explain the reality to a tutor ‘with little understanding of behaviour and SEN’. She knows from her own experience and knowledge that what the tutor is actually suggesting, namely, conducting research interviews with staff and children, just would not work in a SEN setting,

“...but she/he was adamant that I needed to do an interview and then she/he said ‘can’t you interview any of the children?’ and I said no there’s no way I can interview any of the children and so then she/he turned it around and said ‘once you’ve done this and once you’ve done that part of your research could you then interview’ (sigh...)

“...and I ended up with...from two heads of department (in the school she works in) er two written statements...one of them had given it a general overview and one of them had broken it down and given it an overview of what was going on so I had that information and I said to
her/him I’m going to struggle with an interview but I’ve got this can I use this as their comments you know it was all dated it was .....but she/he said ‘oh yeah but an interview would still be’... (laughs)...

Despite this disagreement which she referred to in all three interviews, Kerry said that she had done what she was happy with regarding her research assignment. Disagreements need to be ‘let go’; Kerry makes a statement about herself, “...I don’t worry about it I can’t I just can’t let things like that worry me because you know I just get on with it...” This is an instance of containing/protecting/blocking off potential stressors. Similarly, this was a minor feature of Julie’s containing; indeed, stressors such as not agreeing with a mark for an assignment had to be let go in similar way to Kerry. For Julie, she had to not ‘let it’ get to her as it would have ‘eaten (her) up otherwise’.

Therefore, for Julie, the implications were about damage to her wellbeing and equilibrium rather than future security as it seemed to be for Kerry.

For Kerry, boundaries need to be articulated to others whom might not realise that time is of the essence. In addition, others such as parents or her partner may not appreciate the reality of a set of circumstances and the options it yields. Kerry makes a division between what is possible and realistic at the present with a time in the future which is about exploration without constraints,

“I said to him (her partner) last night that when I’ve finished doing everything for where I need to be in my life and at work I said then I’ll go and do a degree or something on anthropology just on anthropology because the books – I got in to a point where I was having to put the books down to actually get on and do the work because I could have just sat and read the books cover to cover er I found them so interesting I really found it interesting and I said although I feel I did do the essay justice in the title of the essay that we had and how we were supposed to go about researching it and studying it I do feel I did it justice but I felt I wanted to do so much more and I felt there was just so much more to do just surrounding that subject out there that I really just want to get my teeth into and do it so that’ll be a when I’ve got time to do one for pleasure.....like a luxury a luxury degree yeah (laughs)”

‘Luxury’ appears to express all that which is about not worrying about time; that is, being spontaneous and putting the books down only when she wants to, not when other commitments are pressing. It perhaps speaks of the liberation envisaged when she does not have to ‘secure’.
Although she speaks of doing further study rather flippantly (for instance, spotting those at graduation who wore ‘squashy’ instead of square hats and saying ‘I want one of those – what do I have to do to get one of those? – oh a PhD oh maybe not then’), she conveyed an impression that some ambivalence existed over whether to take further options seriously. She relays events on the evening of final submission day when celebrating in the bar with fellow students,

“we were all having a laugh and saying oh that’s it I’m not doing any more I can’t be doing with study any more I’m so pleased this is all over and within about ten minutes it had all turned around to who was looking at what masters to do (laughs)...”

She recounted in the third interview that she missed the writing aspect of the course. From May (2010) when she had handed her last assignment in she expressed that she experienced rather a void,

“we had nothing.....it was strange having nothing to read, research for”.

For Kerry “the adjustment didn’t come naturally” as opposed to others whom she felt experienced relief at having nothing to do. Indeed, she relayed

“I felt uneasy going from that level of work to not having it”.  

Kerry conveyed an impression in the second interview that she was ready for a new challenge. In a conversation made prior to the interview, she spoke with excitement about her job interview and the possibilities the job offered her (there was a high chance that the new employers would fund a Masters degree). This sense of excitement flavoured the entire second interview. In the interview, Kerry disclosed that she went beyond what the job interview questions demanded in terms of expert knowledge in the field in question. She was cautiously optimistic about her chances,

K:“...with it being child centred one of the major questions was around the Every Child Matters agenda...em and every part of my degree has been around the every child matters agenda so I just though bl bl bl and it all sort you know came out of my mouth and when they turned round and said no pressure it doesn’t matter too much but can you name any of the five outcomes I managed to name them all and in order you know so she went oh alright you know so that’s that I feel was quite a good point and the question I’d had before although it wasn’t centred around every child matters I’d actually mentioned every child matters within it because it was centred around me and school and what I’ve done so I sort
of pulled that not knowing what the next question was I’d pulled Every Child Matters into it already”

“...they rang me up and I got an interview and there was part of me that’s excited and then I went to see my head teacher em to sort of say that I’ve got this interview and that they’d probably be asking for references and although he was extremely supportive I ended up walking out of his office having had – shed lots of tears over it because I was like I don’t want to leave here but I don’t want to waste my degree either and there’s no progression for me where I am and now with my degree em and I can recognise and see that so you know I know that I need to and I need to think of the... I think it’s just everything’s come at once finishing my dissertation and my other essay and then the job interview has all come within the same week so it’s all been a bit emotional really (laughs)”

Interviewer: “It seems like there’s been a lot of quite big changes all of a -

K: “Yeah it’s like em Yeah September next year anyway I shall be looking at doing my Masters in social work em..I may go back to education at some point em if I was then I’d probably do some sort of Masters or PhD in Inclusive Education coz it’s my interest an area that that’s where I really am with it...em but yeah I’ve got the studying bug (laughs)”

In summary, containing is pertinent to both Julie and Kerry in slightly different ways. The containing, for Julie, is more about not wanting things to go too far beyond her vision of what she wants her life to be. There is a slightly protective element in so far that she does not want things to be too much or get too big and this involves monitoring. For Kerry, containing is more about security and a way of looking at things that keeps her on track and not overly distracted or sidelined.

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<th>Containing/ securing/monitoring</th>
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<td><strong>Containing</strong> is a category particularly pertinent to two students. However, it is related to monitoring and securing. These two categories present two slightly different aspects of containing as reflected in two different participant experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monitoring</strong> is a matter of ‘seeing how I go’ and not letting things creep beyond the boundaries one has set; securing speaks more of family and financial security and of ultimately letting this determine one’s choices.</td>
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4.4 Subcategory: forging a path

Foraging a path is connected with ways of getting through to a place where there are a greater set of possibilities. For Cathy, she has had to make changes and accommodate to where and when a particular course is running.

When talking about her previous educational and professional experiences, Cathy expressed a clear vision of how her exploration is taking shape. She was particularly interested in linking this with an overall idea or vision of what she wanted to bring to the broad profession.

Accumulating ‘all sorts of training bits’ starts to coalesce into meaningful patterns and themes in the trajectory she presents. This trajectory is one of discovery and of continually adding depth:

“...I’ve done all sorts of training bits as it’s gone through em I did as I say a diploma in community youth work I’ve done the er sort of introduction to teaching assistants, I’ve done higher level teaching assistant which was actually specialising in behaviour so I did a six day training course in behaviour management and then 3 days on the HLTA side of things that was with X university they had a tutor who came in and did that with us and then recently I’ve done er an emotional literacy support assistant course so I’ve sort of built up bits as it comes in and you see how all they all interconnect.”

“I like things to be like jigsaw pieces I like to go and pick different things and then look at how it all pans out really....I would say I’d always go like down the psychology route or always down the sociology or always down the behavioural or anything like that I like to see how it all meshes...you know together”

As well as accumulating them in her exploration, the ‘bits’ interconnecting is a way of achieving a broad understanding and finding threads of continuity in an otherwise slightly fragmented trajectory. Further, she expresses commitment to the idea that I have inferred as ‘remaining open’ as she encounters repetition which is, in her terms, more a matter of depth and richness;

“...you come across people I think who think you know they’ve done a training course in x year and then that’s it that’s all they need and you think yeah well things change and new procedures and new systems...there’s new techniques come out and I just think I could never be so arrogant to say that I know enough em I don’t ever want to get to the stage where I think I
know enough or that’s it I know what I’m doing now I’m too clever and that I just never want to be that arrogant to think that I can never learn anything new or improve my skills or learn something, you know...again”.

To be impatient, or single tracked or to have a closed mind to revision of old ideas and understandings constitutes the ‘arrogance’ from which Cathy strongly marks herself apart. Further, she chooses to remain on a rather undetermined path that is driven by a desire she defines as to ‘help young people who don’t want to be in education find their best route through’,

“you don’t know what’ll happen in like five years time and whether that is the route I take or whether there is other routes..I don’t know I’m just open to see where things go really.......but I do want to continue my learning I don’t want to think you know that’s the end”

‘Staying on track’ (part of ‘forging a path’) 

When Cathy speaks more directly in connection with the course, I infer that she has arrived at the conclusion that she needs to be wary of straying from what is expected from course tutors. Making errors in referencing, something that is ‘one of those things we’re always picked up on’, requires remaining vigilant,

“...it’s things like referencing you know checking up you know how do you reference that or I’ve got this thing and I’m not sure how I should reference it –“

This indicates a form of vigilance. Further, Cathy speaks in terms of giving tutors what they want. Even though it can be ‘traumatic’ to get an essay back with a poor mark that ‘you’ve put your heart and soul’ into,

“I have you look back thinking oh my goodness it’s been so traumatic as you know when you know you’re trying to get these essays in or you know you’ve put your heart and soul into one of them and your results come back and it’s not what you expected”

Pertinently, Cathy speaks of giving what she wanted in an assignment and had originally deduced that it required her to include the way her religious faith was intertwined with her reflection on her practice. She relays that it was obviously not what they (the course staff) wanted which accounted for her lower mark. She then states ‘but that’s what they can do isn’t it – after all it’s down to them’ (referring to academic staff marking her assignments). ‘Giving them what they want’ seems pertinent. She describes the dangers inherent in giving her own opinion as it might stray from academic conventions,
C: “when I go into my Masters is this whole critical analysis of things trying to unpick it you know think broader and then the you know the having other theories to back up these things that you’re thinking but then having some originality as well within that and having you know being allowed to have the you know thoughts without the you know the plagiarism ahh (laughs)

Interviewer: That’s the biggest stress isn’t it ..I mean do you think you’ve conquered that now – the idea of being critical but having a bit of originality -

C: And sometimes because you’ve read so many different bits you’re not even quite sure if what something you’re thinking is actually your own or whether it’s something you’ve actually read along the way...em and it’s probably along the ways that some of those of ideas are developed or started to think about are probably come out from something I’ve read along the line”

A consistent thread in her interviews seems to surround resourcing. This is reflected in the way she speaks about her peers ‘rally(ing) around’ for one another to find the answers for a peer who is stuck. It is also reflected in her expression of an appreciation in regard to a tutor directing her to a particular book in a tutorial concerning her research project: ‘here get this, get this book read this’. In a similar vein, she expresses the following in the third interview (after graduating) when she reflects on her time and priorities when on the course:

“...If I’d done the top up at 18 it would be different. I’d be living on site – immersed in it – eat, sleep, breathe it. But I was further away from uni.... but I enjoyed the Top-up as you sort of dip in and out - and I say, it it’s like sections in a big picture rather than all consuming part”.

“I think if I was younger then I might be coming for the whole experience whereas my key aim is to get the qualifications rather than the social side of it as well”

A general ‘resourcing’ category was something I had considered. It seemed to be reflected in the interviews of Cathy, but also Beth. Both Cathy and Beth expressed a sense of being appreciative of things course staff would do in order to smooth the process. For example, lightening things with the addition of humour;

“I think em the (X) module was hilarious the tutor had a wicked wicked sense of humour and that just came over you know it just brought it alive and she/he was like dipping in all these words in but you would you know like an awful word like epistemology... and when you’re tired and it’s the end of a day at school and that... but she/he dipped them in in such a way and explained em and you were like oh yeah’
Being directed to relevant, specific literature eased fatigue and increased time efficacy. Indeed, efficiency is a key part of resourcing. Particular tutors were noted as (in the interviews of both Cathy and Beth) being willing to give individual attention. Taking the time to literally sit down and have it all written out in front of them represented ‘not being overlooked’.

For Beth, some tutors are felt to be simply leaving her to ‘flounder’: “they’ve sort of said this is your time allocation...if you don’t get it sorted we’ve moved on next week...do you know what I mean?” In contrast, one particular tutor would, “sit with you and explain things she/he wouldn’t just leave you to flounder and sort of go and find out yourself”

“...the first couple of weeks coz me and my friend we always sit at the back and like no idea what she/he’s talking about write little note so you understand it’s like – but then she/he’d come round each week and check and you could say well I don’t understand that could you do that again can you cover that topic or can you spend some time at the end”

4.5 Subcategory: Connection through shared commitment:

I have included this as a category as much of each participant’s approaches or perspectives on what the course is about and how it relates to their lives is reflected in the way they chose to refer to the peer group.

Cathy, for instance, refers to being able to get answers quickly to questions posted on the VLE and a social networking site. The support is characterised by others’ empathy with the process of being stuck, to have ‘hit a blank’ and the offering of encouragement, particularly in the last few weeks approaching the final submission date. Answers were given by peers online to the more ‘technical’ problems like referencing and also emotional support when pressure was at a peak. Cathy speaks of the support that went on in the peer group:

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<td>This also includes resourcing, staying on track, giving them what they want, accumulating during the journey. This is about moving towards increasing possibilities and opportunities.</td>
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C: “It was it was like ‘I’ve three thousand words today’ and it was like ‘how’s everybody doing’ and em there’s like frantic phone calls to each other ‘what does this sound like’ you know ‘what do you reckon to that bit’ you know ‘I need some encouragement’ you know ‘I’ve just hit a blank’ and there was a real support going on for the last...and it was lovely

Interviewer: Thank goodness for things like facebook!

C: It really was coz everybody was just like ‘oh.. ‘I’ve had enough’

Interviewer: Really?

C: And there was times when everybody went through a cycle of different struggling and there was like a real rally round around that person before the next person hits it em yeah there was an awful lot of encouragement...and support that went on”

Beth, like Cathy speaks of this with an emphasis upon getting answers quickly referring to a time when she put a message on the VLE - for fellow students to reply to - questioning what to do if you have not been issued with a supervisor:

“I just put a message on (name of VLE) and suddenly I was inundated with replies and I hadn’t been given a supervisor coz the supervisor had changed and I’d been missed off the list but you know I think it’s like that you get a lot of support and if I hadn’t put my message on I’ll probably still be thinking oh I wonder when my supervisor’s gonna contact me...”

On the other hand, Pauline emphasises the more symbolic side of this. ‘Not letting one another fall’ represents Pauline’s particular take on this support of the peer group. (It largely reflects the key constructs in her interviews, namely, ‘resisting’):

“...I do think part time students are taken for mugs some of the time.....I really do ..but it won’t stop me doing it because – and I don’t think it’ll stop any of us doing it now coz we’ve come this far we won’t let any of the others – do you know what I mean -we won’t let each other..fall..”

One noteworthy point is that this was something to join in as ritual (and it was mostly held through social networking internet site rather than the university VLE). I inferred that the students on the course would come together to offer mutual support and find a way through. It seemed they were committed to a collective understanding of their predicament as betrayed by certain recurring terms which seemed to be loaded with meaning. For instance, ‘so be it’ and ‘we won’t let each other fall’.

Pauline invested in an understanding that their task was to hang on through grit and determination. Pauline particularly felt an affinity with the group through identifying as
‘women’ who ‘don’t get what we deserve’ and when she spoke of the group it was predominantly in connection with a sense of defiance that was echoed throughout her three interviews. In the third interview, five months after graduation, Pauline expressed:

“...I’ve avoided my study peers because they keep I mean most of them I’ve avoided [name of VLE]. I’ve even not been on facebook as much as I would because they keep saying ‘oh I’ve got this done and I’ve got this done’... and I’m really pleased for them but I don’t want to know that... coz it just makes me worse and increases my stress levels and makes me feel all the more inclined to this oh stuff this I’m not doing it.”

This was her low time; ‘I know we spoke last time about sort of it was the motivation that kept you going I’ve been very close to not finishing’, was relayed in the second interview. One aspect that led to my inference that they were grouping together in quite a practical, resourceful manner as a response to their understanding of their shared circumstances was during the evening on the day they had submitted their final assignment. After the initial ‘euphoria’, as Kerry put it, there was a moment where all the expression of relief and celebration dissipated and gave way to a period of quiet introspection. They had all reached their goal and got over the ‘hurdle’, but then Kerry stated she knew straight away, as she reflected upon that evening, that when they had submitted their final piece that they would all be taking different paths. Most had been in contact over 5 years:

“We’d all come from different areas of studying on the foundation degree...during the foundation degree we’d all been online on [name of VLE] and we were all on together and so usually at times when we were doing essays and people were going ‘oh how do I cover this outcome’ or ‘how do I do that’ or ‘I don’t understand the question on this and...we’d all been there even though we hadn’t met each other we were like ‘oh this is how our cohort are doing it” [the VLE is shared by different student cohorts].
“And I said it’s not like we’ve been together 18 months it’s like we’ve actually been through a 5 year process together so em yeah it was a bit odd really, I say really happy to have got finished and got this hurdle over with but really sad to sort of think oh and everybody was talking about going so many different ways....

“....em so we were I think that was the realisation last night out of the group that whatever we do even though we’re all probably going to go on and study something else we won’t be doing it together”

Another glimpse into a collective understanding is provided by Julie’s account of the group’s aspect or outlook. In a letter which was about correcting misrecognition and defending one’s integrity in the context of a confrontation with a visiting tutor, the main concern in that respect for Julie is to iterate what they are doing in these circumstances and how a previous piece of advice is kept in view so that they do not give up. When defending her decision not to do a directed task outside the session she wrote,

“I’m not an eighteen year old student who is doing the course for something to do......everything I do I try to do to the best of my ability......One thing [name of different FD tutor] told us when we began the course is that in order to succeed in our studying it is important that we gain the right balance between home life, work and studying, and not to lose sight of the reason we began this journey in the first place. It was excellent advice, and if not for that, many of us may have given up.” (excerpt from letter to a tutor that Julie offered me)

For Julie, this particular FD tutor had flown in the face of a mantra that Julie - and possibly others - had held close to heart from the early part of the 5 year process. Julie continues (after spontaneously electing to provide me with a printed out copy of the letter of complaint she had sent the tutor on the FD following a confrontation in class in front of her peers about Julie’s decision not to do the directed task) and justifies why she made her independent decision:

“...I said to you know it is Christmas, we’ve got children’s plays to work on, we’ve got our own children’s plays to go and see we’ve got Christmas, you know we’ve got essays to write. We made a priority like... you have to prioritize... and em and it wasn’t being assessed so it wasn’t a priority”.

A public accusation and ‘...to be spoken to like that...’, particularly when one is ‘...paying a lot of money for this...’ was a shock to Julie. More pertinently, she spoke of the fact that she felt the need to apologise for her confrontation with the FD tutor straight afterwards on the social networking site to the peer group and explain her actions to the
group. She relayed that the consensus was that it was necessary ‘they said yeah it was the right thing to do’. This sense of being rather wary of new tutors is also found in her talk about being wise to things and the fact that she referred to a ‘string of dodgy tutors’ some members of the group had had for the Foundation Degree.

**Connection through shared commitment**

This subcategory is different from the others as it speaks of a more collective process (perhaps which was only faintly discernible using the purely interview method). The other categories speak of difference between participants and slightly different subjective experiences: this collective category, however, suggests a possible group outlook, as indicated by points of convergence between participants and how they appeared to think about the student group of which they were a part.

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### 4.6 Summary

In sum, this chapter has presented the Grounded Theorisation of the empirical findings within this thesis. It represents a ‘data driven’ analysis which means the categories and their integration have been arrived at through the adoption of the analytic procedures central to Grounded Theory methodology. Further, it has not been shaped by a conceptual framework developed from reviewing the literature. A diagram which serves to summarise the categories within the Grounded Theorisation is shown in Figure 4a ‘Grounded Theory diagram’, below. However, commensurate with the methodology, the diagram is not intended to replace the careful narrative rendition of the findings which has been presented in this chapter. The reviewing of literature occurs in the next part of the thesis, in chapters five and six.
A simplified overview denoting the main category, ‘operating within constraints’ and subcategories constructed in the Grounded Theory analysis. The richness and subjective experience of participants is conveyed in the prose in the following pages.

**Resisting being channelled**

Feelings of being channelled into ‘single-mindedness’, for instance, bring about a certain tension. Channeling is also about feeling one is not being recognised for one’s needs and the way one wants to be. The resistance associated with such tension brings into play a set that holds out for what one wants and resists.

**Connection through shared commitment**

This subcategory is different from the others as it speaks of a more collective process (perhaps which was only faintly discernible using the interview method). The other categories speak of difference between participants and slightly different subjective experiences: this collective category, however, suggests a possible group outlook as indicated by points of convergence between participants and how they appeared to think about the student group they were a part of.

**Forging a path**

This also includes resourcing, keeping vigilant, accumulating during the journey. This is about moving towards increasing possibilities and opportunities.

**Containing/securing/monitoring**

Containing is a category particularly pertinent to two students. However, it is related to monitoring and securing. These two categories present two slightly different aspects of containing as reflected in two different participant experiences. Monitoring is a matter of ‘seeing how I go’ and not letting things creep beyond the boundaries one has set; securing speaks more of family and financial security and of ultimately letting this determine one’s choices.
Preface to Chapters Five and Six

The crux of Grounded Theory approach is that the literature is not consulted prior to data collection and analysis. As explained in chapters 1, 2 and 3, the rationale is that overlaying a conceptual framework means data cannot be analysed via the inductive process; that is, when each piece of data is compared with other pieces resulting in a schema which eventually ‘rises’ from the ground. Any prior conceptual framework or definitive concepts, Grounded Theorists contend, would influence the apportioning of data into categories and colour the coding. The result would be that data were selected merely to ‘fit’ conceptual ideas rather than being systematically analysed through the constant comparative method so central to the methodology. Furthermore, in this way, the literature then does not overly ‘flavour’ selection of issues that are relevant to the participants, nor does it pre-empt the formulation of the ‘problem’. In this part of the thesis, ‘turning to the literature’, the literature will be reviewed.

The notions ‘self’ and ‘identity’ provide the grist for debate within a number of schools of thought existing across the social sciences (Ivanic, 1998). Rather than representing clear cut ideas, they pose several challenges in terms of conceptualisation and definition (Hall, 2003). Indeed, rather than a ‘thing’ that one ‘has’, self and identity are largely understood as fluid in nature, their construction responsive to the relational and interactional context. The intangible nature and ‘slipperiness’ (Lawler, 2008) of the terms is accompanied by a rather opaque conceptual literature. Conceptualising - or ‘thinking about’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000)- self and identity has presented some contentious issues. These concern whether to take self and identity as ‘inside’ the individual, reflecting deep layers constitutive of an inner world, or, conversely, as shaped by ‘outside’ forces. The latter stance would take the individual’s thoughts, values and ideas as merely effects of societal practices and institutions. However, this is not a straightforward distinction. Indeed, a more balanced position is often sought and this represents a key challenge for those seeking to theorise self and identity.

The dense theoretical literature on self and identity in which many of these debates are embedded is far from monolithic. Rather, it is characterised by ‘theoretical pluralism’ (Wentzel Van Huyssteen and Viebe, 2011: 126). This renders reviewing the field challenging, particularly when one encounters the expansive theoretical literature pertaining to the notions (Du Gay et al., 2005). Furthermore, as ways of approaching self and identity have proliferated, clear distinctions between all the ideas generated in relation to them become blurred (Falsafi, 2007; Smith and Sparkes, 2008). However, the vagueness that pervades the theoretical (Hall, 2003),
conceptual and methodological (Gillespie, 2009) literature is not to be automatically deemed a problem. Indeed, Wentzel Van Huyssteen and Viebe (2011) contend the diversity encountered may reflect the impracticability of creating a single theory with the capacity to engulf all the ideas self and identity pertains to. In other words, the vagueness surrounding self and identity may simply be a defining and necessary feature (Flum and Kaplan, 2012) of such rich and complex notions.

Of note is the interdisciplinary nature of the study of self and identity. Many of the conversations which make it ripe for qualitative inquiry draw one into a theoretical and methodological literature replete with overlapping and blurred genres (Hughes, 2006). These are encountered more recently and are associated with what is recognised as an interdisciplinary merger (Denzin, 1992; McAdams, 1997). Aside from this, there are moments in the last century, associated with the American Pragmatist tradition, where there is a sustained theorisation on self and identity. As Jenkins (2008) and McAdams (1997) lament, this represents the last point at which some cohesion in terms of approach could be found. Since then, cohesion has given way to disorganisation. Pragmatist renderings are not covered in detail in this review as delineation of these has been conducted by many including Jenkins (2008) and Elliott (2008). Instead, the threads that have been developed in various directions emanating from these beginnings are traced as this is where much of the complications and density are encountered.

Those who have embarked upon reviewing the literature in recent years, having conceded that a comprehensive and exhaustive view of the plethora of ways of understanding them is an unrealistic task (Jenkins, 2008; Gee, 2001), present certain ways of making sense of the key themes running through the literature. As more and more perspectives converge upon the notions, different questions are asked of self and identity. These themes are largely a matter of epistemology. Although handled in various ways, a predominant way of presenting them, to put it crudely, involves their organisation along an axis of ‘essentialist’ to ‘Postmodern’ stances. This axis will be used to orient the exploration of threads or themes running across this diverse terrain.

While chapter 5 attends to the more abstract, conceptual literature and associated theoretical perspectives, Chapter 6, the second part of ‘turning to the literature’, focuses upon literature which takes self and identity as pertinent ideas to extend to learning contexts. Thus chapter 6 handles more substantive expositions or applications of self and identity. Theoretical and conceptual developments expounded in chapter 5 inform, in many cases, empirical, substantive studies; in particular, those which choose to handle self and identity in a deeper
and more rigorous manner. Such depth or attention to conceptualisation is not widespread, however. Some merely present the terms as though they require no explanation. The view taken in this thesis is that, given the theoretical expansion of self and identity in recent years (Du Gay et al., 2005), it seems necessary to bring into focus theoretically guided, conceptual understandings of their meaning.
Chapter Five

‘Turning to the literature’ part 1: conceptual literature

Chapter 5 begins by introducing ‘self’ and ‘identity’, highlighting challenges to terminological understanding and the contested nature of the terms. This is followed by a brief snapshot of tensions and competing views held by sub-disciplines engaged in conceptualising self and identity. Here, it is possible to detect shifts in the questions asked of self and identity and the concerns of particular intellectual traditions. This wide angled view of the terrain is followed by a more detailed exposition of key traditions associated with the notions. It is beyond the scope of this chapter, to document the entire field; therefore, those perspectives which converge under the broad banner of social constructionism, commensurate with the interpretivist approach adopted in this Grounded Theory study, will take centre stage. However, those on the periphery will be recognised, albeit more briefly, and placed in terms of their positioning relative to the former.

Firstly, a tradition in which self and identity are viewed as formed within interactions rather than existing outside of interactions will be expounded. This leads on to the identification of an interdisciplinary merger which this approach has been blended into. One organisational feature from section 5.1.3 onwards, whereby the key traditions are expounded in detail, is to consider perspectives as championing either an ‘interiorised’ view of self and identity or a more ‘socialised’ view. While this may be somewhat simplistic, it does help one to distinguish and remain abreast of the intricate conversations which converge upon self and identity.

One point of note is the complexity surrounding the division between theory and methodology. Although largely theoretical and philosophical, some perspectives represent entire theory-method packages (Clarke, 2005 and Spector-Mersel, 2001). As such, methodology enters into the conversation with no clear division between this and theory. The point where the most blurring occurs is where consideration of conceptualisation starts to become engaged. Indeed, this is where abstract, theoretical ideas meet the empirical, more substantive studies and brings self and identity into connection with real life issues. Although the chapter does not focus upon methodology, attention will be turned from section 5.4.3 onwards to conceptual issues which have drawn the attention of those conducting empirical research in relation to self and identity.
5.1.1 Introducing the terms self and identity

The terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ have received attention across multiple fields and sit within a literature which is vast and varied (Jenkins, 2008). However, ‘identity’, in particular, has come in recent decades to take on a catch-all, undifferentiated meaning (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Furthermore, gravitating around the term ‘identity’ is an associated gamut of ideas, namely, ‘sense of self’, ‘self-understanding’ and ‘self concept’ (ibid). Rather than adding refinement for those wishing to define the term ‘identity’, these ideas present more ‘a thick bundle of meanings’ to be ‘unbundled’ (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 14). This tortuous task is compounded by the widespread compulsion to use the terms in a non-specified manner (Griffiths, 1993; Harter, 2003; Kristjansson, 2008; Menard Marwick, 2005).

Arguably, part of the convoluted nature of the literature on ‘identity’ may be attributed to the relaxed approach to terminology, as noted by Brubaker and Cooper (2000). This contention is corroborated by Sfard and Prusak (2005) who adduce ‘identity is rarely preceded by explanations’ (2005: 2). In other words, identity, in numerous cases, has been presented to the reader as a given, with little attempt to specify how it is being used. Moreover, ‘in the absence of a definition, the reader is lead to believe that identity is one of those self-evident notions that, whether reflectively or instinctively, arise from one’s first hand, unmediated experience’ (Sfard and Prusak, 2005: 15). Thinkers who are interested in theorising self and identity demand a closer examination.

The idea that individuals have an ‘identity’, or that a sense of coherence across time and space amounts to a ‘self’ are both postulations for theoretical exposition and occupy those working within the perspectives mapped in this chapter. Within the terrain, as well as those taking a more popularised, intuitive understanding of self and identity, there are those who deconstruct or even debunk the very notions, viewing them as merely popularised constructs which reflect individualised discourses (Kitzinger, 1992). In such instances, a highly critical lens is deployed whereby the very notions themselves are questioned. These broadly social constructionist viewpoints consider the terms to have permeated public consciousness. In the absence of the structuring forces frequently cited as a symptom of the contemporary - or ‘Postmodern’ - era, the search for a supposed ‘identity’ becomes increasingly pressing (Du Gay et al., 2005). Further, Matusov and Smith (2012) go as far as to consign ‘identity’, in particular, to the realm of the middle classes. In the USA, for instance, conditions whereby one’s social roles can no longer be thought to describe them give rise to the contemporary preoccupation with ‘choice’;
life consists of big and small choices and these repeated choices we made define us and crystallize in our identities

(Matusov and smith, 2012: 11)

The broadly social constructionist perspective, particularly the ‘strong’ forms (Kitzinger, 1992), is prominent in the interdisciplinary literature, but does not entirely dominate the field. It rubs shoulders with an approach which champions the subjective, ‘felt’ aspects which the former would denounce as ideological. For the latter, the sense of unity experienced by individuals is important when thinking about self and identity and must be taken into consideration. These differing aspects or ways of thinking about ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are the subject of synthesis for those expounded in later sections. In fact, as suggested by Wentzel Van Huysteen and Weibe (2011), these two angles – to consider social construction, mutability and transience alongside unity and continuity as felt within a body - seem to represent two poles and thus present a compelling puzzle for synthesis.

At this point, it is necessary to provide a tentative sketch or working understanding of the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ to indicate how they are used, on the whole, in the perspectives explored in chapter five. Even though they are terms that are often used interchangeably in theoretical work, or even as synonyms (Vadeboncouer, 2011), distinctions between ‘self’ and ‘identity’ can still be discerned. However, the distinction between the two terms will depend upon the particular perspective adopted. Indeed, different traditions may be more likely to emphasise one more than the other (Ivanic, 1998). For instance, ‘self’ is more often associated with deconstructionist thinking whereas ‘identity’ has slightly stronger ties to sociological thinking (ibid) and is the preferred term in these conversations.

‘Self’ is the topic of philosophical debate spanning centuries (Wentzel Van Huysteen, 2011) and commonly deployed to refer to a phenomenological ‘sense’ of self in the human organism. Various conceptualisations have been developed, but a point of consistency is that self is a more expansive idea than identity (see Zock, 2011: 168). Indeed, out of the two, identity is the one that denotes ‘a certain brittle inflexibility’ and the more static and label-procuring aspect (Marginson, 2012: 6). That said, ‘self’, particularly in the interpretivist-constructivist accounts which steer the larger part of this review, is rarely used to signify the whole human being or the entire ‘unit’ of the human organism. Indeed, as Elliott (2008) notes, a biological human is not what is meant by a ‘self’; rather, a ‘self’ amounts to a feeling of continuity experienced across time and space. Thus the ‘self’, used theoretically, is not merely another way to refer to the human being. Instead, ‘self’, as will become evident in this chapter, points to an achievement by the individual. This aspect is stressed particularly by those adopting a broadly social constructionist epistemology (Lawler, 2000).
The term ‘identity’ is very closely related to the term ‘self’, though has emerged distinctly as part of academic and cultural discourse relatively recently (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). ‘Identity’ gained its centrality within academe around the 1950s-60s (ibid), particularly in the wake of the burgeoning interest in identity as a developmental construct and ‘identity crises’ associated with the work of developmental psychologist, Erik Eriksson (Lee and Anderson, 2009). It then became diffused across disciplinary boundaries from then onwards (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Furthermore, ‘once a part of specialised psychological vocabularies, it now enjoys the attention of researchers in a wide range of social and humanistic sciences, including sociology, cultural studies, anthropology and history’ (Sfard and Prusak, 2005:1). Such widespread appeal, according to Jenkins (2008), has perhaps contributed to a flattening of its meaning across the social sciences.

Despite criticism of its almost ubiquitous use and resultant ‘abuse’ (Alvesson, 2010), ‘self’ and ‘identity’ – particularly ‘identity’ - appear to persist as an intriguing focus for those interested in the human faculty for meaning making. In respect of the seduction and promise for fresh insights on human behaviour that the term ‘identity’ offers, Alvesson et al. (2008) coin the term ‘master signifier’ to denote the term’s status in those fields which draw upon it. Such a term, Alvesson et al. (ibid) are suggesting here, reflects the manner in which ‘identity’ is made to signal just about anything that relates to individual conduct. Indeed, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) imply that multi-disciplinary influences such as those associated with the discipline of cultural studies, along with a wide array of theoretical impulses, contributes to academics’ sense of ‘obligation’ to handle the notion of, in particular, ‘identity’,

Qualitative as well as quantitative indicators signal the centrality – indeed the inescapability – of ‘identity’ as a topos. In recent years two new interdisciplinary journals devoted to the subject, complete with star-studded editorial boards, have been launched. And quite apart from the pervasive concern with “identity” in work on gender, sexuality, race, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, immigration, new social movements, culture and “identity politics”, even those whose work has not been concerned primarily with these topics have felt obliged to address the question of identity (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 4).

One particular criticism in respect of the increasing attention given to self and identity is there is little agreement, or indeed awareness, between disciplines and intra-disciplinary factions (Kristjansson, 2008). To illustrate this, Schwartz et al. (2011) provide a poignant anecdote about two esteemed journal reviewers of self and identity who were brought together in order to map the field. In their first meeting, each had never heard of any of the sources or associated traditions that the other was using. Such insularity and lack of co-ordination presents a challenge to those attempting to summarise the literature on self and identity.
5.1.2 A snapshot of the wider terrain

A trajectory of the study of the self and identity over the twentieth century is outlined by Mischel and Morf (2003), providing a succinct overview of the wider terrain in which interest in self and identity sit. They write from the perspective of the discipline they define as ‘social psychology’ and are concerned with advancing understanding of self and identity as a substantive and theoretical subject. They present an overview of the sometimes competing views held by different disciplinary areas and how this has contributed to an expanding field of debate. Not only have the boundaries of what the study of the self and identity involves widened, there is an element whereby different paradigms compete to define the dominant view of what can and ought to be studied.

The trajectory that Mischel and Morf (2003) delineate is characterised by a lack of coordination across the boundaries of sub-disciplines which take an interest in theorising and researching ‘the self’. The fact that work is scattered ‘across diverse subfields and disciplines that often work in remarkable isolation, impervious to developments across the boundaries’ (Mischel and Morf, 2003: 15) does little to advance a cumulative theorisation of the self and identity. This fragmentation has accelerated from early conceptual beginnings associated with the American Pragmatists at the end of the nineteenth century wherein at least some sense of consistency was encountered (ibid).

- A move away from essentialism and the ‘homunculus’

Despite the terrain being marked by conceptual disparity with tensions existing over whether or not self should be taken holistically, there are some overriding themes. Mischel and Morf (2003) identify a broad consensus to divert analytic attention away from earlier conceptualisations of self founded upon the notion of the ‘homunculus’, associated with essentialist thinking. This ‘little man in the head’ was assumed to be the ‘causal agent’ who sits inside the head and ‘pulls the strings’ (2003: 18). Such a metaphor for the self, as Marshal Sheldon (2004) notes, is suggestive of a stable entity or essence that exists over and above mental processes. This is an idea which, Mischel and Morf (2003) contend, has been subject to some derision in scientific fields during the twentieth century. Moreover, it is often conflated with the idea that the ‘true’ self is within every person and fully formed in isolation from the

19 Self and identity represent a popular construct for both psychological and sociological perspectives (Mischel and Morf, 2003). However, it is important not to overstate the divide between the ‘psychological’ and ‘sociological’ for, as West et al. (2007) note, the move towards interdisciplinarity - encountered in eclectic topics such as education - means the psychosocial becomes increasingly merged with the sociological. Thus the strict demarcation of disciplines loses its pertinence.
other elements that the person experiences in the world. The homunculus presupposes an interiorised, essential self as a discreet entity, making individual decisions in isolation from any social influence.

A primary problem presented by conceiving of the self in this rather ethereal way, for Mishel and Morf (ibid), is that it prevents theoreticians from acknowledging all the components which bear upon the self. Furthermore, apart from raising intractable longstanding philosophical problems associated with whether self can exist on its own as an ‘essence’, it particularly discourages analytical treatment of the social dimensions which are central in understanding how the self is constituted (ibid). This is echoed by Cooper-White (2011) who contends the problem the idea of a ‘core’ presents is what it leaves out; that is, the inherent ‘relationality’ (Cooper-White 2011: 150) and interdependence of individuals.

Both Mischel and Morf (2003) and McAdams (1997) are able to locate the seeds of thinking about the self in the theoretical developments of the Pragmatists James, Cooley and Mead. Indeed, these thinkers sought to salvage the notion of ‘self’ from the realm of metaphysics and give it an anchorage in the fabric of day to day life (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). However, this did not dominate the field for long. Some scientific traditions in the first part of the twentieth century regarded the wholesale handling of the self as directly aligned with homunculus thinking. In particular, cognitivist and behaviourist strands ascending after the bedrock of theorising by the Pragmatists distanced their work from the idea of ‘wholeness’. For them, it was tantamount to assigning agency to an ‘inner agent’. They therefore made a stand to disavow the notion of the ‘self construct’ almost completely so as to extricate their work from an assumed ‘whole’ directing human action (ibid).

Such a rejection of any possibility of a ‘whole’ self was partly a stand against the Humanist tradition which was regarded by cognitivists and behaviourists alike as championing the idea of a core self. Since then, Mischel and Morf (ibid) document a tension in the wider field concerning the conceptualisation of ‘the agentic functions of the self as a “doer” while avoiding the homunculus threat’ (Mischel and Morf, 2003: 19). In other words, if one wishes to consider the individual as agentic and not merely the passive reactor as espoused in behaviourist perspectives, they have to tread carefully in order to avoid the spectre of the homunculus.

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20 Lee and Anderson (2009) speak of the cognitive revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, a paradigm which has implicitly guided or become enmeshed with much work on self and identity from that time onwards.
In the conceptual mapping of McAdams (1997: 15), one means of circumventing thorny questions concerning whether an individual and their actions could be thought of in relation to an ‘inner core’ is to break down the individual into separate constructs. The rationale for such ‘construct elaboration’, McAdams (ibid) contends, was to ‘increase...knowledge of the different parts of the person’, rather than face the prospect of studying the self as both multidimensional and integrated. Indeed, such a task, McAdams (ibid) suggests, would be enormous. Thus, knowledge of each separate part became an overriding concern and usurped the quest for theorising self as a whole unified system. It facilitated the operationalisation of self, a concern which reflected the spirit of experimental ‘hypothesis-testing’ psychology dominating the field through the 1960s (ibid).

The work of James, Cooley and Mead, as McAdams (ibid) notes, had represented a self-conscious attempt to carve out a distinct field for the study of the individual, far removed from the rest of the natural sciences which favoured the experimental approach. McAdams’ (ibid) argument is that if one were to develop a complete theorisation or, as he puts it, the theorisation of ‘wholeness’, then, as corroborated by Mischel and Morf (2003) and Jenkins (2008), the seeds for this were to be found in this bedrock. These possibilities became quashed by the developments of disciplines which took a construct elaborative approach and which steered clear from attempts to see the integration of all the dimensions at work in regard to the self (ibid). However, as McAdams (ibid) discusses, the developments in these disciplines remain unconnected in the literature. Single aspects have been developed with little promise of their being combined to provide an integrative theorisation (ibid).

- **The influence of the socio-cultural perspective**

In addition to the thinking associated with the experimental sciences subverting the study of self as a whole, there are those which are more sociologically oriented which present similar challenges to such a project (ibid). A raised interest in the ‘socio-cultural context’ meant the conception of the ‘whole person’ gave way to the more socio-cultural idea that the individual ‘is a product – even a victim – of social context’ (McAdams, 1997: 20). The ‘socio-cultural’ perspective takes the position that theorising should focus upon context rather than the individual, ‘on social influence rather than personality’ (ibid). Further challenges emerged in the form of ‘multiple selves’, a more impactful notion evolving in the 1980s (ibid). This hinged largely on deconstructionist literary theory which introduced from outside the social and psychological disciplines a certain type of dynamism and ‘decentring’ of the self (McAdams,
1997), a notion expounded in section 5.1.8. Therefore, interest turned to the ‘situatedness’ of the person as a worthwhile analytic question rather than to who the individual is (ibid).

It is possible to discern in McAdams’ (1997) mapping a proliferation of interdisciplinary interests in the study of self and identity in current debates on self. Van Huyssteen and Weibe (2011) also cite this as a key feature of the wider field of the study of self and identity. These gained eminence from around the 1980s.

5.1.3 A predominantly ‘socialised’ view of self and identity

In this section, the chapter turns to those traditions espousing a largely ‘socialised’ view. This is emphasised the most, or becomes the most extreme, in the Postmodern stance. The Interactionist tradition considers ‘self’ - the salient term here - as only making sense in terms of interaction with others; therefore, this is what those working within this perspective confine their thinking to. Delineation of the Interactionist tradition is followed by attention to the ‘Post perspectives’ whereby self and identity are considered almost entirely the produce of the social domain.

- Interactionist perspectives

The self that appears in interaction - or the ‘relational’ self - marks one area of the conceptual terrain with a discernible rooting in the work of James, Cooley and Mead (Jenkins, 2008). Conceptually, the self as ‘relational’ is another idea that does not sit comfortably with essentialist notions of self. This is due to its key principles. To say that self formation occurs during interaction directs thinking away from the more essentialist idea that it is fully formed in private and merely becoming expressed to others. At the heart of relational approaches is the notion that that self requires other people; indeed, ‘the locus of the self... is in the social space he or she occupies with others’ (Hewitt, 2000: 90). Furthermore, self does not refer to anything fixed within the human organism, but is fluid. Importantly, its construction is largely dependent upon who is present in a situation (ibid).

These ‘relational’ conceptions have distinct philosophical underpinnings associated with the Chicago School wherein the ideas of James, Cooley, Mead and Blumer became developed into a coherent tradition (Denzin, 1992). As part of the Chicago School’s quest to subvert the idea of the transcendental self standing over and above the social realm, James, Cooley and Mead proceeded to ground the self in the practices of everyday life and liberate thinking about self from the purely metaphysical domain (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Later on, this approach
evolved into the disciplinary tradition of ‘Symbolic Interactionism’ which sought to develop a more empirical framework for understanding the place of self in everyday life. The Symbolic Interactionist tradition upholds the view that self becomes enacted during interaction with others. Moreover, self is evoked in response to the responses - both actual and anticipated - of others (ibid).

The idea of self which is associated with relational approaches is one which, rather than corresponding to a stable entity transcending social scenarios, is placed firmly within the domain of localised interaction (Hewitt, 2000). Moreover, if, for argument’s sake, the self were extracted from interactional settings and studied in isolation, one would, in all actuality, be dealing with a self that was merely ‘peopled with’ (Elliott, 2008: 32) the responses and attitudes of others21. Thus, strip away what has occurred through being responded to in a particular way and, from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, there might not be the self that lies at the heart of common sense understandings; in other words, the self as formed prior to interaction. To put it another way, rather than thinking of oneself as unique and able to express oneself as one really is to others, the self enacted in the world will be merely a result of ‘selves’ that have been supported by others. As such, the constitution of self, as Hewitt (2000) contends, is largely about those with whom the individual interacts and has interacted in the past.

Being able to take the self as ‘object’ is a key requisite of social interaction and represents a key theme in the theorising of the Chicago School. This means that in order for an individual to act appropriately in social settings, she or he needs to be able to imagine her or himself in the eyes of others (Elliott, 2008). This visualisation of self in its environment constitutes a meaningful object - the capturing of oneself as a ‘thing’ that has impact on others and towards which others will respond (ibid). The formation of objects which are constructed as meaningful stands as a central tenet of Symbolic Interactionism (Hewitt, 2000); that is, ‘things’ which are constituted such that they can be named, imagined or visualised. It is when they are acted towards that they become meaningful objects (ibid). Taking self as an ‘object’ refers to the manner in which the person signals to themselves what they are (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Simply put, to echo Hewitt’s (2000) example, in deciding ‘I’m going to knuckle down and get a degree’ one simultaneously creates and acts towards the object, namely, ‘myself’.

21 This is what Cooley understands as the ‘looking glass self’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).
5.1.4 A fork in the road: ‘Chicago School’ and ‘Iowa School’

It is important to note at this point that there is a divide identified by Holstein and Gubrium (2000) concerning the degree to which a core self was espoused or not within this tradition. They propose that the relational approaches can be broken down into those which follow the ‘Chicago School’ line of thought and those which follow an alternative ‘Iowa School’ line of thought. Whilst wedded to the ideas of the Pragmatists, the Iowa School sought to advance a more model-like conception of self and identity\(^{22}\). Herein was an emphasis upon the ‘measurement’ of attitudes based on the premise that one’s actions stem from, or are determined by, one’s attitude to oneself. For the Iowa School, ‘attitudes’ represented a crucial aspect to subject to empirical study - using quantitative methods. This clearly demarcated their approach from that of the Chicago school which was fixed more upon the idea of meaning and thus advocated naturalistic research oriented to the study of interaction and the methodological principles of participant observation (ibid).\(^{23}\)

The body of literature which can be traced from the Iowa School line of thought includes what Holstein and Gubrium (ibid) suggest is the more static or ‘concretised formulation of the self’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 35). This had a close following by those who took the study of the self as amenable to positivist rather than interpretivist methodology. Thus the Iowa School and the Chicago School mark a cross roads for successive perspectives on self and identity. For the Chicago School, a distinct line can be identified by those such as Holstein and Gubrium (2000), emphasising the way self and identity are knitted into the fabric of everyday life. Thus the emphasis is drawn away from the ‘inner’ workings of the mind to the social domain. This broadly defined ‘line’ which emphasises interaction, meaning and interpretation rather than the positivist notions of stability, measurement and causal explanations is more of interest to this thesis and subsequently to the remainder of the mapping of the terrain.

5.1.5 Following the interactionist (Chicago School) line into its merger with Poststructuralism and Postmodernism

A certain conceptualisation of the self as little more than a show that an audience helps support is forwarded by the work of Goffman, a follower of the Chicago School approach. He

\(^{22}\) The ‘structural’ Symbolic Interactionist position associated with the Iowa school focuses primarily on the individual and then moves ‘outwards’ to the social structures impinging upon the individual. They are oriented towards measuring ‘outputs’ and ‘higher and lower self esteem’, for instance (Cast and Burke, 2002: 1043).

\(^{23}\) Those such as Holstein and Gubrium (2000) and Denzin (1992) chart a thread purported to stem from Mead which has provided the foundations for an interdisciplinary communion.
expounds in detail how interaction between people in everyday life serves to produce self through use of a dramaturgical metaphor (Hewitt, 2000). Here, the presence of an audience in a particular setting helps to direct the ‘self’ presented (Elliott, 2008). The particular self enacted depends on the individual’s understanding of the situation they are in (Goffman, 1959); that is, what is expected in terms of comportment and consideration of how one will be seen. Furthermore, continuing the dramaturgical metaphor, the use of props or elements within the situation will also help to shape the nature of the performance (ibid). Indeed, the audience is instrumental in supporting a show of self and may ‘hinder’ as well as help (Chaput Waksler, 1989: 5).

While there is not the space to attend to the intricacies of Goffman’s engagement with self and its presentation, what is apparent within his framework - and pertinent to the foregoing - is that there is little in the way of anchorage to something ‘inner’. That which is presented has to be appropriate and fit in with the scene in which the act occurs. It is almost as though one will pull out the ‘self’ which one has ‘at hand’, as it is needed (Elliott, 2008). As such, Goffman’s self, rather than the self wedded to humanistic and essentialist notions, is one that ‘acts’ and can only be empirically investigated in the realm of locally produced interaction (Chaput Waksler, 1989).

Goffman’s theorising, as Chaput Waksler (ibid) suggests, is tantalisingly bent towards the construction of methodological imperatives for studying self. This might lead to thinking about or conceptualising it as an individual’s way of appearing and the way they might manipulate others’ inferences. As such, there may be a way of the researcher (as participant observer) watching individuals’ responses during interaction. Nevertheless, practical, empirical prescriptions, other than being described as a broadly naturalistic and ethnomethodological in approach, remain rather vague (Turner, 2000). However, what Goffman recognises is that, if researchers are to study self, it is beyond the scope of the perspective he develops to set about gaining knowledge of what is in another’s mind. Rather, the idea of studying individuals in interaction - even if they are just occupying the same space - ‘as though’ they are giving off impressions or staging a certain self, is presented as a loose strategy or point of departure for empirical research (Chaput Waksler, 1989).

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24 Goffman, according to Chaput Waksler (2011), did not explicate an empirical procedure.  
25 According to Trevino (2003), Goffman proposes that ‘the best way of understanding the social self is not by starting “with a subject’s verbal description of himself” as is done by “pencil and paper students of the self” but rather by observing the various ways in which the individual is treated and treats others, and deducing what is implied about him in this treatment” (Goffman1971: 342; as cited in Trevino, 2003: 15).
While there are suggestions for ethnomethodological analyses (focusing on the participant observation of face to face interaction, non-verbal conduct and language) appearing to render Goffman’s framework amenable to empirical investigation (ibid), there are certain frustrations noted by Denzin (1992) concerning what is considered a lack of direct translation into empirical studies. After all, it is considered an ‘empirical theory’ (Turner, 2000: 211). There is a body of literature which centres on Goffman’s legacy, though his theorisation has been added to by several (for example, Chaput Waksler, 1989; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Trevino, 2003, Denzin, 1992) to include some of the analytic threads expounded in the following section. Thus Goffman’s original work, on its own, does not appear to provide researchers with a complete empirical package for the application of his ideas about self and identity.

5.1.6 An Interdisciplinary ‘merger’ – blending Interactionist with Post perspectives

It would not be accurate to say that the Poststructuralist and Postmodern perspectives have subverted that of Interactionist perspectives. Indeed, since its initial development within the Chicago School, Symbolic Interactionism, in particular, has ‘scattered into many blooms’ (Turner, 2000: 203). It has to a certain extent become diffused into the interdisciplinary melting pot associated with the cultural turn around the 1980s onwards (Denzin, 1992). Thus, rather than having disappeared, its key principles have reverberated through these interdisciplinary perspectives which have, arguably, contributed to the variegated ways in which to handle self and identity. This collection of concepts and philosophical positions have culminated into what Turner (2000) identifies as a particular critical-theoretical cannon which incorporates the post perspectives as well.27 Within this canon, new avenues for the theoretical study of self and identity have been generated.

The critical theoretical canon represents a point of convergence in the study of self and identity and appears reasonably consistent in its treatment of the notions. This section examines the change in ways of thinking about self and identity associated with this. The key perspectives within this canon will be referred to collectively as the ‘Post’ perspectives, as they include aspects of both Postmodern and Poststructuralism and are the main constituents of the critical canon referred to by Turner (ibid) above. The ‘Post’ signals a departure from

26 A ‘merger’ was formed with cultural studies in respect to Symbolic Interactionist frameworks. Added to this were trends in intellectual thinking from Europe (Denzin, 1992). Thus, the Cultural turn and its interdisciplinary nature represent a point of convergence of European (Poststructuralist) and American (Symbolic interactionist) thought-stream (Denzin, 1992).

27 The critical theoretical canon is strongly associated with the more recent ‘movements’ that inform qualitative inquiry as elucidated in the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2005).
‘modernist’ thinking, an idea explicated at length by those such as Kincheloe (1991) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005). Pertinently, for the notions self and identity, the self creating subject of modernity (Wenzel and Van Huysteen, 2011), or, put simply, the unified, inner-directed self, is the object of sustained critique.

The ‘Post’ perspectives are viewed, by those who are concerned with charting the development of a conceptual understanding of self and identity (see Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Elliott, 2008), as a solution for the deficit in Symbolic Interactionism concerning the neglect of macro forces (Turner, 2000). While Symbolic Interactionism may be useful for capturing ‘lived experience’ (Denzin, 1992: 66), it was deemed to have obscured the ideological forces acting upon the storied accounts captured in the research text. Neglecting macro forces means one is assuming that individuals are at liberty to forge interpretive networks of meaning without the influence of institutional or structural aspects (ibid). It is the examination of the effects of the latter which forms the backbone of Poststructuralist and some Postmodernist thinking (Turner, 2000).

With attention now turned more towards societal, institutional forces and the macro conditions that Symbolic Interactionism was purported to have neglected, the ‘Post’ perspectives raise a different set of questions in respect of the self and identity. No longer is it a matter of understanding the production of self in local interaction, but of how it is constituted by ‘expert’ discourses (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). The accompanying notion of ‘subjectification’ raises specific ideas about whether individuals are self governing and agentic, or merely ‘constituted by’ (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 400) the rather insidious societal forces that hide behind a facade of self help therapies, for instance (see Lawler, 2008 and Rose, 1989). Space does not permit a detailed account of such ideas; however, the point is that popularised understandings of self and identity and those associated with psychological discourses, or what are termed by Lawler (2008) as ‘psy industries’, can be subjected to critical exposition in terms of how they shape individuals’ understandings of themselves as a ‘self’.

An example of such an approach may be useful here. It may be due to a socio-cultural expectation that one ought to work on oneself in a project of ‘self actualisation’ that a person will then actively engage in a certain set of practices such as reading self help books (ibid); or that they might feel wedded to a goal to ‘do their own thing’ (Billington et al., 1998: 40) in a quest for self actualisation. Normalisation of such practices is instrumental to their absorption into society and culture (ibid). This is perhaps an oversimplification of the ‘Post’ perspectives, but a key point is that various societal discourses are the source of a person’s ‘feelings’ about
themselves. Any subjective sense on the part of the individual that they emanate from within is considered an illusion.

The cynicism encountered relates to the main thrust of the ‘Post’ approach which is to take an ‘iconoclastic position of the orthodoxies within societal institutions’ (Usher et al., 1997: 4). Indeed, they are suspicious of popularised ideas about identity that arose largely in the 1960s in response to a cultural feeling of ‘identity crisis’ (Elliott, 2008: 17). At this time, the notion of ‘self’ was brought to the forefront of concerns and reflected a cultural desire for release and the subversion of repressive traditional forces (ibid). However, it was only a short step from intellectuals embracing self and identity in terms of emancipation to adopting a more cynical view (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). This gradual suspicion and disaffection with popular assumptions about self, authenticity and other related constructs has culminated in the Postmodern perspective (ibid).

A key theme central to many threads within these perspectives is the placing of ‘priority of circumstance over will’ (Archer, 2000: 25). Put another way, socio-cultural context bears more weight over ‘will’, or the person’s ‘intent’, such that one’s actions are seen as shaped by society instead of by an inner director. Thus there is a much weightier concentration upon social factors. This is reflected in a shift in terminology such that Postmodernism and Poststructuralism champion the notion of the ‘subject’ more so than the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’. ‘Self’ and ‘identity’ are still referred to, but ‘Post’ thinkers are suspicious of the essentialism and stability that self and identity connote and their roots in a modernist paradigm (Hall, 2003). The term ‘subject’ is advanced as it is more apt in reflecting the idea that individuals are ‘subject to’ and made the ‘subject of’ institutional discourse (ibid). Indeed, subjectivity is considered determined almost entirely by language and discourse.

If the review were to continue along the broadly ‘Post’ path and arrive squarely in Postmodern territory, particularly in its more ‘radical’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000) forms, one would be entering almost purely theoretical territory. The paradigm would seriously challenge the need to gain insights into an individual’s experience. Indeed, for Postmodernists, an individual’s ‘experience’ is not something which can be grasped, as though emanating from inside them,

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28 Postmodernism is often postulated as a descriptive term to characterise the contemporary era (Turner, 2000); however, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) speak of it in terms of a distinct intellectual current.

29 According to Hall (2003) ‘identity’ is used for want of a better word. He contends it is a term which is under erasure: in other words, it does not serve the philosophy of Postmodernists, but there is not yet a better term which could replace it. As such it is a term that is placed ‘under erasure’ (Hall, 2003: 2).
nor is it amenable to more traditional forms of interviewing (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, the Postmodern perspective starts to challenge the very act of conducting any sort of empirical study and the premises upon which the Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis within this thesis was conducted. It is more aligned with the idea of textual analysis (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). That said, Postmodern perspectives are included in the review as they introduce a completely distinct way of thinking about the self: the ‘de-centred’ self. Such decentring of self has reverberated across a wide range of disciplines. As well as appearing in sociological and cultural studies literature (Hall, 2003), the Postmodern de-centring of self has penetrated ‘psychological’ literature (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011).

5.1.7 At the extreme end of the socialised view of ‘self and identity’: ‘decentring’ the self

The ‘decentred’ self, a hallmark of Postmodern thinking, is distinct from the self encountered in the Interactionist perspectives. The difference is that, in the former, particularly those following the Chicago School line of thought, individuals connect with one another through fairly durable meaning systems (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). The decentring of self does not even acknowledge that meaning is constructed by individuals to create a reasonably stable basis for understanding the world. Rather, meaning is unstable and undulates with the incessant flows of representation in the Postmodern condition (ibid).

This complex notion requires some explanation. Holstein and Gubrium (ibid) provide a lucid example of the various ways of ‘being’ that the individual might engage in – however transiently – as they draw upon the different subject positions during the communicational flows encountered during a day at the office, for instance. In brief, these various ways of ‘being’ can occur simultaneously, overlap and be shaped by multifarious forces whose origin is untraceable. The point is that the individual who, in a typical day at the office, engages in multiple communicational flows (speaking on the telephone, using a mobile phone, catching sight of a news flash on the television) becomes engulfed by images and ideas of self that literally flood into the moment. There is no sense of consistency across each of these moments. Indeed, when talking to this individual, one would not be achieving a clear, stable picture of ‘who they were’. Thus it is far removed from the stable, core identity that is continuous across contexts (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011).
Implications of ‘decentring’ for understanding self and identity: the reception by others in the field:

Despite being felt across a range of disciplines, and posited as a paradigmatic shift (ibid), the Postmodern position is not universally embraced. It has been maligned, as Beard et al. (2007: 239) put it, as involving ‘upward conflation to discourses’. In other words, it reduces to the social in much the same way that the essentialists reduce, ‘downwards’ to the core of the individual. Thus it becomes a way of thinking about self and identity which is heavily oriented to the social. Further, for Bonnet (2009), to evacuate or deny the interiority of the individual means there is no means of considering a sense of morality, other than to consider it as manufactured out of institutional discourses. The decentring of the subject perhaps limits conceptualisation of self and identity to the critique of ideological forces. Pertinently, a decentred subject cannot be held accountable, and there is no sense of the individual as agent, or as Bonnet (ibid) contends, appreciation of individual uniqueness.

In a similar vein, decentring means emotions, a key part of understanding lived experience (Elliott, 2008), are neglected. Indeed, the swing away from ascribing any agency to the individual also severs it from the developments that Jenkins (2008) contends were provided by American Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism. There is little accounting for the self as formed as a part of meaning making shared with others in a relational manner (ibid). This concern spurs those such as Holstein and Gubrium (2000), to seek a way of bridging the Symbolic Interactionist and Postmodernism perspectives. This would then provide an in-between position such that the self is conceived of as both relational and socially situated. This bridge which Holstein and Gubrium (ibid) proffer involves the use of the methodological approach ‘critical discourse analysis’ whereby expressions of humanity and subjectivity are analysed within social contexts that help shape them.

In summary, the exposition of Interactionist to ‘Post’ perspectives has exposed a shift in conceptualisation. As each conceptualisation represents different paradigms, (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), there are of course different sets of questions raised in respect of self and identity. In line with the specific concerns peculiar to the Postmodern lens, questions are raised in regard to the constitution of self and identity in societal practices, including that of language. In other words, there is complete rejection of the more traditional idea that there is a self to discover (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011). As such, questions about anything concerning reflection or impact upon the sense of self are simply not relevant. Thus it would seem reasonable to say that Postmodernism represents a self contained tradition that only
entertains – or that the lens is attuned purely to – particular issues surrounding self and identity.

5.2.1 Alternatives to decentring the self: reconsidering the more ‘interior’ aspects as well as the ‘social’

Postmodern thinking, while more recent than the broadly interactionist tradition, does not signal a total debunking of earlier ideas about self and identity across the field of the social sciences. Some, such as Jenkins (2008), denounce Postmodernism as a mere ‘hubub’, insinuating that is has become merely a fashionable idea. Jenkins (ibid) does not appear to integrate its precepts into his theorising. Furthermore, authors such as Giddens (2005) are committed to placing the subjective experiences of the individual fully in the spotlight

Giddens (ibid) is concerned with recognising the effects of the contemporary era in his theorising, but concentrates upon the notion of ‘reflexivity’ to show how the cultural and the ‘inner’ are interwoven. He positions individuals’ inner processes in the context of the turbulence experienced in contemporary life; that is, how a changing environment impacts them. In other words, the ‘social’ is not championed completely over the ‘inner’ for subjectivity is attended to.

While Postmodernists push the idea of self to the extremes of total elimination whereby there is no individual at all (Kritsjansson, 2008), Giddens (2005) is concerned with the way the individual responds to ‘Postmodern’ conditions on a subjective level. These more subjective aspects are obliterated in radical Postmodern thinking. Giddens (ibid) offers a way of handling the subjective experience of the individual directly by proposing two notions that set his work apart from the Post perspectives: ‘ontological security’ and ‘reflexivity’.

- **Ontological security**

Ontological security refers to a feeling of continuity within the subjective experience of the individual. It connects with more psychological formulations of self. Ontological security is about a strong sense of being consistent such that the individual is able carry out the tasks associated with day to day living. If this were lacking, the individual would be so consumed by self-doubt and anxiety that they would not be able function in a - psychologically conceived – ‘healthy’ manner. The feeling of integrity and consistency across time and space mean that the individual is able to filter out challenges from the environment. Thus, ontological security

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30 Giddens (2005) does not actually use the term ‘Postmodern’ to characterise the contemporary era; instead, he uses the term ‘modernity’.
serves as a ‘protective cocoon’ (Giddens, 2005: 53) for the individual. Any notion of an individual being decentred and without a sensed continuity, as the Radical Postmodernists would have it, would be to speak of some troubling, pathological processes. For Giddens (ibid) those with what could be considered normal functioning have a feeling of ‘biographical continuity’ (Giddens, 2005:54), enabling them to ‘maintain regular interaction with others’.

- Reflexivity

The notion of ‘reflexivity’ is a key notion which connects with ontological security (ibid). Reflexivity pertains to the feeling of continuity associated with ontological security as interpreted and understood by the individual. Put simply, it is the self-aware aspect and it is in ‘reflexive activities’ (2005: 52) wherein sense of self is maintained.

Giddens’ (2005) theorising, although seemingly aligning with more essentialist ideas, which is a common critique of his work (Elliott, 2008), does not slide as much towards a realist conception of the individual as it might first appear. Indeed, for Giddens (2005), the individual has to work at maintaining a sense of integrity and this represents a key urge. Giddens (ibid) proceeds to show how this will override much of the fragmentation experienced in terms of roles and associated selves demanded by today’s complex environment. The overriding compulsion for a subjective sense of integrity, amongst multiplicity, is ‘made internally cohesive by distinct forms of elected behaviours across time-space’ (Giddens, 2005: 83). Furthermore, choice and fragmentation are always connected by the individual to a coherent self narrative. This self narrative is embedded in reflexive activities (Giddens, 2005).

In sum, Giddens’ (ibid) notions of ontological security and reflexivity provide a means of understanding self and identity in a way that relates the ‘inner’ with the ‘social’. It does not take the critical tone of the ‘Posts’ exactly as the lens is angled towards how the individual ‘experiences’ with a focus upon consistency rather than mutability. Further, rather than decentring, Giddens (ibid) demonstrates how the individual interprets the world around them, even if it is fragmented. The reflexive practices, for ‘Post’ thinkers, would be considered in terms of the way individuals are duped. For Giddens (ibid), on the other hand, reflexive practices are a matter of taking the inner world of the individual seriously.

5.3.1 The notion of ‘multiple selves’

The idea of ‘multiple selves’, as mentioned in McAdam’s (1997) mapping in section 5.1.2, needs to be unpacked, particularly as it is a recurring idea in the literature. There is a turn (in
recent psychological and sociological literature) to thinking about the multiplicity of selves and thus to the social constructed nature of ‘personhood’ rather than a preoccupation with the ‘self creating subject of modernity’ (Van Huyssteen and Wiebe, 2011: 125). That is not to say that all ideas of a centre or ‘core’ have been eradicated, but that, theoretically, thinking has moved away from what Van Huyssteen and Wiebe (ibid) refer to as the traditional perspective associated with essentialism. The essentialist idea of ‘coreness’ that is perhaps, on an intuitive level, an idea that is difficult to sever oneself from is catered for in less traditional thinking in a particular way: the notion of a sense of narrative continuity replaces a ‘real’ inner essence (ibid). In other words, here is the possibility to acknowledge that selves are multiple rather than unified, but to also acknowledge, as Jenkins (2008) contends, the all important human ‘experience’ of unity. Indeed, echoing Giddens (2005), Jenkins (ibid) maintains that individuals do not usually experience themselves as multiple or fragmented.

Most of the perspectives addressed thus far in the chapter connect in some way with the central thrust of the ‘multiplicity’ position. Van Huyssteen and Weiße (2011) contend that the current state of affairs, as a result of numerous influences in the theoretical exposition of self, is,

By effectively divorcing the concept of self-continuity from any notion of the singularity of self, the concept of the narrative identity provides a means of how individual persons can remain continuous despite the structural plurality of self and the diversity of self-experiences over time

(Van Huyssteen and Wiebe, 2011: 129)

This statement perhaps sums up the impact which removal of essentialist thinking has had on theorising. To put it another way, the sense of consistency experienced is not reducible to a singular self, in a more essentialist sense, but refers to the way individuals subjectively experience themselves. This is developed particularly in the narrative tradition as addressed in section 5.4.1. In the narrative tradition, the individual has to work at maintaining a degree of continuity across diverse plains.

‘Multiple selves’ is a generic idea that cuts across various theoretical perspectives and recurs in the literature, such that it is more common to conceive of ‘a’ self rather than ‘the’ self (ibid). However, those focusing particularly on the subjective aspects of self and identity, such as Giddens (2005), understand that such ‘multiplicity’ is to be combined somehow by an understanding that there is a drive within individuals to feel ‘continuous’.

Thinking in terms of ‘selves’ rather than ‘the (singular) self’ is by no means new. The seeds of thinking in terms of ‘selves’ in the plural were, again, laid down in the thinking of the American Pragmatists a century ago (Jenkins, 2008). However, to say that an individual is constituted by
‘multiple selves’ is an idea that is frequently alluded to in a vague manner and is ill-defined within the literature. It is a more complex idea than many have taken it to be over the twentieth century (ibid). Moreover, it is a notion that Stryker and Burke (2000) contend, has remained rather elusive in terms of empirical research, and is less than established in the literature,

Research to date has not faced squarely the implications of the “multiple identities” conceptualisation

(Stryker and Burke, 2000: 292)

Indeed, it becomes questionable as to whether it implies a need to identify each one and take each in isolation, a concern echoed by Akkerman and Meijer (2011). The theoretical developments alluded to in this chapter would suggest otherwise as, from a theoretical point of view, each is inextricably linked to a context. Therefore, it would become problematic to consider them each fully formed and stable ‘inside’ the individual. Indeed, Jenkins (2008) attests to the need for caution in this regard. At times, there is a danger that thinking in terms of multiplicity can lead to what he deems a misplaced ‘concreteness’; that is, to conceive of self as constituted by a cast of members in a rather static way. Multiple ‘identities’ does refer to the idea that individuals possess numerous ‘selves’ that are called upon in different situations and thus represents a clear step away from the idea of essentialism or unity. This part is clear. What Jenkins (ibid) is criticising is the rather literal understanding that many personas reside within the individual. For instance, to take an individual as the owner of static and fully formed separate selves or identities which inhabit different parts of the mind, each to be studied in isolation.

In line with theoretical developments, instead of thinking about the interior as clearly divided into separate sections, it is important to think in terms of fluidity. Multiplicity means the more intuitive idea of self as ‘within’ becomes subverted by one which is more detached from any ‘inner’ anchorage. For those focusing on subjective aspects, self is in a state of continuous construction and, while it may feel unified on the part of the individual, it is not something which is solid or residing within. Those more sociologically inclined abide by a similar assumption that social context or the situation in which one finds oneself takes precedence over, or is more instrumental in shaping a person’s conduct than anything amounting to ‘inner’ direction. Put simply, thinking about self and identity in terms of multiplicity calls for an explicit recognition of context.

The chapter now turns to a particular approach which is used in connection with the study of self and identity, particularly in recent decades. It is associated with all the perspectives that
have been expounded thus far. Rather than a theoretical perspective, it is noted as a ‘packaged deal’ (Spector-Mersel, 2011: 172) whereby there is a cohesive ontology, epistemology and methodology. It is another thought stream that has reverberated through interdisciplinary literature, particularly that associated with qualitative inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

5.4.1 Conceptualisation of self and identity within the narrative approach

This section addresses the perspectives associated with the ‘Narrative turn’. This warrants attention as it is an approach which is connected with a particular way of conceptualising self and identity and is particularly salient in empirical studies. It offers a way of thinking of self and identity as only being achieved or ‘fashioned’ (Smith and Sparkes, 2008: 2) through the telling of stories, rather than existing independently of them. Thus it relates to a distinctly social constructionist epistemological stance. Firstly, its theoretical, philosophical rooting is explicated, followed by a brief examination of its deployment in empirical research.

5.4.2 Ontological and epistemological issues connected with the narrative approach:

The Narrative approach is underpinned by Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation within hermeneutic philosophy (Wiklund et al., 2002). Ricoeur (1991) raises issues concerning self and identity in his essay on ‘narrative identity’ which delineates the stance of those taking a narrative approach. A pertinent and largely ontological point raised by Ricoeur’s (ibid) theorisation of interpretation is whether there is a ‘thing’ that one can extract – as ‘identity’ – from experience. In other words, it invites consideration over the implications of proffering a continuous entity definable in the absence of the things that it experiences. As such, the question becomes one of whether there is an obdurate entity which persists across time; furthermore, whether the ‘persistence’ is merely an effect of the compilation of stories that are doing the persisting (ibid). Thus, here is the notion that self only ‘exists’ as a story. Moreover, self is not expressed through the story but comes into being as a story.

The epistemological position, which is of particular concern for those who wish to deploy the narrative approach in research on self and identity, is that one can only ‘know’ self and identity in terms of a narrative. Indeed, ‘identities are stories’ (Sfard and Prusak, 2005) and are not expressed ‘through’ stories. Furthermore, as Kraus (2000), Doucet and Mauthner (2008) and Spector-Mersel (2011) note, since there is no subject beyond the narrative, their analysis is
confined purely to understanding the subject that appears within the narrative. In other words, what the interpreter of the narrative can discern or ‘know’ is the subject which literally takes a form as the storyline unfolds.

5.4.3 The narrative approach within empirical research on self and identity

The general ‘narrative’ approach features in much of the empirical research in regard to the subjective experiences of students in learning contexts which is expounded in chapter 6. However, it is noteworthy that,

The current popularity of the narrative approach means that it is used in all sorts of, and sometimes rather vague ways. ‘Story’ easily refers to everything and nothing. When applied in identity studies, it sometimes then does not reduce as much as reinforce the tendency to use identity in an indistinct way (Alvesson, 2010: 205)

However, some researchers are clear in their epistemological position and adhere to its theoretical underpinnings. Ochs and Capps (1996) present a more theoretical version of the argument against the idea that narrations simply express a self which lies behind. Focusing on the idea of self rather than identity, they regard narrative as aiding the binding together of disparate fragments to form a life-story. Parts of this life story, as ordered by narrative conventions, are then linked to constructs of the self as ‘past, present and future’ (Ochs and Capps, 1996: 30).

The view that a narrative does not simply ‘reflect’ the individual’s self and identity underpins empirical research undertaken by those such as Spector-Mersel (2011). For Spector-Mersel (ibid), instead of assuming that narration in research interviews shows ‘pictures of narrators’ identity’, as seen frequently in ‘factist’ conceptions which characterised earlier work on narrative (Spector-Mersel, 2011: 173), he takes a different view. This is that the individual behind the narrative is not considered ‘knowable’. Spector-Mersel’s (ibid) contention is that attending to the way identity can come into being within the construction of stories is a more epistemologically sound concern and more amenable to empirical research. Attention to issues of this nature is important for Spector-Mersel (2011). In other words, one cannot begin

31 The focus on the idea of narrative in connection with self and identity began in 1970s and later became incorporated within literary theory, Psychoanalysis and Postmodernist thinking
32 Spector-Mersel’s (2011) notion of ‘re-writing’ the self pertains to the idea that the story is assembled on demand, from a multiplicity of possible semi-constructs which can readily be reassembled in a different configuration to suit different situation demanding a different portrayal.
to analyse a narrative until an understanding of the way identity can come into analytic focus is achieved.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address specific methodological details, there are those who raise certain practical questions in regard to the analysis of narratives. Kraus (2000), in his research paper ‘making identity talk’, highlights certain issues surrounding the type of narratives that can actually be elicited from research participants in an interview situation. The ‘self-narrative’ which flows out coherently is one that is readily elicited. However, this is only of service when a coherent account is actually sought. When the researcher wishes to understand some of the ongoing construction of self and identity, cohesive and rehearsed accounts are not necessarily useful.

Arguments of this nature would appear to go a long way towards presenting a case for a conceptualisation that goes beyond what a participant is ready to relay in a research situation. That is not to say that there is something fundamentally misguided about this, but that, following theoretical developments, there is much depth to the narrative approach. As implied by Alvesson (2010) above, these distinct pathways might possibly become submerged in the rush to apply it in a generalised way when confronting empirical contexts. As elucidated in the next section, submergence and lack of distinction can result in a rather nebulous approach which obscures much subtlety.

5.5.1 Ordering frameworks for conceptualising self and identity

The lack of coordination within the field contributes to an impulse to demystify the conceptual implications for studying self and identity. Moreover, within the narrative tradition, researchers who explicitly deploy it do not always sing in harmony (ibid). In this regard, and to provide some much needed clarity (Smith and Sparkes, 2008) in a unwieldy ‘narrative’ research tradition centring on issues of self and identity, Smith and Sparkes (ibid) propose an organising schema to take stock of what is available. This serves to illuminate and clarify the multifarious positions available. A common way of achieving such ordering is to propose a dichotomy whereby conceptual positions are grouped as wedded to either an ‘essentialist’ or ‘Postmodern’ stance. However, as noted by Alvesson (2010), such a dichotomy presents the differences between the positions in an overly simplistic manner. The ‘two dimensional’ proposition of ‘essentialism’ versus ‘postmodernism’ obscures some of the subtle differences between them and blurs their distinctiveness.
Smith and Sparkes (2008) include all those sharing the broad position that identity is constructed through narrative, however loosely defined. Here, the sheer range of perspectives sharing this view is apparent. A close lens examining this range of perspectives reveals, however, many fine differences between each position in terms of conceptualising self and identity. Indeed, the ‘narrative research’ tradition is constituted of different ways of understanding the constructed nature of self and identity and, as such, reflects differing theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, at this level of detail, associations with distinct perspectives can be seen. Pertinently, this detracts one from bluntly classifying them as either ‘essentialist’ or ‘Postmodern’.

One way of organising them is to proffer a continuum from what they term the ‘thickness’ or ‘thinness’ of the individual. The ‘thickness’ and ‘thinness’ refers to the amount of analytic emphasis upon either ‘interiorised’ (individual) or ‘exterior’ (social-relational) aspects. Thus a ‘thick individual’ position puts the spotlight more upon experience and private reflection as though inside the head is where stories are principally generated. A ‘thin individual’ position assumes the construction process is dependent on and constituted by the social context. The ‘thinnest’ of the individual positions reflect the almost complete detachment to any moorings to the individual such that social relatedness ‘completely precedes individuality, interiority and lived experience’ (Smith and Sparkes, 2008: 24).

**Figure 5.1 A diagrammatic representation of Smith and Sparkes’(2008) continuum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Thick individual/thin social relational’</th>
<th>‘Psychosocial’</th>
<th>‘inter-subjective’</th>
<th>‘Storied resource’</th>
<th>‘Dialogical’</th>
<th>‘Performative’</th>
<th>‘Thin individual/thick social relational’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neo - realism</td>
<td>non - foundationalism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the purposes of clarity for this chapter, the continuum which Smith and Sparkes (2008) propose can be represented in diagrammatic form, as shown in Figure 5.1 ‘A diagrammatic representation of Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) continuum’. This provides a view of differing assumptions about the nature of self and identity and how it can be analysed. In addition, a connecting thread or axis accompanying this continuum is identified by Smith and Sparkes (ibid) as that of ‘neo-realism’ to ‘non-foundationalism’. These have direct implications for the methodology adopted. In other words, these positions determine whether one adopts an approach which is predicated upon the interviewer asking participants the ‘right questions’ to
expedite ‘accurate’ communication of self and identity. Alternatively, when assuming that there is nothing lying behind participants’ expressions and their talk is not merely a conduit through which to ‘express’ self and identity, a more textual methodological approach is appropriate. Put simply, interviewing, whereby one listens to the voices of participants to gain an in-depth understanding of what they are trying to express through their narrative, aligns with the more neo-realist approaches. On the other hand, the more non-foundational positions attend more to elements of turn-taking in transcribed interactions and analysis of the subject positions adopted therein.

- The neo-realist position in relation to empirical research:

Those placed towards the more ‘thick individual/thin social relational’ end uphold the idea that the researcher can tap the subjective experience of an individual. Moreover, the resultant story obtained through interviewing processes is assumed to be a direct reflection of the way the individual has reflexively constructed their identity. This configuration is deemed unique to each person, reflecting the human urge for continuity and a feeling of consistency.

All positions which maintain links to inner mental processes are deemed neo-realist (ibid). Even those which are ‘inter-subjective’ are still anchored – albeit less so – to a meaning-making individual who ‘thinks’ in narratives. Those associated with Symbolic Interactionism will appear in the inter-subjective position.33 Realist ontological approaches do not appear anywhere on the continuum as they are incompatible with a narrative tradition. Indeed, realists would not regard self and identity as constructed, but as a ‘real’ entity residing inside the head of the interviewee and amenable to extraction through objective, ‘unbiased’ questioning.

Moving from left to right along the continuum, as the assumption that there is an internal process interacting with culture begins to diminish, the non-foundational aspects start to become engaged. This philosophical stance assumes that story telling is something that people ‘do’. While the inter-subjective and storied resource positions are very similar, their distinction lies in the ‘storied resources’ emphasis upon culture ‘speak(ing) itself’ through a person’s story (Smith and Sparkes, 2008: 17). Put simply, researchers become sensitised to how resources from culture can be used to achieve an impression of coherence, the formation of a plot and other constituents of a narrative. This is put into much sharper analytic focus in

33 The more Chicago school oriented thinking would be closer to the right of the diagram as there is the least emphasis upon culture being drawn into the inner workings of the mind associated with the thinking of those such as Bruner and Vygotsky (Smith and Sparkes, 2008).
'storied resource' perspectives than those of the ‘inter-subjective’ position wherein narratives are regarded as expressive of meaning-making activity occurring inside the person’s head.

- **Non-foundationalist positions in relation to empirical research:**

When the social relational aspects become ‘thicker’, that is, more heavily emphasised, the decentring of the individual becomes heightened and reflects a more Postmodern perspective. The dialogical position still examines the achievement of the narrative constitution of selves and identities. That is, there may be a particular impression the individual wishes to achieve in the eyes of others and this is only achieved through dialogue. The idea of the individual as meaning-maker, seen in the psychosocial, inter-subjective and storied resource perspectives, is thus faintly preserved as it is still possible to see the struggle to position oneself on a subjective level.

In the ‘performative’ position at the far right of the continuum, the selves that can be studied are not the property of the individual but positions that they literally ‘surf’, to coin Alvesson’s (2008) metaphor. This means subject positions can be adopted transiently with little anchorage in experience. Thus self and identity cannot be ‘had’, but rather simulated during the ‘flow of interaction’ (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). With respect to methodology, some positions are more amenable to empirical investigation than others. The philosophical stance of the ‘performative’ position is the most theoretical of them all. Indeed, it presents a challenge to empirical investigators for if identity is completely detached from experience then interviewing is perhaps only going to capture a process in context, saying little about the interviewee as a meaning-maker. This does not completely exclude it from empirical examination, but, as Holstein and Gubrium (2000) note, the lack of grounding in experience does present its difficulties.

Smith and Sparkes (2008) have identified a need for clarity concerning the multifarious - and intricate – positions or ways self and identity might be conceptualised. It presents a useful overview of what researchers might mean when they say they are adopting a narrative approach. The different approaches which all connect under the banner of the narrative approach can be summarised according to certain questions. The answers to the questions, which help lay bare the researcher’s assumptions or philosophy, will direct them to a particular position along Smith and Sparkes’ (ibid) continuum.

- Is it assumed that that an interviewee would communicate, in a transparent fashion, the thought processes which occur inside their heads?
- Should stories that were told in interviews be analysed in terms of how these stories presented the protagonist within them, rather than how they might be expressive of the self telling them?
- Should one be interested in analysing dialogue wherein struggles for positioning can be discerned?
- Is it a matter of taking transcripts or documents of research participants’ ‘talk’ as ‘texts’ as manifestations of power relations in society?

While this provides a clear typology of different ways of conceptualising self and identity, Smith and Sparkes (ibid) contribute to the foregoing the contention that each of these ways of approaching research on self and identity ought to be synthesised. At least, they argue, some should be combined to provide a more integrated and multidimensional understanding of self and identity. However, Smith and Sparkes (ibid) stop short of specifying how this may be achieved as their aim was merely to provide clarity and prevent further merging and blurring of the narrative approach.

The next section addresses those seeking to achieve a synthesised view. This has arisen due to an impulse to understand the individual as all the following: reflexive, seeking a sense of continuity; relational; socially constructed; fragmented.

5.6.1 Achieving a multidimensional understanding of self and identity - differing possibilities

5.6.2 The possibility of reconciling different conceptual positions

Some of the difficulties lie in the fact that not all the conceptualisations are compatible due to their differing epistemological stances. Despite these difficulties, it presents an intriguing puzzle for those taking a theoretical perspective on self and identity. For those wishing to take a more substantive interest in self and identity the puzzle manifests itself as the following: how can the individual be thought about as shaped by wider forces, whilst simultaneously attending to active meaning-making processes? While it is not the aim of this chapter to provide a theoretical synthesis of differing aspects, the following section provides some illustrations of where this puzzle has been drawn upon.

Griffiths (1993) theorises a way in which self can be both agentic and socially constituted. Pertinently, social influences do not entirely determine a self. She draws upon all the theoretical perspectives outlined thus far in the chapter, though claims her theorising is rather
distinct from them. Moreover, she contends it addresses a deficit in relational, interactionist theories for the lack of ‘narrative unity’ and evaluative, reflexive components. Furthermore, her theorising is not so biased towards analysing texts and language as seen in ‘Post’ perspectives. What appears to be the defining aspect of her theorisation is that one’s biography serves as a means of actively deciding what paths to take. Indeed, societal structures are not so much forces which determine the individual’s decisions as ‘suggesters’. The individual crafts her or his path through making selections. These involve accepting and rejecting options presented and cognisance of this culminates in an autobiography. This is constructed ‘by the decisions a person makes as she or he evaluates circumstances and changes direction’ (Griffiths, 1993: 153).

The interweaving of the idea of relationality with a narrative construction of self represents another means of achieving an integrated approach. Ochs and Caps (1996) contend that narrating one’s ‘self’ is a communicative accomplishment whereby others are needed. Thus they are combining the notion of the narrative one tells to oneself with the contention that others are instrumental in supporting these. In other words, individuals do experience a sense of continuity, but this is not a lone activity. Such syntheses seem to draw upon ideas which remain within the confines of the original, broad premises associated with those perspectives outlined thus far. However, the remainder of the chapter will acknowledge theorising drawing from beyond this. Indeed, clearly still in pursuit of a holistic understanding of self and identity, some, as seen in the next section, cast their net wider and beyond the social-constructionist stance.

5.6.3 Wider theorising – stepping beyond the confines of the social sciences and into the wider field

While those detailed thus far draw from beyond the set of options within broadly neo-realist social constructionist or radical Postmodern approach, others go beyond and engage scientific principles. Hunt and West (2009) choose to think beyond social constructionism and draw from across a broad (inter)disciplinary base when theorising self and identity. This involves drawing upon aspects from a tradition whose principles are based upon the natural sciences. For those in the social constructionist and Postmodern schools of thought, scientific ways of thinking are maligned as ideological. Hunt and West (ibid) combine these scientific and arguably ‘essentialist’ ideas with certain elements of constructionist thinking in order to advance a rather novel conceptualisation of the self.
The broadly social constructionist aspects Hunt and West (ibid) select to feature in their theorising, are the subjective aspects of ‘self’; in particular, the idea of how an individual experiences ‘self’. Like others (for example, Jenkins, 2008 and Giddens, 2005) they abide by the idea that self equates to a feeling of consistency and that this aspect of self is of key importance. However, this is combined with developments from neurobiology which they utilise to argue their case for a scientifically verifiable ‘core self’. Thus the idea of the sense of coherence, narratively constituted, is synthesised with the sense of self that they have identified as having biological foundations.

When exploring self, essentialism, they contend, is not to be recoiled from. Indeed, expunging it means theorists are ‘throwing a very fundamental baby out with the bathwater of crude essentialism’ (Hunt and West, 2009: 71). The scientific notions they draw upon proffer a fluid rather than static conception of the ‘core’ self. For instance, certain ideas such as narrativity and the seeking of continuity are reflected in neurobiological – and equally fluid - processes such as the working memory. Furthermore, there is a non-reflexive, physiological state which provides the basis for a ‘core’ self that continually adjusts to preserve continuity, keeping pace with experiential data that floods into the human organism’s fields of perception. Thus the core is a tangible thing that can be understood in biological terms.

What this synthesis shows is that even when evoking very different ideas, very faint epistemological consistency can be discerned. This concerns the idea that the core biological self is still fluid rather than fixed. Indeed they are mindful not to resort to ‘crude essentialism’ (ibid). The insinuation is that by thinking of the core as interacting with the environment, one is able to maintain moorings in the notion of a humanness residing within. Hunt and West’s (2009) clearest points of synthesis are perhaps that the self is to be understood as embedded in relationships which are experienced emotionally. Indeed, it is this raw emotional aspect that they seem to be trying to account for and salvage from recent preoccupation with more ‘Post’ thinking.

In sum, self and identity are notions attracting wide-spread interest and, in the eyes of some, are notions that have been subject to indiscriminate usage. The proliferation of theoretical developments that have been spawned, rather than advancing a firm understanding of self and identity, has clouded the field, rendering summarising and mapping a challenging task. Others regard the plethora of theoretical developments generated to be valued for providing many ways to look at self and identity and that, moreover, these await integration into a more dynamic conception of self and identity. The mapping in this chapter has shown that there were some key traditions that grew from American Pragmatism thinking just over a century
ago. Certain lines have emerged from these which have converged in what has come to be
known as an interdisciplinary tradition. A consequence of this interdisciplinary merger is that
particular positions in the study of self and identity, and all their distinction, become blurred
such that acuity is lost and their conceptual lineage submerged.

A popular way of ordering the ways of thinking about self and identity that have amassed has
been to categorise them according to whether they champion ‘inner’ or ‘social’ aspects.
Recently, however, within the literature that conceptualises self and identity as constructed
rather than a solid entity that an individual ‘has’, finer distinctions have come to light. These
concern whether to conceptualise self and identity in terms of a) a sense of continuity
experienced on a subjective level b) ‘self’ as constructed relationally, with others or c) self and
identity (where the term subject is preferred) is constituted by socio-cultural discourses.
Pertinently, these conceptual positions can be seen to align with methodological approaches.

Conversations and debates concerning how to conceive of self and identity are ongoing. When
developments to integrate various conceptual understandings are proffered – the individual as
reflexive; seeking a sense of continuity; relational; socially constructed; fragmented - this
remains at a predominantly theoretical level. Importantly, self and identity and many of the
traditions they are embedded in are bent towards the study of everyday life. As such,
opportunities seem to be presented for inquiring into the sense of continuity associated with
self and identity and how self is the basis for interaction. However, these represent starting
points rather than clear directions for empirical research.

In chapter six, the debates and tensions across the continuum of ‘inner’ to ‘social’ reverberate
through the literature. Self and identity, particularly ‘identity’, are invoked when it comes to
understanding the subjective ‘experience’ of learners and the role of the social context in this
regard. Certain paradigms from different corners of the social sciences are drawn upon in
‘education’ literature, some of which are flavoured by positivism; however, studies conducted
in the spirit of qualitative inquiry draw more upon the social constructionist paradigm.
Chapter Six

‘Turning to the literature’: part 2

6.1 Introduction

This chapter represents the point at which conversations in the literature meet the Grounded Theorisation developed in a ‘data-driven’ spirit (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) which was detailed in chapter four. Due to the postponement of the close examination of the literature until after the analysis had taken on a discernible form, the Grounded Theorisation of chapter four is not necessarily in alignment with conversations in the literature. In other words, the data collection and analysis were not designed to answer particular questions circulating in extant conversations in the literature. This matter is taken up fully in chapter seven when the tenets of Grounded Theory come under scrutiny from a more experienced standpoint. Nevertheless, there are occasions when aspects of the Grounded Theorisation and its categories connect with understandings and concepts developed in the literature.

Theoretical frameworks and lenses developed to be acutely attuned to the idea of ‘identity’ and how it has been developed to be useful for exploring issues in educational contexts will be expounded firstly. Indeed, this is not especially well developed in the literature, particularly where conceptualisation is concerned. Furthermore, discussion concerning its empirical treatment is still ongoing. After more abstract and conceptual matters of self and identity in educational contexts are expounded, attention will then be turned to literature centring specifically on Higher Education settings. This is where self and identity are considered to be pertinent. The studies referred to become more substantive further on in the chapter, whilst still rooted largely in theoretical developments found in the wider field of self and identity explicated in chapter five. It is in relation to the more substantive literature that connections are made to the Grounded Theorisation of chapter four. This starts from section 6.5.

6.2.1 Drawing upon self and identity in relation to mature students in Higher Education

An eclectic literature is associated with ‘self’ and ‘identity’ as they relate to Higher Education contexts. Students’ subjective experience as participants in Higher Education has been subject to sustained curiosity. Indeed, ‘curiosity’ is quite apt as matters relating to the nature of their subjective experience represent an area about which relatively little is known (Martins, 2001). Furthermore, students’ subjective experience is regularly invoked in connection with of a set of recurring notions: those of change, adaptation to a new situation, confidence, belonging and
so forth. Such notions have become subsumed under the idea of ‘identity’ which has resulted in identity serving more as an omnibus, representing a collection of ideas pertaining in some way to the subjective experience of the student.

Again, as seen in the wider field expounded in chapter five, lack of precision in the use of ‘self’ and ‘identity’ is encountered. This is taken by some as an invitation to develop a clearer theorisation of the notions so that they can be used confidently within research. Some, on the other hand, appear to embrace their amorphous nature, using them as a convenient generic signifier for understanding the ‘human being’. Indeed, Menard-Marwick contends,

> identity (along with body, self, person and subject) [are] terms that seem inevitably to spin in elliptical orbits around any attempt to conceptualise human beings

(Menard-Marwick, 2005: 254)

In other words, researchers who invoke self and identity in learning contexts are often wanting merely to procure a way of understanding ‘the individual’; however, they are faced with an amalgamation of terms which all loosely point to the somewhat intangible notion they wish to grasp. The orbiting metaphor used by Menard-Marwick (ibid) is quite apposite as it conveys the idea that these terms are difficult to pin down and not of a fixed, or particularly orderly nature. The complex nature of self and identity means they present more a collection of ideas to be taken into consideration.

- **Conceptual challenges facing researchers studying identity in the substantive context of the Grounded theorising**

As addressed in chapter five, the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ carry with them a rich assortment of conceptualisations which have started to aid researchers in deciding how self and identity are to be thought about. This concerned, primarily, consideration of self as agent and as meaning maker, but without ignoring the societal forces that shape this. For Flum and Kaplan (2012) it is this which makes ‘identity’ a potentially integrative concept. It is integrative in so far that it caters for both the ‘individual’ (subjective, reflexive, inner) and ‘social’ (socially constituted) dimensions. Both dimensions, Flum and Kaplan (ibid) and Falsafi (2011) suggest, are needed. As this necessitates the joining of ideas across paradigms, an integrative conceptualisation is by no means straightforward. Further, how this is to be achieved and how it might be transposed to empirical study has not been clearly specified. Those such as Sfard and Prusak (2005) and Falsafi (2011) are concerned especially with issues arising from the paucity of ways to ‘operationalise’ identity, which, they contend, stems from lack of terminological consensus and conceptual challenges.
A multi-dimensional approach, as Jorgensen and Keller (2007) attest, is a requisite when understanding self and identity; indeed, in order to ‘capture’ them, they need to be taken within their context and all the processes and elements which constitute it:

Identities are rich and complex because they are produced within the rich and complex set of relations of practice...What characterises identity is that it is lived, which points to the fact that identity is more complex than categories like personality traits or roles

(Jorgensen and Keller 2007: 8)

This quotation may serve as a partial explanation for the convoluted nature of the ideas subsumed by the terms\(^{34}\) and their association with interpretive, qualitative approaches. Moreover, self and identity require an exploration, through qualitative inquiry, of the way elements come together and comprise the ‘lived’ identity. However, the impulse to incorporate many aspects of lived experience - and thus exploit the terms ‘richness’ - as Jorgensen and Keller (ibid) put it - is not matched by a set of clear or well established modes of analysis.

Further challenges in surveying the field are presented by the multifarious ways in which it can be studied specifically in relation to Higher Education contexts. Martins (2001) indicates the somewhat expansive field that self and identity pertain to; in particular, the ways in which participating in Higher Education impacts upon identity construction can be studied ‘in various forms and from different perspectives’ (Martins 2001: 4). The different disciplinary factions which gravitate to questions of self and identity - each with their own particular ways of using these terms - can result in further terminological confusion. For instance, those who draw upon Poststructuralist approaches are more likely to use the terms ‘subject’, ‘subjectivity’ and ‘subject position’ (Ivanic, 1998). This convergence of different perspectives and, as Falsafi (2011) notes, the interdisciplinary nature of the notions, may, arguably, have contributed to the lack of consensus in the wider field regarding the meanings and distinctions between ‘self, person, role, ethos, persona, position, positioning, subject position, subject, subjectivity, identity and the plurals of many of these words’ (Ivanic, 1998: 10)\(^{35}\).

Despite the theoretical and conceptual possibilities that abound in the field, one possibility appears to be to align oneself explicitly with the work of those who have developed a framework and set of concepts therein; for example, the work of Bourdieu (for example, Toman, 2012). This presents a coherent ‘take’ on identity. However, a move towards a more blended approach, whereby offerings from a range of perspectives are selected and

\(^{34}\) See Thursfield (2007) for a theoretical analysis of the different aspects of self and identity and their integration. This is developed in relation to the field of organisation studies.

\(^{35}\) The synthesis of various theoretical perspectives drawn from the field of the social sciences is a characteristic of some explicitly theoretical development (Ivanic, 1998).
synthesised in order to develop one’s own particular interests in education related spheres, is largely apparent. As these are theoretically oriented, certain concerns commensurate with each of these perspectives are combined to provide a particular ‘lens’ through which to view the substantive topic. The lens will bring into focus certain aspects which are of greatest interest to the researcher.

In the work of those such as Ivanic (1998) and Gee (2001), the lens adopted is developed from the tenets of Poststructuralism. This, to coin Alvesson and Skoldberg’s (2000) turn of phrase, makes ‘visible’ certain phenomena of interest to those interested in power relations. Ivanic (1998), for instance, uses the Poststructuralist perspective to consider and, in turn, start to subvert the assumptions that the individual ought to fit in to the ready-made moulds or ‘subject positions’ (Ivanic, 1998: 8) that are deemed natural or inevitable in learning institutions. However, added to this distinctly Poststructuralist slant are understandings drawn from the relational, interactionist tradition, expounded in chapter five, and those which emphasise the meaning-making processes on the part of the individual. This blended approach, it would seem, enables the development of a more multi-dimensional view of self and identity. In other words, it achieves, through borrowing from various theoretical perspectives, a way to incorporate the self as agent, as meaning maker, but without ignoring the societal forces that shape this.

As well as the direct treatment of self and identity as particular ideas, there is a body of literature which alludes to self and identity in a more peripheral way, incorporating them within wider discussions about issues such as student retention. Furthermore, they are used rather diffusely in relation to ‘motivation’ and ‘self esteem’, wherein the conceptualisation of self and identity is often rather muted. ‘Identity’, in such studies, is merely one of the various elements which enters the frame when researchers consider the subjective experience of students. In such instances, for example, in the work of Ainley (2008), ‘identity’ is not fully in the spotlight. Rather, it is used to fulfil some key, though largely unspecified, roles in connection with change, adaptation and fitting in. Furthermore, the nature of the relationships between these proffered elements remains somewhat abstruse.

For the remainder of the chapter, the term ‘identity’ will be adopted as this term is more salient than ‘self’ in this literature. ‘Identity’ seems to be widely recognised as a particular idea, as reflected in titles of research papers. ‘Self’ does not seem to be as meaningful or

36 Johnson and Robson (1999) advocate an ‘integrated psycho-social theory’ (Johnson and Robson, 1999: 286) for understanding experiences pertaining to transition.
37 These notions are subject to criticism in much theoretical work and also this thesis as they are associated with disembodied traits that are taken out of context and the individual and seen as fixed.
recognisable for those attuned to matters within Higher Education contexts. Indeed, the idea of ‘selfhood’, as Bonnett (2009: 1) regards it, has received ‘rather little emphasis’ in educational discourse. The more subjective aspects and those associated with a feeling of continuity which, in the wider field, would be more readily associated with ‘self’ are subsumed merely by the term ‘identity’.

6.2.2 Cohesive theoretical frameworks for ‘identity’

Discernible in the literature is a concern to develop, incorporating a range of perspectives, whole frameworks to address the notion of ‘identity’ directly, placing it in the spotlight as an idea of distinct relevance for questions surrounding learning. This is partly due to dissatisfaction with the understandings relating to identity in the literature (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). Those who develop theoretical frameworks remain at a predominantly abstract level, choosing not to focus on one particular educational context but on the relevance of identity for learning matters in general. It is as though identity is ripe for transposition to certain arenas, but just awaits the development of a more definitive framework. When developing such a framework, a key task is to devise a means of understanding identity as an idea that is sufficiently flexible to extend to a range of phenomena and incorporate contemporary theoretical developments, whilst remaining internally cohesive. The idea, for Gee (2001) and Sfard and Prusak (2005), whose work is expounded below, is that this can be transported to more substantive, empirical studies.

- One particular ‘face’ of identity: ‘recognition’

Gee (2001) speaks of the notion of ‘recognition’ as constituting one particular ‘face’ of identity, (see, also, Coll and Falsafi (2010)). Gee (ibid) recognises that there are several ways to think about identity and proposes this ‘face’ as just one of several. All the aspects on this ‘face’ revolve around the somewhat abstract notion of ‘recognition’. This requires some explication as it represents a highly complex framework for ‘identity’, or, in Gee’s (ibid) terms, an analytic lens that serves as a tentative point of departure for research in educational contexts. Indeed, ‘recognition’ provides a way of understanding, in more specific terms, the notion ‘identity’ and, importantly, the ‘ways in which these might enter into research’ (Gee 2001: 116).

Gee (2001) uses the notion of ‘recognition’ to organise the elements within his framework and achieve some coherence. ‘Recognition’ connects with identity in so far that an individual comes to be seen – or recognised – ‘as’ a person of a certain sort in a given context. Gee’s (ibid) interest surrounds the idea that ways of being ‘recognised’, whereby others give an
individual an identity label, govern two important aspects of identity: the way that the individual behaves, along with how others respond to them. Types of recognition are founded on principles drawn from aspects of interactionist and relational as well as Poststructuralist perspectives. This blend of perspectives sits together comfortably in his framework as they each are founded upon a social constructionist epistemology. Gee’s (ibid) integration of these enables the framework to begin to theorise the way individuals come to be recognised – and even, it is implied, recognise themselves – as a result of both wider ‘institutional’ structures and more localised interactional discourse.

An example of a child with ‘Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder’ (ADHD) is provided by Gee (ibid) to illustrate the way in which ‘recognition’ operates on various levels. An individual may be considered to have a nature based identity, that is, a state or way of being that may be recognised as biological (and not social) in origin. Thus a child with ‘ADHD’, for instance, will be recognised as a having a pathological state. This gains force as ‘an identity’ only if it goes widely acknowledged – on an interactional, relational level. Indeed, others would have to ‘make something of’ (Gee, 2001: 102) this ascription in order for it to be meaningful. The force of institutional beliefs, which permeate every day interactions, is also needed to support and sustain this identity. The child recognised as having ‘ADHD’ will become a subject of institutional practices (medical treatment, for instance) wherein professionals have the right or ‘authority’ (ibid) to start to treat them ‘as’ a patient with ‘ADHD’. Added to this is the importance of the less official forms of recognition, those without ‘overt sanction’ (ibid), that occur in day to day interaction. Indeed, the child would have to be talked about and to ‘as though’ they were one afflicted with ‘ADHD’.

Here, as well as the label being used by others, there is also the propensity, Gee (2001: 103) suggests, for the diagnostic label to become part of how the child sees her or himself ‘as’ this label, such that it becomes a ‘calling’ as opposed to an ‘imposition’. In other words, the child will become accustomed to being known as one with ADHD and will, Gee (2001) implies, start to live up to it. However, how exactly the child comes to take on or embrace this label remains rather muted in Gee’s (ibid) work.

- The idea of identity ‘as’

It is quite evident that the framework Gee (ibid) presents takes a particular angle on understanding identity. For Gee (ibid), identity is only a matter of procuring a ‘badge’ that is summative of who or what one is. In other words, an identity ‘as’ one thing or another, as though this label is constitutive of a complete individual. To be sure, Gee (ibid) is explicit in confining his attention to the socially constituted identities, that is, those which individuals
may possess in specific social contexts, rather than to an idea of holism. However, the process of an individual internalising these labels and feeling, subjectively, ‘as’ a person of a certain sort is less than clear, particularly in regard to how it might extend to empirical research. It is implied that one comes to subscribe to, or embrace this ‘label’; however, there are limitations within this lens in terms of understanding how one is persuaded to do this. In other words, the more subjective dimension, or how one comes to feel and accept this label ‘as’, is not particularly addressed. What is fairly conspicuous here is that Gee is focusing more upon Foucault’s earlier work surrounding the objectified individual which is relatively ‘docile’ and at the mercy of those in power (Rabinow, 1984). The more questioning and perhaps resistant individual ‘subject’ is less in focus in this perspective. Moreover, it focuses on the ‘social’ aspects rather than how this is meaningful for the individual.

Another analytic lens, developed by Sfard and Prusak (2005), echoes the tenet that identity is an idea of being ‘something’ and is thus not completely at odds with Gee (2001). However, their contention is that rather than theorising identity ‘as’ in terms of boxes or classificatory systems that individuals merely come to inhabit, as in the work of Gee (2001), they offer an alternative conceptualisation. Identities, for Sfard and Prusak (2005), materialise through stories constructed by the individual and those constructed about them. These stories are largely told by others in order to position the individual, or they can be told by the individual, privately, to themselves. In these stories, the individual appears ‘as’ one thing or another. Stories ‘about’ is central here for it is in the act of telling someone, or indeed the act of telling to oneself that identity is located. Stories ‘about’, rather than static descriptors or labels of individuals, identify them ‘as’.

This way of understanding identity – identity ‘as’, in terms of stories told - is less monolithic than Gee’s (2001) framework predicated upon labels appears to allow for.

Sfard and Prusak’s (2005) contribution to ways of studying identity is, in their view, a matter of creating a more refined operational definition which, they contend, is absent in current literature. By operational, they mean a way of thinking about identity such that it can be applied in empirical research. They reflect upon Gee’s (2001) framework, arguing that his theorisation - and its reliance upon capturing the essence of the individual - is predicated on expression of ‘who one is’, as though this is a ‘thing’ which is obdurate. This, they argue, does

38 However, while this all encompassing label – oriented slant might challenge perspectives on self and identity which regard them as dynamic and multi-layered, Kristjansson (2008) contends that humans have a tendency towards being ‘entity theorists’ (2008: 224). Thus they might actually perceive themselves in a totalising way.
not offer clarity for the empirical researcher in terms of deciding how to discern who or what kind of person the individual is. Sfard and Prusak (2005: 7) focus on analysing ‘self-addressed stories’ whereby the individual paints a certain picture of themselves. Further, they imply this affords insight into the more subjective dimension.

As they are not espousing the view that identity relates to an essence tied to an individual, Sfard and Prusak (2005) are abiding by an epistemological stance aligned with narrative philosophy (see chapter five). Indeed, their preference is to think about identity as embedded in communicational practice, achieved over time and subject to change. Simply put, for Sfard and Prusak (ibid), identity is not amenable to direct description: one’s identity cannot simply be communicated in a direct, descriptive manner, but discerned by the researcher through their paying attention to the character portrayed in the story narrated.

Gee’s (2001) theorising, instead of attending to stories told about or by the individual, consists of examining fragments of classroom interaction (an interchange between learner and teacher) to illustrate the way the learner makes identity ‘bids’. Thus, there is a different empirical application in his work. A ‘bid’ is an attempt made by the individual to be seen in a certain way and this may or may not be taken up by the receiver. Thus, the learner may go recognised or unrecognised as such. This is where the act of recognition is ‘captured’ empirically: the researcher discerns, through examining transcripts of verbal interchange, whether and where a ‘bid’ is either being ignored or taken up by the receiver. For example, a learner wanting to be seen ‘as’ a learner who is active in seeing ‘the connection among her life-world...her teacher and the school’ may or may not have this identity bid accepted by the teacher (Gee, 2001: 118). For instance, the teacher may overlook or quash the learner’s voice or bid to be recognised in this respect.

There is a subtle and almost negligible difference, however, between the theorising of Gee (2001) and Sfard and Prusak (2005). Any difference is arguably a matter of whether to view identity ‘as’ in terms of a static label or badge or, alternatively, as narratively constituted. Sfard and Prusaks’ (ibid) concentration upon narrative imbues their framework with a seemingly more fluid conceptualisation of self whereby the narrative ‘story’ is the locus of identity rather than a word or label. The argument Sfard and Prusak (ibid) present is that stories can move across contexts, whilst the owner-of-identity premise, which, they contend, features in Gee’s (2001) theorisation, connotes immutability and the anchoring of an identity to the individual.

Despite criticism from Sfard and Prusak (2005), it is evident that Gee (2001) does not actually imply that there is one identity per person, or that these identities are obdurate; indeed, he
contends there are as many identities as there are contexts providing them. This aligns his thinking with the multiple identity thesis expounded in chapter five. Thus the ‘essentialising’ properties that Sfard and Prusak (2005) are critical of are not wholly apparent. On a further critical note, in Sfard and Prusak’s (ibid) theorising, the story about the individual is still a matter of becoming ‘something’, with identity still cast in the rather singular terms of ‘who one is’, albeit in the more ‘fluid’ narrative form. In fact, they allude to becoming ‘a fully fledged mathematician’, which, although signifying a vision of self in the future as betrayed in a fluid, narrative form, still appears to be rather static. Thus it is questionable whether than can purport to have offered a more fluid way of thinking about identity.

- Summary: how identity is used in the frameworks offered by Gee (2001) and Sfard and Prusak (2005)

On the whole, these largely theoretical and, to an extent, methodological conversations bent on the development of entire frameworks are occupied with the idea that identity ‘as’ is a particularly important aspect of identity to extrapolate to learning contexts. For Gee (2001), identity, understood through largely social processes of recognition, is a lens for analysing how individuals may be positioned. Put simply, how they come to be seen by others and what might happen to them as a result of this. Sfard and Prusak (2005), argue that introducing the narrative element pays tribute to the way that stories, which can cast an individual ‘as’, circulate as resources for identity construction. In doing so, Sfard and Prusak (ibid) appear to account for the more subjective aspects.

These authors are of the few whose primary aim is to demystify the uses of identity as an analytic term for use in learning contexts39, whilst utilising ideas from wider theoretical perspectives. Moreover, as noted by Falsafi (2011), there are few who attempt to unpack the deeper meaning of identity in learning contexts and draw upon its theoretical heritage. Points of difference when developing this lens in an empirical direction concern whether the examination of typical interchanges within routine practices within learning contexts, or examination of narratives which constitute identity, serve to shed light on its construction.

39 Their foci reflect their particular theoretical and epistemological predilections. Gee (2001) wishes to examine how individuals are shaped and how this might structure their actions or the things that happen to them. Sfard and Prusak (2005) are more bent on examining how stories might shape actions.
6.3. Considering the emotional (‘affective’) dimension

When considering questions of identity in educational contexts, one particular impulse concerns paying explicit attention to the emotions regarding questions of identity in educational contexts. This is particularly the case when oriented towards students’ subjectivity. Attending to the emotional aspects of adapting to a situation might initially seem to indicate a largely psychological angle; indeed, it suggests it is a matter of thinking about what is going on inside the mind of the individual. However, this is not always the case. The emotions can be handled in ways that are rooted in interaction with others and this is a common approach adopted. Another side to the emotional dimension involves unconscious processes becoming the crux of the analysis, namely, that associated with the theoretical perspective of ‘object relations’.

Christie et al. (2008) and Beard et al. (2007) posit the emotions or ‘the affective’ as a particular facet of subjectivity which is neglected within the literature exploring the subjectivity of students in Higher Education. This, Christie et al. (2008: 569) contend, is despite compelling evidence that anxiety, for instance, can become ‘entangled with the learning process’. Indeed, any recognition of emotional aspects, Beard et al. (2007) argue, has been overridden by an overriding focus upon cognition within educational discourse. Christie et al. (2008) argue that acknowledgement of the affective will enrich research into student subjectivity for it makes visible particular aspects relating to impact of institutional practices on students that may have previously been unseen.

The circumstances wherein emotions are brought most acutely into focus, when perusing the literature, are during times of transition for students. Moving into the realm of the unfamiliar and being confronted by new demands evokes disturbing feelings (ibid) that may be difficult for the student to handle. For instance, a student finding themselves in an unfamiliar environment can evoke a deep sense of distress, rejection and loss (Hunt and West, 2009). It is a student’s emotional response and the rooting in subconscious aspects which attracts the particular theoretical perspective of ‘object relations’. Holiday and West (2010), for instance, use the ‘object relations’ perspective to shed light upon how an individual connects with a pedagogic activity. This is on a more psychodynamic or subconscious level and handles, in particular, how certain aspects can be experienced as threatening or welcoming. This, Holiday

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40 However, it must be recognised that psychodynamic perspectives can be compatible with relational approaches: indeed, some psychosocial functioning and collective understanding can be analysed using a psychodynamic approach (Du Gay et al., 2005).

41 ‘Object relations theory’ is handled predominantly in connection with ‘self’. Both ‘self’ and identity, together, are referred to by Hunt and West (2009) in their work on object relations.
and West (ibid) suggest, provides an alternative way of thinking about the student’s feeling of connection with a pedagogic activity or scenario.

Pertinently, an ‘object relations’ angle, explored through psychotherapeutic methodologies, can offer explanations for particular actions and comportment. Certain practices associated with the procuring of a grade, or receiving feedback, for White (2006), provide grist for the analysis of psychodynamic tensions at play. For instance, those pertaining to a student’s feeling in control of the learning process. In the substantive context of Higher Education programmes, practices such as the stipulation of a minimum level of attendance can rouse complex subconscious elements for students (ibid) and bodily ‘felt’ memories (Hunt and West, 2009). The fact that these sorts of practices might cause discomfort to a student is unlikely to be considered surprising. However, the ‘object relations’ angle starts to enable the researcher to understand discomfort in relation to deep seated processes.

The emotional response, it could be argued, would be evident in instances whereby the student’s voice in interviews becomes apparent. However, having a distinctly ‘object relations’ perspective at one’s disposal apparently also affords deeper insights into certain points of emotional difficulty concerning interactions and relationships with others. For example, relationships between academic staff and students often serve as a focus for the analysis of some profound emotional reactions.

Perhaps an example would be useful here. A distinctly ‘object relations’ analysis might be as follows. The relationship between student and tutor can be considered symbolic, interacting with parts ruminating within the subconscious. Psychodynamic ructions and processes such as ‘transference’ (Baker, 2006) can be encountered during interactions between the student and the tutor. An example of ‘transference’ might be when a student reacts to another individual (a tutor or another student) as though they were a significant other encountered in the student’s past. Thus, the student’s reactions to this other individual might seem out of keeping with the situation at hand (ibid). Perhaps, even, the person interacting with the student might wonder why the student is reacting to them in a particular way. An ‘object relations’ perspective would understand it such that something the other person said, or the way they behaved, had triggered a psychodynamic process rooted in earlier experiences.

The psychodynamic perspective is also invoked by those drawing from developmental science who might examine reactions as connected with a student’s being at a particular stage. For instance, there is an idea that the very nature of the student–tutor or student - institution relationship is analogous to an earlier developmental stage in the life-span. Baker (2006: 171) takes this further and proffers the notion of ‘studenthood’ as a specific ‘stage’ to be
encountered as part of the student’s ‘personal developmental context’. Herein, the role of the tutor is central in helping students to ‘metabolise the disorientation’ entailed within a Higher Education (Baker, 2006: 182). In other words, the tutor is needed to help the student make sense of the situation and be reassuring through the time at university.

Both psychodynamic and developmental principles can indeed help to shed light upon unexpected behaviour. In this regard, Griffiths et al. (2005) develop the particular concept of ‘learning shock’ to help explain profound responses. ‘Learning shock’, borrowed from wider disciplinary areas, represents a reformulation of ‘culture shock’ and is a notion which subsumes ‘acute frustration, confusion and anxiety’ (Griffiths et al., 2005: 276). The emotional ramifications of being in unfamiliar surroundings, or the feeling of confusion generated through receiving mixed and disorienting viewpoints of others are powerful and might account for some seemingly incongruous behaviour. This ‘learning shock’ can be illustrated in the case of an assured and competent professional who appeared ‘to fall to pieces’ (ibid) at the onset of embarking on a study programme. This contributes further to Baker’s contention (2006), above, that a student’s time in a Higher Education institution can be quite distinct from others areas of their life. However, the methodological procedures for taking the more psychodynamic approach to understanding emotional dimension are not as prominent in research by Baker (2006), Griffiths et al. (2005) and Hunt and West (2009) as the theoretical aspects that they espouse. Furthermore, there is little explication of how this may have been developed by those conducting the empirical component of their research.

A clearer view of how the emotional dimension might be researched empirically is provided by Clayton et al. (2009). Although borrowing somewhat from key principles of psychodynamic theory, they regard the emotions as amenable to a situated, ‘social’ approach. The situated approach to understanding the emotional dimension involves blending the idea of social context with the more subjective, ‘individualised’ aspects very broadly associated with psychodynamic theory. Here, emotions are taken as embedded within the interactional setting and the means of recognition afforded within these (Beard et al., 2007). This is then interpreted by the researcher adopting an empirical approach based on ethnomethodological principles. The emotions that students might express need to undergo some form of recognition or validation by those around them. Indeed, there needs to be the emotional space, Beard et al. (ibid) argue, to accommodate or recognise these emotional expressions42. The implication is that without the necessary means of recognition or validation, expressions of certain emotions may not actually gain force. In other words, if others do not make

42 Certain constructs which appear a matter of one’s interior; for example, ‘self esteem’, need to be validated by others in order to have powerful effects on the student (Beard et al., 2007).
something of, or expect a particular emotional expression or articulation, then it is less likely to be expressed.

- The contribution of emotional dimensions to understanding ‘identity’ in Higher Education contexts: the highlighting of anxiety and fitting in.

The emotional dimension and the theories from ‘object relations’ and the developmental perspectives relating to it seem to arise in connection with a number of phenomena within educational contexts. What connects the emotional dimension most closely to the notion of ‘identity’ is that the anxiety associated with lack of familiarity – whether understood psychodynamically or not - seems to engulf the student in a profound way. Indeed, familiarity can lead to the student connecting with an activity as it seems relevant and, moreover, as they can actually imagine themselves being part of it (Christie et al., 2008). Unfamiliarity, on the other hand, means the student discerns a lack of relevance and no connection to their understanding of who they are (ibid). The notion of identity, for Christie et al. (ibid), is appealed to in terms of how an individual understands themselves.

Thus, ‘knowing who one is’ or thinking of oneself in a particular way connects with one’s participation. The emphasis for those focused upon highlighting the emotional dimension is upon understanding an individual’s connecting or not connecting. Identity is seen as implicated in this process in highly complex ways and to be deployed to account for the idea that the individual either ‘sees’ themselves in a situation or not.

This is of a similar flavour to Wenger’s (1998; 2000) work which is explicitly drawn upon by those attending to the emotional dimension and, in particular, the idea of familiarity and feeling a part of. Wenger’s (ibid) work flavours many studies centring upon identity construction in Higher Education (examples include Christie et al., 2008; Holiday and West, 2010; Lee and Roth, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Tobbell and O’Donnell, 2012). In particular, those focused on the emotional aspects for students often appeal to this framework in their theorising because it offers ways of theorising the subjective feeling of belonging. The notion of ‘belonging’, developed in this tradition, is often viewed in emotional terms in so far that it involves the ‘feeling part of’ element.

Full explication of Wenger’s (1998; 2000) theorising lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Indeed, it could not be classed as a way of theorising ‘identity’ as a distinct notion in the ways that others have done earlier in the chapter. Put briefly, Wenger (2000) presents a comprehensive framework which advances an understanding of the interrelationship between ‘identity’, ‘meaning’, ‘practice’ and ‘community’, neither of which are intended be taken in
isolation. Those who adopt his thinking seem, particularly when questions of identity are in
focus, to emphasise the ‘belonging’ aspects of identity. They are careful to not only emphasise
the emotional feeling surrounding ‘being part of’, but seek to anchor this in a social context.
Indeed, it was developed by Wenger as a way of seeing the individual as enmeshed within the
meaning-making processes that both maintain and are maintained by a collective (Jorgensen
and Keller, 2007).

Using Wenger’s framework, Jorgensen and Keller (2007), for instance, attend to the way the
individual simultaneously makes sense of themselves whilst finding a way of connecting with
the activities within the situation. However, it is specifically the idea of ‘identity’ that they wish
to keep clearly in view. Connecting or thinking of oneself in the group is where identity is
invoked. However, if interested in identity, as noted by Handley et al. (2007), the theoretical
ideas proposed by Wenger do not lend themselves directly to empirical study. Furthermore,
to take an element out of Wenger’s framework, such as ‘identity’, and focus on it outside of
the system of which it is a part, Handley et al. (2007) imply, can lead to conceptual opacity.
Identity is less than definitive, despite being a key element within his framework (Gee, 2001;
Jorgensen and Keller, 2007). Another element, ‘belonging’, whilst reverberating through the
work of those adopting Wenger’s approach, is also not clearly defined (Lusk, 2008).

Wenger’s (1998: 154) work might contribute to understanding identity in an educational
context in so far that it pertains to the way it is a perpetual process of, or what he understands
as, a ‘constant becoming’ for the individual. Being able to visualise oneself within a situation,
such that finding a position and participating within it comes easily is a proffered notion. It is
used in relation to a sense of being part of, fitting in, feeling accepted for one’s subjective
sense of individuality and, at the same time, adopting core values systems (Lusk, 2008).
Indeed, the individual needs to align themselves with the outlook of those within a situation
and their world view (Jaworski, 2006). Moreover, belonging, which is also integral to the
system along with practice and community, implies a strong element of acceptance or decision
‘to belong’ whereby the individual positions themselves actively within the community
(Griffiths, 1993: 154).

The next section moves away from largely theoretical matters and elucidates literature with a
discernibly empirical focus wherein a range of uses of identity in a Higher Education context
can be found. Although they are all different in terms of the questions they ask and the issues
they are investigating, they are united in their deliberate use of the notion ‘identity’.
Furthermore, they attend to issues of conceptualisation and, within their explication of the
way identity is conceptualised, the influences of differing perspectives can be seen. It is in
relation to this more substantive literature that aspects of the Grounded Theory findings in chapter four can be drawn into extant conversations.

6.4 Students in Higher Education settings and the connection to identity

This section will attend firstly to the identification of the participants of the Grounded Theory study as a group or category and the issues that have drawn them to researchers’ attention.

6.4.1 ‘Mature students’ as a category

Participation in Higher Education has often been assumed to present greater challenges to ‘non-traditional’ students, a category subsuming ‘mature students’, compared with traditional-aged students. This has, perhaps, accounted for the curiosity which this group has attracted from researchers, particularly when insights into their subjective experience are concerned. Identity, variously understood in the literature encircling ‘mature students’, is highlighted due to the supposition that this group brings greater diversity, or typically faces a more challenging set of circumstances. These peculiarities are deemed, in this literature, to pertain readily to matters of identity. This can be understood in terms of: social analytic categories such as social class\(^{43}\), gender or ethnicity; a distinct ‘learner identity’; a sense of oneself as having undergone ‘change’ or otherwise connecting oneself with the university environment.

When research is directed towards the experiences and needs of mature students, which are often the foci for those oriented towards practice and policy, ‘sociological theoretical’ approaches are largely used (Smith, 2008). Reflecting the interests of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning policy frameworks, these are often directed towards issues of motivation or decision making upon entering Higher Education. For Smith (ibid), sociological theoretical approaches are appropriate for the analysis of the complex combination of factors that constitute the barriers to their participation. Further, the way the more social, contextual and historical aspects interrelate with those deemed more ‘psychological’ can be brought into

\(^{43}\) There was not the analytic focus upon the placing of subjectivity against a macro backdrop. Identity was not taken so much in terms of class or subjective sense of movement between social class divisions – for one thing this was not mentioned by participants. Class, gender, ethnicity were not the foci in the analysis. Although economic factors were conspicuous in the categories such as the consideration of financial security shaping certain aspects of decision-making, these did not relate to a sense of class awareness as such.
focus using these theoretical approaches. Thus it engenders a multidimensional view whereby structuring elements are accounted for along with the ways these are experienced on a subjective level.

6.4.2 Researching the mature student ‘group’

Certain methodological approaches and assumptions may contribute to mature students being understood as a ‘group’ (Haggis, 2004). The group ‘mature students’ is not as homogenous as empirical researchers had once assumed (Arksey et al. 1994; Given, 2000; Haggis 2004; James, 1995; Waller, 2005). Furthermore, it has been a result of examining the fine detail of students’ accounts found in qualitative studies containing ‘rich’ detail that a more recent understanding has emerged regarding the diversity amongst mature aged students (Haggis, 2004). The vital differences and idiosyncrasies are those which can only be discerned using qualitative approaches. Indeed, these will disappear from view as analysts ‘zoom out’ and identify broader categories, much in the spirit of the more quantitative approaches. Such generalising techniques give rise to generic categories such as ‘instrumental’ or ‘idealistic’, which, Haggis (ibid) contends, start to become reified. In other words, aiming for data reduction so that elements from within narrative become absorbed into generic categories such as ‘having an instrumental attitude’ obscures subtlety and deeper processes.

Haggis (ibid), clearly an advocate of qualitative inquiry, is thus contending that conclusions drawn about mature students as a ‘group’ have been largely due to the positivist approaches which tend to be more reductive in nature. Such methodologies, as Martins (2001) notes, prevailed until relatively recently in studies relating to mature students in Higher Education and perpetuated the understanding that they comprise a homogenous group. It would seem, for those such as Smith (2008), that those studies taking a more contextually situated approach, aiming at the development of in-depth understandings and rich description, are deemed not as applicable for practice and policy making due to their parochialism. Thus they have not, perhaps, been so popular.

The Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four, as a ‘micro-substantive’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2003: 238), theorisation was not oriented towards any sorts of generalisation or claims to having developed a typology of mature students. Only if the Grounded Theorising were to be extended and developed into a ‘formal-macro’ (ibid) theory would there be the possibility for extension or generalisation across contexts. However, the interpretive approach was adopted in order to achieve depth. The Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four
would concur with the contention of Haggis (2004), above, such that there is little to suggest homogeneity in the small sample of participants used in terms of their stories and personal motivations. In fact, the diversity and detail elicited did prove a challenge, a matter addressed fully in chapter seven. Perhaps more pertinently, in relation to the foregoing, it could be argued that difference rather than homogeneity is likely to be more visible within in-depth qualitative studies.

The next section turns to literature which centres upon students in Higher Education wherein identity is deemed a pertinent notion and deployed to account for the phenomenon under study. Some are oriented towards mature aged students while others are not; however, these studies are brought together on the basis of their focus upon students in Higher Education and their deployment of identity as an analytic term. However, there are a variety of understandings of the pertinence of identity and the aspects of it which are most important. The use of theoretical perspectives drawn from the wider field of self and identity are conspicuous in this assortment of empirical studies. This assortment which has been grouped according to their use of identity is oriented predominantly towards the micro rather than macro level. Put simply, the meaning-making of research participants, their interactions with others and their subjective experiences pertaining to their immediate circumstances, rather than wider social contexts, are closely in focus.

### 6.5 Different uses of the notion ‘identity’ in empirical literature

There is a degree of overlap evident in the groupings constructed, but they do indicate the range of ways the idea of identity is approached:

1. **Identity understood as one’s changed self or ‘sense of self’**
2. ‘Making sense of’ in terms of ‘identity work’ and inhabiting pre-existing positions
3. Learner identity – a type of identity which is forged
4. ‘Framing’ one’s identity ‘as’ provides an insight into actions and behaviour

#### 6.5.1 Identity understood as one’s changed self or ‘sense of self’

One particular use of identity can be discerned in studies oriented towards an in-depth understanding of the impact of Higher Education degree programmes on its students\(^{44}\). For

\(^{44}\) Those adopting an action research perspective, such as Briedenhann (2007), aim to bring this into the spotlight with a view to developing practices built upon these understandings.
instance, Briedenhann (2007) wishes, as his title indicates, to ‘hear’ students’ experiences regarding the impact of being in Higher Education ‘from the horse’s mouth’. This sums up the tone of those inquiring into students’ subjective experience. However, those who allude also to the notion of identity are included in this grouping. Briedenhann (ibid) seems to have a particular focus upon how the student might experience quite a ‘whole’ shift in terms of their identity. However, identity is presented as through a given and is not unpacked conceptually. Indeed, Briedenhann (ibid) uses the term ‘self–identity’ interchangeably with ‘self-image’ and then, at other moments, reverts simply to the use of the term ‘identity’. Thus, identity, here, is not treated in a theoretical manner, but quite implicitly to denote a whole shift in the way the student perceives themselves. His study represents quite a loose deployment of identity whereby it seems to be one of those ideas which circulate around understanding the individual.

Breidhann’s (ibid) study joins others in so far that identity is brought into the frame when the idea of a ‘whole’ change is invoked. Studies oriented towards issues such as ‘sense of self’ or ‘change’ incorporate identity in a rather unspecified, diffuse manner. Indeed, it is used predominantly in relation to ‘confidence’, ‘self-esteem’ and sense of agency which are terms suggestive of a humanistic approach. Within this approach exists a particular use of identity which, it would seem, is founded upon the idea of identity as one’s whole being, and, moreover, that this will be communicated by the individual in a statement of having ‘changed’. ‘Reflectionist’ accounts whereby one’s identity is described or summarised in a direct statement of identity are a feature of this approach. Moreover, it is not acknowledged or examined in these studies such as that of Knightly and Whitelock (2006) how this might actually be known or whether identity can be described in a direct manner.

A further instance of such an approach can be discerned in the work of Mercer (2007). Gaining insights into the ‘subjective sense of self’ is central and stated clearly in her research. It is not taken as narratively constituted, but as an entity which can be expressed, in an unmediated and, arguably, realist manner. As such, it tends towards more essentialist and obdurate conceptions, with matters of its construction less apparent. It seems, here, that a rather narrower conception is forwarded than that discernible within the theorising of self and identity in the broader field which views identity as complex, as ‘lived’ and interdependent.

Breidennhan (2007), Knightly and Whitelock (2006) and Mercer’s (2007) research appear to operate within quite a distinct paradigm. This paradigm incorporates more developmental perspectives and those oriented towards humanism. Indeed, reverberating through such studies is the idea of ‘self actualisation’ associated with humanism. Mercer (ibid), for instance,
states her intention to become more knowledgeable about students’ self-development in connection with returning to Higher Education. Her aim to obtain a holistic understanding of the student draws upon a largely positivist, model-based conception of identity. When this paradigm is invoked, contextual and relational matters are subverted in favour of a conception of the reprocessing of self and its constituent parts. This is taken to occur predominantly within the individual's head. Moreover, the idea of the individual possessing a self-construct, as abstracted from time, place and relational elements within the situation, presides.

As this thesis is oriented to an ‘interpretivist’ rather than positivist stance, studies such as Mercer’s (ibid) will, perhaps rather unsurprisingly, stand out for having a different philosophy and thus come under fire. However, rather than the criticism being a matter of one philosophy being preferable to another, it is more Mercer’s (ibid) claims arising from her empirical research that appear contentious. Her claims of discerning ‘enhanced sense of self’ and, particularly, the discovery of ‘a missing part of self’ appear grander than the chosen methodology - predicated on ‘expression’ in interviews - could allow for. Indeed, there is little consideration of the debates surrounding how ‘inner’ processes - which is what the claims made from the research pertain to - can be known and researched empirically.

While her realist approach might come under question from others working with the idea of self and identity expounded in chapter five, Mercer (ibid) is, in fact, coherent in her position; namely, that she considers individuals to be self-aware regarding such matters. This would seem consistent with her assumption that direct accounts will be able to express or reflect experience which, in this case, would be whether one has ‘changed’. Simply put, her view maintains that the individual is in the best position to know whether or not they have changed and their reports or statements, in this regard, should be honoured.

The debates this position gives rise to are complex and examination of questions surrounding the use of language and representation are beyond the scope of this chapter. However, what can be noted is that there are those, working on a similar substantive topic, that adopt a philosophy which questions, rather than takes as given, what can be derived from students’ expression in verbal accounts. Michelson (2011), who operates in a more social constructionist paradigm, raises the point that giving ‘voice’ to students is an idea which ought to be handled with care. She argues that it is not empowering in the way that many pedagogues have taken it to be. Indeed, practices of reflection and supposed introspection, she contends, can bring about reified accounts that circulate in cultural discourse which she characterises as ‘I-saw-the-light’ stories. For example, the rather clichéd storylines which might be summarised as, ‘I went through hard times, then had an epiphany and sought radical
self change’. These, for Michelson (ibid) are culturally reinforced stories which are spoken ‘through’ the accounts of individuals, rather than being a direct expression of the individual’s change.

There are those, however, who in their focus upon the idea of ‘change’ attend closely to the conceptualisation of ‘change’. They may not be as cynical as Michelson (ibid), nor subject it to a full poststructuralist critique, but at least do not assume that is straightforward. Martins (2001), for instance, provides a clearer explanation of the processes incurred in what he understands to be ‘change’ and how it relates to identity; namely, that individuals are compelled to seek a subjective sense of being centred and consistent as they move across different contexts. For those working within a more social constructionist paradigm, such as Martins (ibid), the impetus for identity construction is closely associated with the idea of struggle and it is this that they direct their attention to. It is assumed that at a time of change and instability, there is heightened activity regarding the individual’s striving for a sense of coherence. The emphasis is much less on having a static image of oneself which remains consistent, but more on instability and fluidity. Although Martins (2001) does talk about the individual in terms of their whole and the identities that constitute it, his empirical study does not appear to be bent on examining an ‘internal’ reorganisation which seems to be the intent of Mercer (ibid). Moreover, Martins (ibid) is oriented towards gaining understandings of the stories that help students gain such a feeling of unity amongst changing circumstances.

- Connection to the Grounded Theorising in chapter four

In the Grounded Theorising detailed in chapter four, what might be considered direct identity statements discernible in the empirical work of Mercer (2007), such as those directly describing their ‘change’, are not apparent. The analysis was, in fact, oriented slightly more towards the ways students described themselves in the context of a certain event or activity they were doing on the course. The Grounded Theorising only connects with an overall sense of ‘change’ in so far that differences in the ways participants described themselves were apparent.

While the notion of ‘I am a changed person because of my time on this degree programme’ is not apparent in the Grounded Theorising in chapter four, there are aspects which perhaps indicate ‘change’ and which connect with the categories generated in the analysis to a certain extent. However, the emphasis in the Grounded Theorising was upon how students decided to draw themselves into, or how they expressed an idea of themselves when relaying a
dilemma they were facing or recounting an interchange with another. Moreover, any ‘change’
could be interpreted in terms of differences in the way they spoke about hopes and
disappointments, particularly in the case of Pauline. In the category which pertains primarily
to her experiences, ‘resisting a channelling’, what came to the fore was more that she did not
want to align herself with the way she felt the university was moulding her. Indeed, there was
a degree of separation between this and the way she described what she wanted to be like.

The category ‘resisting a channelling’ also subsumed the idea of having to ‘shelve’ one’s hopes.
As explained in chapter four, this is about feeling one’s hopes could not be realised and what is
left to face the constraints pertains to wanting to be shown the ‘hoops’. This is the way she
had to be and ran counter to her hopes which were shelved or postponed. Again, this does
not signify ‘change’ in the way it is understood by Mercer (ibid), that is, in terms of ‘sense of self’ that is directly described. Instead, it was seen more through Pauline’s talk about ideas of
ways of being that could not be brought into play. There is a strong sense, in the analysis, of
contrast regarding the way she spoke about what she had hoped for and an impression of
what she imagined herself to be like as a student. Although she did not express it directly as
such, the inference was made that Pauline had provided a vision of enrichment and
spontaneous intellectual discussion with peers beyond taught sessions.

Pauline’s relaying of her frustration throughout her three interviews that she did not feel
‘enriched’ could be regarded as quite telling in relation to the notion of ‘change’. Indeed, she
may have originally had an expected change or an idea of how she might change whereby the
gaining of degree was central. The idea of not achieving an expected identity, perhaps, or how
she would expect to ‘be’ when she got a degree, is also indicated in her talk surrounding not
feeling like a ‘proper’ student. As addressed in chapter four, she relayed her reticence in
approaching another university to enrol on a Postgraduate programme, despite having
achieved a first class degree. In relation to the literature surrounding the idea of ‘change’, a
further interpretation could be arrived at: it was as though she only felt that it was a matter of
herself and her degree, not the two combined to create a new person, or the one that she
expected to become. The idea of ‘change’ here can only be inferred in quite a speculative
manner, however. What the Grounded theorising in chapter four points to is an implicit idea
of ‘change’ or expectation held by the student surrounding what the university would deliver.
This type of introspection was most evident in the case of Pauline who had relayed the most
about her past.
6.5.2 ‘Making sense of’ in terms of ‘identity work’ and ‘inhabiting pre-existing positions’

The notion ‘identity work’, within extant literature, needs to be highlighted here as it is a recurrent notion used in certain studies to signify construction processes. It is not only used in relation to the context of Higher Education but circulates in the wider field as a ‘much used word’ (Degele, 1998: 1). It carries a flavour of a Postmodern understanding of identity. Those with such proclivities use it to denote the ‘work’ entailed in constructing identity. Indeed, in the contemporary area which these authors understand as Postmodern continuity and linearity has given way to a greater fragmentation. Further, it is incumbent on the individual to structure or manage the different selves that they may be present in the course of differing demands in daily life (Degele, 1998). Indeed, the ‘work’ is important for the individual so that they can ‘meet a fiction of continuity’ (Degele, 1998: 8) which fits their particular needs.

‘Identity work’ features in literature that directs its gaze towards students’ encounters with Higher Education in particular ways. It may not necessarily be cast in distinctly Postmodern terms, but is invoked when a identity is considered to be achieved rather than had. It is deployed, in particular, in relation to any form of adjustments that the student has to make through being in Higher Education. For Sagan et al. (2007), ‘identity work’ is invoked in connection with encountering new circumstances. Here, identity is taken in terms of a student wishing to make a permanent shift to a ‘desired state’. A change in identity, they seem to suggest, is the outcome of ‘identity work’. However, as Sagan et al. (ibid) have used the term ‘state’, they appear to be upholding a conception of identity as a matter of ascending to and remaining on a new level. This does connote a certain ‘staticness’, perhaps reflecting the learners’ characterisation of themselves ‘as’ one thing or another. Explication regarding, for instance, whether this is to be understood as narratively constituted is, however, absent in the research of Sagan et al. (ibid). Furthermore, there is a slightly greater emphasis upon the ‘outcome’ of the identity work, as though the student has ‘arrived’.

Understanding the processes through which students engage in ‘identity work’, for Sagan et al. (2007), involves discerning how a student comes to terms with their circumstances. The idea of ‘taking it as it comes’, they proffer, indicates a particular outlook that a student has developed. It is about a way of accepting what a student might regard as needing to be done which is discerned in the study through interview data. For Sagan et al. (2007: 10), links can be made between ‘taking it as it comes’ and those students who do not see ahead of them ‘an uninterrupted plain of work and success’. Indeed, it is as though students who think about the future in terms of inhibition rather than opportunity have developed quite a firm outlook. For Sagan et al. (2007), ‘identity work’ is integral to students developing a way of looking at their
circumstances and drawing ideas of themselves into it. For such students, their understanding of their predicament as one of constraint might be quite efficacious in terms of managing, in a practical sense.

In the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four, there were times when a particular approach could be inferred to be associated with a way of describing themselves. Sagan et al.’s (ibid) notion, ‘taking it as it comes’ is comparable to taking ‘bits’ at a time, ‘accumulating’ and the general idea of anticipating a journey that were visible in ‘forging a path’ in the Grounded Theorising in chapter four. Pertinently, an idea of ‘patience’ and of having to take what is available accompanies this. It was particularly for Cathy that a sense of ‘patience’ and of not being ‘arrogant’ came out as she relayed the adjustments, detours and repetition she had encountered. Of course, discernible in the Grounded Theorising in chapter four, are portrayals of the multiple roles and demands of a life filled with differing commitments. However, connections to identity might be ‘seen’, so to speak, when a way of dealing with this is associated in their talk with an idea of being patient and not arrogant, as in the case of Cathy. This was an idea alluded to in chapter four and connects with the understanding of ‘identity work’ in extant conversations.

This is perhaps a particular side to ‘identity work’ which is less about confronting the system and resisting. Instead it appears to be about accepting. For the categories in the Grounded Theorisation which pertained to ‘containment’, much pointed to the idea of ‘containing’ in order to manage it. Thus, perhaps ‘managing’ in quite a pragmatic sense rather than feeling affronted or a need to resist could be discerned. However, it was only related to a distinct description of self for Cathy and thus can be related more confidently to ‘identity work’ in extant literature. Other participants relayed that they had to let things go or it would have ‘eaten them up’ otherwise. However, for these participants, it was not related to an apparently deeper vision of oneself in say a journey of ‘seeing how all the bits connect’ as in Cathy’s accounts, nor a vision of self pertaining to patience.

A further use of ‘identity work’ in extant literature is discerned in the work of Weiland (2010). It comes to the fore when students have to adapt when a ‘routinized reproduction of self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued’ (Wieland, 2010: 509), posing challenges to the continuous process of ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening and revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and stability’ (Wieland, 2010: 507). Thus the ‘work’ concerns a student having to hold together a sense of continuity amidst instability. This becomes pertinent when they feel they cannot be the way they are
used to being in other settings. As the focus for Wieland (ibid) is upon narrative analysis, the
construction processes rather than the outcome of identity work is highly visible.

Wieland’s (2010) understanding of ‘identity work’ relates to the Grounded Theorising in faint
ways. In the category ‘resisting a channelling’, tensions surrounding finding a way of being on
the course that one is content with are discernible. Pauline’s interviews, in particular, might
be considered a means of acting out a presentation of a self that is ‘resisting’. In other words,
as she relayed her feelings in interviews, it might perhaps have reinforced or enabled her to
regain a sense of coherence or a strong position, when she may have been feeling a sense of
precariousness. However, precariousness can only be a very tentative inference here as the
data were not analysed particularly for this. Abiding by the analysis conducted in chapter four,
there was more of a sense, in the idea of ‘resisting’ more generally, that feelings encountered
were of having to adapt in a way that was experienced as alien. Perhaps, then, the responses
and reactions of participants in the Grounded Theorising could be considered part of the work
required in ‘identity work’ as proffered in extant literature. Indeed, the ‘work’ for the
participants is signified by the tensions concerning having to reconstitute certain ideas of
oneself that are being challenged in the present situation. Pauline appeared to feel this
challenge the most and cast it in terms of an affront to her imagined way of being.

A further use of ‘identity work’ in extant literature concerns the individual having to reconcile
different identities (Lee and Anderson, 2009). Here, there is the sense of the student having to
fit various ways of being together. This relates very slightly to ‘resisting a channelling’ as
presented in chapter four, again, whereby the student weighs up and expresses the emotional
impact of the imposition of the demands and adjustments that are expected. The ‘work’
entails thinking about one’s roles, one’s desires and whether these have to be adjusted to fit
the new demands or preserved or ‘shelved’ for later. However, in the Grounded Theorising
presented in chapter four, what could be discerned was less about finding a way of reforming
one’s way of being, as Lee and Anderson’s (ibid) work suggests, but rather the way an identity
might be formed in response to the turbulence. This was perhaps a way of being which was
expressed in terms of not being walked over or manipulated by the demands imposed by the
course, as seen in the category ‘resisting a channelling’.

For the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four, there appeared to be quite a
pragmatic emphasis: it seemed most had to literally fit in, on a practical level, the demands of
different roles. As such, there was a lot to pertain to the notion of ‘juggling’, in quite a
pragmatic sense, as seen in the work of Arksey et al. (1994). However the specific notion of
‘reconciling’, developed in Lee and Anderson’s (2009) work, which is more oriented to
questions of identity, is rather less evident. In the Grounded Theorising in chapter four, the
idea of not wanting to submit could be discerned along with the expression of discomfort
when adjustments were felt to be required. Furthermore, the idea of being at the centre of
competing demands was apparent. However, it would be a step too far from the data to
suggest that ‘reconciling’ different identities could be discerned in the data. Certain role
conflict could be discerned in connection with the demands of studying. However, different
‘identities’- over and above the different roles - were not especially apparent in their
expression. Indeed, an identity, as aforementioned, is not, Jorgensen and Keller (2007)
contend, necessarily equal to a ‘role’.

What could be inferred for the participants is that there is a degree of being brought to a point
where one has to make decisions and this is the ‘work’ entailed. However, ‘identity work’ and
the idea of ‘reconciling’ might be investigated at the point at which Julie had to consider
leaving behind the cherished aspects of her life such as walking her children home after school.
What was more in view in the Grounded Theorising in chapter four was her ‘containing’ and
placing of boundaries rather than ‘reconciliation’ as Lee and Anderson (2009) take it. Part of
the containment was deciding how much it would affect her life and perhaps the other roles
she might have.

‘Identity work’ can also be invoked when the researcher’s attention is directed at the situation.
Some emphasise the role the situation plays in students’ ‘identity work’ more than others.

- Identity is matter of inhabiting pre-existing positions

How a student works out a way of being in the situation which works for them constitutes a
further understanding of ‘identity work’ in extant literature whereby the lens is angled at the
situation. This way of construing identity is about the individual’s making sense of themselves
in relation to the circumstances, though this grouping has been identified as a greater
emphasis has been placed upon the situation as accommodating this. To put it another way, in
this way of understanding ‘identity work’, the idea is that the student has to be rather shrewd,
albeit on a tacit level, about deciding what identity or identity position to inhabit out of those
offered in the situation. Thus the sense-making has quite a pragmatic orientation. It involves
taking on an identity which is made possible by the setting. The student needs to inhabit ‘an
identity’ which seems to fit in well with the setting. As in the work of Johnson and Watson
(2010) and Rea-Dickens et al. (2002) this ‘identity’ is adopted almost as though it serves as a
vehicle for getting by. In other words, it enables them to operate smoothly in the situation.
Particularly in the case of Wilson (1997), it is an efficacious way of being – or mode of
operating - which suits both the individual and the situation. Put simply, this is about devising
a way of maintaining certain feelings required to prosper in the situation. This way of thinking of oneself is useful for the student in so far that it is an acceptable vision of oneself which also happens to be congruent and not in conflict with the situation.

When researchers adopt this way of thinking about identity, they are championing the understanding of identity as highly situated. This does not necessarily mean that the individual is passively ‘determined’ by the situation, but that the situation is a key player in identity formation. When attention shifts more towards the situation, it is still accepted that the student tells themselves what they are; however, their sense–making and how they understand what they are is also shaped by the situation. In the case of Solomon’s (2012) empirical research, the narratives which circulate as particular resources can actually begin to prescribe a range of possibilities for the individual’s understanding of themselves.

For Solomon (ibid), stories told by students are the resources which abound in the situation. These stories surround a student’s understanding of themselves as either a ‘natural’ at mathematics, or one for whom mathematics is ‘unnatural’. These narrative resources wherein such a dichotomy can be discerned and also the way they are used represent the foci for Solomon (ibid). She contends that they are the seeds of a student’s construction of an identity. Of course, these resources are not just ‘supplied’ by the situation as the students themselves play a part in generating them. In order to think about themselves as ‘successful’, they have to negotiate aspects of the natural and unnatural dichotomy. To put it another way, these resources could be considered a type of folklore that has been constructed through students’ talk. However, this folklore develops in the situation in a way that may not be particularly efficacious for the learner; for instance, ‘I’m not a natural at mathematics’. It is this folklore whereby a potentially ‘fragile’ identity, as Solomon (ibid) terms it, can germinate.

Whilst Solomon’s (ibid) attention is upon the ‘identities’ that can be fostered in a situation, she appears to take this further by contending that, in the future, the learner will take this idea of themselves with them. In other words, this initial conception of the identity wherein the learner actively constructs it as their own may be the beginning, Solomon (ibid) implies, of a way of thinking of themselves as mathematicians longitudinally. Therefore, it is independent of the relational situation – the undergraduate mathematics course - in which it was initially constructed. Conceptually, Solomon (ibid) has upheld the notion that an ‘identity’ will be largely collectively based. It is an example of quite a theoretical framing of identity which takes on the substantive concerns of learners feeling as though they are progressing as mathematics undergraduates.
- Key points of connection with the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four

It was not in mind during the Grounded Theory data collection and analysis to think specifically in terms of the situation as accommodating an identity. However, what is in view in the Grounded Theorising of chapter four is students’ subjective experience. It shows that Pauline, for instance, expressed that she wanted the opportunity to do her best. She had clear ideas of what she wanted and was not going to accept what she felt channelled into. To look at it quite simplistically, one could say she was resisting what she felt were the accepted norms within the situation. Arguably, what she felt was enabled in the situation was, from her subjective experience, the possible position of acceptance and acquiescence, or even the ‘yes miss no miss’ which she spoke of. Although the subtleties of this process go beyond what could be discerned in the Grounded Theorising, perhaps what is visible is her recognising what is enabled on the course. Perhaps to look at it another way, there may have been an identity or narrative resources (folklore) of ‘resistance’ generated more within the peer group which she identified with. This, of course, is only faintly in view in the Grounded Theorising and will be addressed again in the grouping surrounding ‘framing’.

Another way of understanding this is to consider the presentation of the self ‘as’ a ‘resistant’ student, perhaps, as representing the way she relates to the degree programme in terms of being successful, in keeping with Solomon (2012). In other words, in order to feel she is coping, Pauline must identify with that of a ‘resister’ in order to get through. Further, it might enable her to ‘hang on’ so to speak, to her perceived ideals and what she envisioned being a student would be like. Indeed, in her talk, ‘her own education’ was demarcated from the educational channels she appeared to feel she was coerced into. Perhaps it could be suggested, tentatively, that for those interested in examining ‘change’ then this represents what is happening subjectively for the student as ‘change’ is occurring in process. In other words ‘identity work’ is part of a larger process which might be understood as ‘change’.

6.5.3 Thinking about ‘learner identity’

A relatively contemporary notion, ‘learner identity’ (Moore, 2004) is encountered when researchers focus on identity as continuously constructed by the individual. It is largely referred to such that it can only be understood when one considers a learner in interaction with an environment. However, as the conceptual unpacking of the term can be rather sparse, the theoretical underpinnings may not be explicated. Indeed, while regularly invoked, there is often little precision, as Falsafi (2011) notes, regarding exactly what ‘learner identity’
encompasses. Furthermore, attempts at definition and explanation remain tentative at best. As such, ‘learner identity’ shares similar issues in terms of conceptualisation as self and identity in the wider field.

In studies with less of a theoretical emphasis, one assumption appears to be that an individual possesses a ‘set’ of ideas which have been assembled, in quite a straightforward way, into a coherent ‘outlook’. For those such as Dodgson et al. (2008), it is asserted that ‘learner identity’ is a well recognised idea in wider education literature. However, arguably, whilst the idea may be well recognised, it may not necessarily be the case that conceptual issues are well recognised, clarified or cohesive. Dodgson et al. (ibid) do, in fact, skim over it somewhat, though this may be due to issues of space in a research report. Relatively implicit in their report is the understanding that a ‘learner identity’ is constituted of a distinct ‘set’ of attitudes. This seems to run counter to certain conceptual issues which feature in the in the wider field of identity literature, and, while ‘learner identity’ is said to be constructed, it is evident that it is used in terms of something the individual possesses which is rather fixed. This seems to under emphasise its more fluid attributes and the idea of the situation as supporting the identity.

When ‘disposition’, a notion broadly related to ‘attitudes’, is used to understand the notion of ‘learner identity’, it is not used in terms of essential, ‘fixed’ attitudes. Indeed, for Crossan et al. (2003), ‘disposition’ is theorised in a more complex and theoretically guided manner. They advance the idea that a particular outlook is formed. Pertinently, however, they frame it in such a manner that students’ narratives are placed in a structural context. Indeed, as a sociological orientation is apparent, social class structures form a backdrop to these narratives which denote experiences on a subjective level that are borne of wider macro conditions. For Crossan at al. (ibid), the formation of a particular outlook is discernible in students’ narratives surrounding their decisions and participation.

Although Crossan et al.’s (ibid) study does not focus exclusively upon the notion of ‘learner identity’, but of a learning trajectory through a student’s life, it does lead towards an understanding of ‘learner identity’ as having been crafted through the student’s experiences. They combine their recognition of ‘learner identity’ as fluid with more longitudinal aspects whereby it is considered built up through life experiences and the sense the student has made of these. As such, the sense the student has made of these life experiences is in terms of active sense-making which is ongoing. Furthermore, while a relatively cohesive outlook on the part of the student can be seen to have been constructed through experiences of constraint or perceptions of ‘risk’, Crossan et al. (ibid) do not suggest that it constitutes a rigid outlook.
Moreover, they suggest that this outlook may not impinge on the learner’s present experiences in a monolithic manner. Indeed, quite a cautious approach borne out of experiences of constraint or risk can coincide in complex ways with more pleasurable elements as discerned through interview excerpts. Thus the ‘outlook’ appears more multifaceted than simply a ‘set’ of attitudes as in Crossan et al.’s (ibid) study.

A more lengthy exposition and exclusive focus on the conceptualisation of ‘learner identity’ is apparent in Falsafi’s thesis (2011). Falsafi’s (ibid) contention is that his thesis posits a conceptual understanding of learner identity which can be used, he maintains, in more definitive way in empirical research. He heeds, perhaps as he is afforded more room in his thesis, the conceptual understanding of identity as fluid and always in the process of being worked out by the individual in interaction with the situation. As such, ‘identity work’, as expounded in the previous grouping, seems to enter his understanding of ‘learner identity’. His particular conceptualisation of ‘learner identity’ brings into focus how the situation may enable the formation of the ‘learner identity’, whilst simultaneously recognising the individual’s subjective experience. Much like Crossan et al. (2003), though with less of a sociological emphasis, the subjective aspects are kept in view largely to account for the potential for agency on the part of learners as opposed to regarding them as merely ‘determined’ by the situation.45

Falsafi’s (ibid) conceptualisation remains committed to the subjective aspects as well as attending to situational elements, and, as such, he has to account for the potential for individuals to experience a subjective feeling of consistency and unity. It would seem he has highlighted the potential for understanding the individual as having rather a fixed outlook or set ideas brought into play in relation to educational contexts. That is, an individual may have constructed an understanding of themselves in relation to the perceived demands within a learning situation. Pertinently, however, in line with his deployment of the socio-cultural approach, he does not take it as an essence sitting inside, fully formed and awaiting extraction by the researcher.

45 Learner identity is set apart from earlier understanding of identities as corresponding simply to classifications used in the social sciences. These are the identities - or ways of identifying groups – of gender, class and ethnicity. The latter were associated with a more deterministic way of understanding learners’ behaviour. ‘Learner identity’, it is implied, connotes the idea that individuals have fairly unique identities. Indeed, notions of agency and active decision making in relation to participation in learning preside. It is the focus upon subjectivity and construction that takes it away from earlier impulses focusing on rather causal, functional explanations based on the categories gender, class and ethnicity (Moore, 2004) and Falsafi (2011).
Meaning-making is central to Falsafi’s (ibid) understanding of ‘learner identity’ and reflects the socio-cultural perspective he deploys. Certain meanings become activated by the individual through different types of learning activities. Furthermore, he distinguishes between the different types of learning activities which relate to the ‘learner identity’. For instance, the learner might have experienced an activity in terms of having learned something. This might then become incorporated into the ‘learner identity’ either during or after the activity has taken place. However, what is particularly notable in his thesis is his notion of ‘old meanings’ and ‘new meanings’ held by the learner. In a social constructivist sense, some meanings will be assimilated into existing meanings and others will help create a changed set of meanings.

Whilst Falsafi (ibid) implies that meanings can occur at an ‘inter-psychological’ as well as ‘intra-psychological’ level, there is a little more emphasis upon the individual, however. For instance, he uses the notion of ‘discourse’, though, rather than speaking of it in terms of a ‘discourse’ within the culture or ‘folklore’, so to speak, he posits it as the individual learner’s ‘discourse’. Furthermore, when others are involved in the construction of the ‘learner identity’ they appear in his framework to serve as a sounding board for what seem to be slightly more internalised cognitive processes.

In terms of identifying when the ‘learner identity’ is invoked, Falsafi (ibid) proffers that there are certain times when it comes to the fore. That is, it overrides other identities. However, this remains at a largely theoretical level in his thesis. He does not specify instances, in an empirical sense, whereby different identities can be seen to interact or override one another. The examples he provides merely surround the learner’s talk about having to see something a certain way due to the ‘teacher’ in them, for instance. It is in this type of talk that a professional identity as distinct from the learner identity is discerned. As well as striving to isolate or demarcate particular identities from one another, he expounds the processes by which the ‘learner identity’ is constructed. This involves a process whereby certain meanings become assimilated to the learner identity specifically. Pertinently, however, he contends the learner has to recognise that they are learning. Otherwise it would not be taken as a learner identity. Indeed, recognition of oneself as a ‘learner’ and engaging specifically in what one understands as learning is the material which constitutes the ‘learner identity’.

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46 This echoes constructivist tenets. Falsafi focuses slightly more upon the term ‘cognition’. Within social constructionist approaches, meaning-making, whilst deemed central, is taken less in terms of individual ‘cognitive’ processes and more upon collective meaning-making in the situation. Falsafi’s (2011) conceptualisation incorporates many of the facets that have been addressed in chapters five and six; that is, meaning-making, discourse and recognition in order to develop a framework which can attend to the construction of the ‘learning identity’.
The idea of a relatively discreet ‘learner identity’ is highly conspicuous within Falsafi’s (ibid) theoretical musings. He is, however, able to extend such theoretical musings to concrete instances relating to interview data. For Falsafi (2011: 141), a learner’s ‘recognition’ of what they might be as they are doing something can be discerned through talk about, for instance, ‘I can’t learn if there’s chaos around me’. It is these sorts of instances, he contends, wherein ‘learner identity’ becomes conspicuous to the researcher. There are obvious parallels to the Grounded Theorising in chapter four in so far that similar talk was contained Julie’s interviews. Indeed, on quite a substantive level, there are similarities between what students say in Falsafi’s (ibid) study and the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four. However, in the Grounded Theorising, Julie’s having to ‘put things into boxes’, for instance, was analysed in terms of how it was integral to a more overarching process of ‘containing’ or ‘monitoring’. Indeed, it was understood in terms of the act of containing or monitoring which played a part in the overall schema of ‘operating within constraints’ rather than in terms of a distinct ‘learner identity’.

Two further ideas can be drawn from Falsafi’s (ibid) theorising which resonate with aspects of the Grounded Theorising in chapter four. These are maintenance and resistance, two ideas which lie at opposite ends of the spectrum from that of dynamism and change. Resistance is evoked when the activities and associated meanings which have formed the ‘learner identity’ have not, in the learner’s history, been especially diverse (ibid). Thus, in this case, the ‘learner identity’ is not particularly flexible or able to accommodate diverse experiences. Moreover, new activities, Falsafi (ibid) contends, might be felt to give rise to meanings which contradict those which have formed the ‘learner identity’ and are therefore resisted. What is important in relation to the foregoing, when reading Falsafi’s (ibid) work, is that it is the ‘learner identity’ which is responsible for the resistance. It is as though the ‘learner identity’ undergirds much of the learner’s interpretation of a new activity. Further, if it is too much at odds with presently held meanings, then resistance will ensue.

The Grounded Theorising in chapter four does not connect resisting so clearly with an undergirding ‘learner identity’. The focus was not upon times when a student is amenable or not to assimilating new ways of approaching activities into new meanings comprising the ‘learner identity’. As such, it may be limited in the way it can speak to conversations in the literature about the ‘learner identity’ per se. However, what it can do, perhaps, is lend some support to the idea that there are processes by which a student encounters challenges which may bring about certain responses. In particular, certain challenges may be experienced as a matter of having to abandon one’s ideals and confront a system – the course - felt as oppressive with a self or way of being which is ‘bloody-minded’.

174
In sum, in regard to ‘learner identity’, the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four is perhaps only able to suggest certain conclusions. Indeed, there was no particular focus on the idea of ‘learner identity’ or an attempt to isolate a discreet identity. Furthermore, the research participants’ experiences and the events they spoke of were not originally deemed to be encapsulated by the notion of a singular ‘learner identity’. Certain visions of self or descriptions of self were apparent in the interpretive process of the Grounded Theorising in connection with what they were doing. Indeed, participants drew themselves into what they were doing in different ways. These ‘visions’ of self were varied and pertained more to what they were doing.

Featuring in the next grouping is an approach whereby slightly clearer connections can be made to the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that the work featuring in this grouping deploys Grounded Theory methodology.

6.5.4 ‘Framing’ an identity ‘as’

Identity is a matter of how an individual gives meaning to what she or he is doing. This is addressed in terms of a learner having a vision of themselves which ‘frames’ actions.

Here, the notion of framing is highlighted as a broad concept which shows how identity can be integral to actions. It has been developed as a concept in the Grounded Theory study of Capps (2010) though echoes some of the principles underlying identity work and the theoretical perspectives expounded thus far.

Framing, for Capps (ibid), is not about a ‘learner identity’ lying at the base of their actions as in ‘learner identity’ in the previous grouping, but indicates that a student can have a transient idea of themselves in a certain predicament. Of note in relation to this grouping is that there is not anything especially new compared with what has been examined so far. There is still an idea of a vision of self and also the idea of ‘identity as’, as seen in the work of Sfard and Prusak (2005) and Gee (2001). However, what sets it apart subtly from those aforementioned, and places it in a separate section, is the view it affords of the students’ subjective experience whilst doing what it is they feel they are doing. It is possible to discern how students make sense of their predicament and how they draw an understanding of ‘themselves’ into dealing with this predicament.
Through examining students’ narratives, Capps (2010) conceives of identity in terms of identity ‘as’. The idea is that students ‘frame’ themselves: ‘as’ a persistent student; ‘as’ competent adult; ‘as’ someone who is persistent. The notion of ‘framing’ and ‘reframing’ is an important notion for Capps (ibid). It incorporates a student’s sense of who they are, in quite a static way, but then in a way which links to evaluation of the feasibility of possible courses of action.

Thinking about oneself ‘as’ then becomes integral to other decisions: students have to consider whether it feels right for them and whether a certain course of action is appropriate.

For Capps (ibid), students do not talk in the abstract about what their identity ‘is’, nor do they describe it in response to direct questions about identity. Rather, identity is taken in terms of visions of self woven into their talk about what they were doing. Importantly, students ‘reminded themselves that they were persistent’ (Capps, 2010: 5). Framing, as deployed by Capps (ibid), is rather like a structure or filter to help order experiences. This resonates slightly with Wenger’s (1998) understanding that identity serves as a schema for organising meanings pertaining to new learning experiences and, moreover, that individuals have an idea or vision of themselves in relation to what they feel they are doing. However, what is more novel when perusing the literature is Capps’ (ibid) use of Grounded Theory methodology and the focus upon students’ choices and actions. It affords insight into the subjective aspects or, more specifically, how the student understands what they feel it is they are doing.

The concept ‘persisting’ is referred to as pertaining to rather an emotional experience which also connects with acting in a situation. Students tell themselves they are persisting. Students carry out the ‘framing’ of themselves ‘as persistent’, for instance, through taking a proactive stance and not thinking in terms of defeat. Indeed, ‘participants used framing to define an event or perception in a particular way that supported their actions’ (Capps, 2010: 148). Simply put, the meaning making processes germane to students’ perceptions could be summed up as, ‘I will get to the bottom of this - off my own steam’. Capps (2010) notion of ‘reframing’ refers to their making an alteration in order to adjust to the demands of the situation. Students will think of themselves a different way when they face a new challenge. This is not dissimilar to the way ‘learner identity’ is expounded in the previous grouping; however, Capps (ibid) chooses to use ‘reframing’ instead of ‘new’ or ‘old’ meanings being assimilated or accommodated in regard to an overall ‘learner identity’.

- points of synthesis between Capps (2010) and the Grounded Theory findings presented in chapter four

The implication for Capps (ibid) is that a feeling ‘as’, inferred through listening to students’ narrative accounts, links with certain courses of action, or some degree of being able to cope,
which, in her thesis, is ‘persisting’. In the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four, although the idea of ‘framing’ was not in mind at the time, there were instances whereby students appeared to have a fairly firm view of themselves - identity ‘as’ - in relation to certain actions. The strongest sense of this, however, was when they had referred to the peer group, as though there was a collective group outlook. Indeed, there were repetitions of particular turns of phrase such as ‘so be it’ which stood out in the interpretation from the early stages. In relation to what could be considered the collective or group outlook, ‘so be it’ was a telling phrase - voiced in quite a sharp and defiant manner by two of the participants. Further, it appeared to symbolise their making a stand against staff along with a commitment to not worrying about detail and just concerning oneself with getting through. This ‘commitment to’ could be considered to represent the ‘framing’ as it is used by Capps (ibid). Inferred in the Grounded Theorising in chapter four is that within the students’ commitment is an understanding of themselves, or perhaps the peer group, as ‘getting through’. These were only faint speculations, however, but glimpses of a group vision and perhaps a shared phrase such as “so-be-it” might indicate this.

Other than Pauline’s accounts which seemed to indicate an instance of having to evoke different ideas of oneself in response to different demands, there was little sense of the participants talking of themselves in a different way in relation to different courses of action on a more individual basis. Perhaps clearer connections between the work of Capps (ibid) and the Grounded Theorising in chapter four might have been aided if the idea of ‘framing’ offered by Capps (ibid) had actually informed the data collection and analysis. On the other hand, the Grounded Theorising in chapter four might be able to extend the concept of ‘framing’ proposed by Capps (ibid) by adding another element to it. In the Grounded Theory methodology spirit, this would potentially render ‘framing’ a more flexible category or concept. It seems to connect with the idea, discerned in the Grounded Theorisation in chapter four, of students having to make a pragmatic decision constrained by time and other factors. This can be extended further, however. An alternative viewpoint might be that this is part of the students’ repertoire of coping skills and pertains to quite a conscious decision. It might even constitute a certain ‘framing’ of themselves. However, this was not attended to in the Grounded theory data collection and analysis in chapter four. It might be useful, if the data collection could be extended, to attend to the students’ cognisance of coping skills and how this may have been constructed in tandem with course teaching. In other words, although not

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47 The exact mechanisms in cognitive, ‘reasoning’ terms are not accessible through these methodologies. Indeed, all that can be inferred in the Grounded Theorising in chapter four in this respect is that the student (SP in particular) seems to be referring to a ‘changed tack’ with associated narrative accounts about having to resort to another mode of operating.
evident in interviews, it could be speculated that students were encouraged by staff to think in terms of predominantly pragmatic ways to organise themselves in order to cope. This would require a slightly different focus whereby the situation and cultural resources therein would be highlighted.

The idea of finding pragmatic ways to cope and ‘operate within the constraints’ was not evident in the talk of every participant within the Grounded Theorising in chapter four. This does concur with Capps’ (ibid) point that some of her participants decided to use the idea of ‘persisting’ as a way to progress whereas others did not. Moreover, she had highlighted reasons behind this as a potential avenue for exploration. In relation to the Grounded Theorising in chapter four, the idea of ‘coping’ and what this means for students in terms of why they might be subscribing to it could be explored further. There were hints at ‘operating within constraints’ as a more generic process within which some experiences were more a matter of having to not having to resort to rather austere strategies for coping.

6.6 Concluding remarks

The literature focusing on ‘identity’ in relation to educational contexts offers varying ways of understanding the notion. Theoretical and methodological developments which centre upon it as a distinct notion are ongoing and are bent upon specifying where certain phenomena can be understood in terms of identity. When identity is taken in terms of ‘whole’ change, there are variations in terms of whether it is taken in an essentialist or more social constructionist spirit. ‘Identity work’ is a particular concept which employs a way of thinking about identity in turbulent times and is more readily transposable than ‘change’ to the Grounded Theorising presented in chapter four. It points to the ‘work’ entailed in feeling consistent and thus the subjective experience of the individual amidst instability. More specifically, in regard to students in Higher Education, there may be a sense of their having to ‘be’ a different way. In the Grounded Theorising in chapter four, ‘identity work’ as it is used in extant literature, is just visible such that the participants may have a certain way of thinking of themselves to deal with challenging circumstances. This might be in terms of taking a ‘patient’ stance or that pertaining more towards being resistant. In the case of the latter, self as ‘bloody-minded’ might be envisaged as not merely ‘accepting’ or ‘getting through’. The concept, ‘framing’, within extant literature echoes identity work to an extent, though emphasises how an identity connects with what the student feels it is they are doing. In the case of the Grounded theorising in chapter four, a commitment to getting through was apparent to an extent.
Perhaps where it could be glimpsed most acutely is in their expression of what appeared shared set phrases to express this commitment or ‘framing’.
Chapter Seven

Reflection upon the Grounded Theory journey

7.1 Introduction

This reflective chapter elucidates how I have come to understand Grounded Theory methodology as a result of the journey undertaken in this thesis. It highlights thorny issues presented by Constructivist Grounded Theory from a more experienced standpoint. It goes beyond the delineation and resolution, delineated in chapter three, of the largely technical problems encountered in the early stages of the analysis. The nature of interpretive coding and the generation of concepts from the data are the aspects which have posed the greatest challenges. What I have learnt from the process and my developing understandings are articulated in this chapter; however, despite certain shortcomings being presented by my initial lack of experience in deploying the methodology, there are features within the methodology which I have identified as contentious. This surrounds the ‘data-driven’ approach and the incorporation of literature after data collection, a principle which undergirds the entire methodology. Furthermore, the identification of the point when extant literature is to become integrated in the analysis and, moreover, how far concepts can be considered to be generated purely from the Grounded Theory techniques is placed under scrutiny. A large degree of opacity encountered within methodological texts surrounds the fluidity encountered in interpretive coding. As a result of being more aware of its precepts and procedures through their observation in this study, I can also identify what distinguishes it as a methodology.

7.2 Issues presented by the interpretive nature of the coding and the assigning of codes

Following Charmaz’ (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008) texts, I abided by the idea that a unit of data (a word, sentence or passage in an interview transcript) does not necessarily correspond to an objective meaning. In other words, the units of meaning in the data will not be clear-cut, nor can the interview transcripts be cut up or identified objectively. Due to this lack of certainty or neutrality, the codes developed in the analysis were largely provisional and this gave rise to much deliberation. It seemed a particular piece of data could be viewed from multiple angles and that each part could be connected to others in different ways. Furthermore, the analysis of the data using the principles of interpretive coding brought home the fact that it is not as
‘technical’ a procedure as I had originally envisaged. It is the distinctly interpretive nature which marks it slightly apart from more traditional Grounded Theory methodological texts, such as Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) ‘Basics of Qualitative Research’ which advocate a more objectivist approach. The objectivist approach is more likely to involve coding for manifest or literal content, rather than the meaning making of participants. Coding for meaning, in accordance with Constructivist Grounded Theory is more nebulous and has posed its own particular challenges in the present study.

To recapitulate, an illustration of the ‘interpretive’ as opposed to ‘objectivist’ nature of the coding is provided by Charmaz (2006). Charmaz’ (ibid) code ‘receiving news indirectly’ was, she concluded, lacking the impact, in terms of conveying meaning, of the code ‘receiving second-hand news’. Thus, the latter was the code settled upon in her analysis. In other words, ‘receiving news indirectly’ did not adequately reflect the way the participant experienced it. She considered ‘receiving second-hand news’ as more apposite in conveying the idea that, to the participant, the news felt ‘second-hand’, thus, by implication, rendering the receiver of secondary importance. She made this inference from detailed analysis of the interview transcripts and also what she intuited as she deciphered the non-verbal communication in interviews, particularly in relation to the feeling of being less important.

The gradual formation of codes and categories was, in my analysis, rather a tentative process whereby I could see that putting different ‘pieces’ together would yield different meanings. Thus, my experience was often one of going round and round the data, viewing them from different angles and experimenting with various possibilities for the name of each code. This occurred predominantly in relation to ‘focused coding’ which involved condensing the initial codes. Further, coding across the whole data set, I found, demanded a careful balancing act between attending to codes indicated by a single word or phrase and achieving more overarching codes. Indeed, the smaller initial codes, or even a fairly short phrase within interview transcripts such as ‘we won’t let each other fall’ could, in fact, work eventually as focused codes and the labels of more abstract concepts.

A further contributory factor to the difficulty in deciding on the label for a code was the absence of an overarching understanding of the wider meaning, and thus a framework for looking at the data. In other words, I did not have an overarching view of which concepts might be included in the schema. Charmaz (ibid) does seem to pre-empt this, to an extent, by stating that the analyst should work quickly through a transcript when conducting initial coding, the idea being that one’s intuition would automatically provide some cohesion or a ‘slant’ on the data. However, this did not always happen in my case. It felt, particularly in the
early stages, as though my coding was very fluid. Furthermore, the ‘slant’ only started to become clear later on in the analysis. Added to this, I was mindful that Grounded Theory methodology does not espouse the grouping of data into themes based on the first few readings of the data. Indeed, Charmaz’ (ibid) texts maintain that the characteristics which ultimately group pieces of data together become discerned after a long, iterative process involving the splitting and merging of putative categories.

Charmaz’ (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008) principles in regard to interpretive coding could be emulated to an extent, though I consider there to be some chasms within her guidelines, particularly in relation to making sense of a diverse data set. Following her suggestions in relation to focused coding, I strived to generate codes which worked across the data set, that is, across all the participants rather than codes pertaining to each individual participant. This necessitated the strategies delineated in chapter three which presented a solution in terms of keeping track of a large amount of data.

The diagrams delineated in chapter three represented my way of achieving an understanding of the schema that I was constructing. At this point, I was occupied with devising a schema which worked best for accommodating all the codes generated through initial coding. However, in retrospect, it might have been preferable to have cut out some of the data and been quite selective. I had initially felt I had attended to issues pertaining to achieving some cohesion in the data collected when conducting the interviews. Indeed, the rationale for interviewing one person and using understandings from this to form the basis of questions posed in the interview with the next person was to aid integration. At least, it represented an attempt to compare and discern similarities, or to identify issues in relation to which there might be contrasting views. This, I considered, decreased the likelihood of having to ‘weed out’ a lot of data in the transcripts. However, if I were to persist with the idea that I ought to have ‘weeded out’, so to speak, when it is a case of eliminating data in the earliest stages in the analysis, I would potentially be in conflict with the Grounded Theory mentality. Indeed, the analyst will not necessarily know in early stages which data are relevant or not. There might, in fact, be data which had initially been overlooked in the earlier in the analysis that later becomes reincorporated into the analysis in light of new insights yielded. In other words, reducing at an early stage could shut off avenues which may come out later on in the analysis as the Grounded theorising starts to take shape.

The lack of linearity or moving ‘upwards’ through ‘levels’ of abstraction necessitated a largely recursive technique. I was cognizant of the principle of being recursive and I felt I observed it through returning to earlier codes if they did not, as Charmaz (ibid) would put it, ‘work for’
other data. I had applied the principle of taking an idea that seemed, visually, to be a key part of the schema and subjected it to micro-analysis to decipher the distinction between the potential categories that were taking shape. However, a recursive technique, I came to realise, is loaded with the potential for the analyst to become lost, particularly as it involves amending earlier codes and categories. My predominantly visual tracking of the data through the diagrams shown in chapter three represented my way of keeping a personal audit trail. However, the idea of moving back and forth does contribute to the likelihood of going in circles. My strategy of keeping maps did start to address this.

It is relatively clear to see how the mutability relating to the coding and categories might account for Charmaz’ (ibid) rejection of qualitative software packages based merely on a code and retrieve system. Indeed, the process of splitting and merging so central to the formation of categories is depicted in her texts through the writing of a storyline and decisions made as to why certain categories could be split. It is largely a case of interpretation and much musing over when to modify existing categories in light of new interpretations. This makes sense to the reader as a story and it is relatively easy to understand Charmaz’ (ibid) reasoning. However, how this sort of thinking might translate into a more technical set of procedures, perhaps in the form of computer software, is not immediately apparent. My technique of writing thoughts next to memos and showing diagrams which developed over time did help to create order.

Ways of remaining abreast of a large data set are given less emphasis in Charmaz (ibid) texts. She stresses microanalysis and the dissection of the language within the interview transcripts. Whilst this is an important feature of all types of Grounded Theory methodology, it does, arguably, detract attention from meanings residing in the larger segments of data. There were times when attending to what the interviewee was saying in a longer passage of interview transcription needed to be compared with the coding of the smaller fragments of data such as single words. Although espoused by Charmaz (ibid), this was perhaps overshadowed by the emphasis in her illustrations upon microanalysis of single words used by interviewees. The balance between coding, categorising, micro-analysing and considering largely overarching narratives was a complex one, involving long periods of reflection and revision.

The concern to remain close to the data perhaps accounts for Charmaz’ (ibid) emphasis upon the importance of writing analytic memos. The memos, developed as the analysis progresses, form the back-bone of the analysis as they communicate the Grounded Theorising – or the end product of the research - to the reader. They are instrumental in helping the reader to decipher how the researcher got from the data to their interpretations. The onus is less on the
imparting of neutral facts or events that occurred, in a purely descriptive sense, but the representation of the analyst's interpretation of what is happening in a narrative form. The argument presented in the narrative or storyline which constitutes the final Grounded Theorising is supported by the inclusion of codes and data into the prose. This contributes to the researcher’s presenting an argument to the reader, contained in final memos, that their interpretation is plausible. Being able to see the raw data and codes woven into the argument is championed by Grounded Theorists. Further, this is what they understand as a 'grounded' interpretation. This manner of grounding the interpretations in the data is what should be aspired to when conducting Grounded Theorising. However, moving from paying close attention to each line in a transcript to creating memos which integrated larger chunks of data presented certain challenges. It was only further into the analysis that I started to gain confidence in taking the time to consider the ideas I wished to present and then place them in a storyline within memos the way that Charmaz (ibid) advocates.

Once I had overcome a block to writing and started to move away from the diagrams I had created, the analysis seemed to make more sense. Diagrams containing boxes and short memos were helpful in achieving a broader picture, though were not so amenable to representing complexity in the data. Further, representing my interpretation as a story, rather than as a set of circles and arrows on a diagram, aided in discerning how ideas could be integrated. Circles and arrows would, arguably, work better for certain types of data. These diagrams were, however, not cast aside but incorporated into the iterative process whereby I would compare diagrams and memos. The process of ‘free-writing’, as recommended by Charmaz (ibid), did help me to overcome a block in the analysis. Free-writing memos (for an example, see appendix 7i) seemed literally to ‘free’ me from stages of paralysis within the analysis for they allowed me to start putting to paper what the crux of the analysis seemed to be. Once I could articulate my ideas in this way, I could then go back and check that the writing of the memos remained close to the codes generated. The process of interrogating the data which involved seeking continual support for the inferences constituting the categories taking shape meant I started to become more reflective and questioning of my inferences. This is a way of thinking about data and I would identify this is a key aspect of deploying Grounded Theory methodology.

The procedures gleaned from Charmaz’ (ibid) examples were implemented as far as they could be extrapolated to my research. However, one further difficulty was presented by the fact that the data I had were not sufficiently focused to warrant the fine-combed approach

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48 Strauss and Corbin (1998) focused on more neutral facts and connections between these facts which is, arguably, more amenable to diagrammatic representation.
whereby memos are generated from discreet passages of interview text. Furthermore, the illustrations in Charmaz’ (ibid) text are rather limited to the depiction of the process as applied to small, discreet segments of text. In fact, it was relatively straightforward to discern how her memos lead on from one to the next. Despite her illustrations being limited to discreet segments of text, there is nothing to suggest in her text that one ought to confine the Grounded Theory to discreet segments of text. Upon reflection, making a decision to concentrate on a particular idea taking shape in the analysis and continuing this as a line of investigation might have been more efficient and enabled me to follow some of Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines rather more closely.

7.3 **Issues of Grounded Theory’s distinctiveness as a methodology**

One characteristic of second generation Grounded Theory approaches, which subsumes Constructivist Grounded Theory, is that of starting with small pieces of data without being overly concerned, during initial stages, with what they represent analytically. In other words, in the early stages, the analyst may find the seeds of quite an overarching concept or just a small substantive detail. I would describe it in terms of starting a very complex jigsaw: one first has to decide what one has and then begin to assemble the pieces, whether this is a word, a general hunch or phrase, into very loose groupings. This, as mentioned above, did prove quite chaotic and was akin to having a jigsaw in which the colours of the pieces changed depending on which pieces they were placed next to.

Perhaps, I would argue, the vision of the jigsaw or of fragments being glued back together, so to speak, befits more the mentality of Traditional Grounded Theory. Indeed, Traditional Grounded Theory posits ‘reality’ as contained in the fragments and that the researcher proceeds to put them all together again and the model in its entirety speaks of this ‘reality’. It is though this ‘reality’ sings through once it has been reassembled. For second generation Grounded Theory, however, there is less of a sense that the analyst has reassembled the pieces in this way. Instead, it is more a matter of the analyst constructing just one part of the jigsaw in ways that seem to fit best and create a cohesive picture. There is not one way or the correct way. Furthermore, it can depend upon where the research starts and the first threads teased out in the analytic process as to the line pursued and the final rendition presented as the Grounded Theorising.

Having adhered to the logic of a predominantly inductive approach espoused by Charmaz (ibid), I took pains to adhere to the procedure of splitting and merging categories based on the
data. Indeed, this is strongly advocated by Charmaz (ibid). However, it is less than clear where this becomes integrated with a conceptual lens which Charmaz (ibid) does, arguably, employ. As well as presenting challenges in relation to coding at the initial stages, the absence of an explicit conceptual lens can impact upon the integration of the categories that are starting to take shape. This represents the point where a lens would be of utmost benefit.

As well as the timing and ‘point’, so to speak, at which a concept is drawn upon, it is not clear exactly what serves as a concept from the literature. For instance, whether it is a way of thinking about identity, perhaps in the form of making identity bids as in the work of Gee (2001) detailed in chapter six; or, perhaps, an idea such as identity work from Wieland (2010) might have aided in making sense of students’ accounts of role conflict. However, rather than having a particular concept in mind, Charmaz (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008) implies the researcher deploys concepts as and when they become relevant. Thus, she seems to align with an earlier dictum in Strauss and Corbin (1998) that Grounded Theory presents the researcher with a ‘smorgasboard’ from which to select ‘tools’ – techniques for analysing the data - as required.

The idea of the smorgasboard bears similarities to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Kincheloe’s (2001) notion of ‘bricolage’ which evokes the metaphor of a patchwork quilt whereby the researcher uses different approaches and lenses where they are deemed useful. The ‘bricolage’ approach is not especially streamlined or planned prior to data collection. Perhaps this impulse towards using multiple analytic approaches is also reflective of the ‘blurring of genres’ which, for Hughes (2006), as noted in chapter five, are constitutive of the field of contemporary qualitative research. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attend to devising a particular methodology for questions of identity pertinent to contemporary understandings. However, particularly as the identity literature is diverse and convoluted, the ‘bricolage’ methodological approach might possibly be efficacious. Furthermore, as a multidimensional understanding of self and identity is an impulse running through extant literature, it is perhaps desirable to deploy a methodological approach which offers a multidimensional perspective.

In other words, one which looks at the empirical world in ways which bring to light that which may not be visible using more traditional qualitative methodology (Kincheloe, 2001).

Charmaz’ (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008) Constructivist Grounded Theory could be regarded to have much in common with those methods grouped under the category of narrative analysis, or the narrative approach outlined in chapter five. It shares a similar orientation in so far that individuals are posited as meaning-makers. However, Charmaz (ibid) emphasises the ‘presentation of self’ aspects drawn from Erving Goffman’s ideas, with the notion of narrative analysis not referred to directly. Put simply, the conceptual framework surrounding ‘the
presentation of self’ used by Charmaz (ibid) has a particular emphasis. That is, individuals’ perceptions of how they are appearing to another, along with a sensitivity to the creation of meaning and the formation of meaning and objects in relation to which individuals act. Narrative analysis, on the other hand, emphasises the subjective storyline as it occurs to the individual with the researcher hearing this sense-making as a fairly coherent story. Charmaz (ibid) does, in fact, state that the researcher will, at times, regard an interview transcript as an entire narrative and that they strive to write in order to construct a ‘narrative’. However, she does not state explicitly at any point in her texts that she is deploying a form of ‘narrative analysis’.

Charmaz’ (ibid) Constructivist Grounded Theory is perhaps most distinct from other qualitative approaches in so far that it purports to facilitate an overarching view across interview transcripts. The implication is that the researcher listens to meaning-making on the part of participants from their interviews and then proceeds to piece together a story. The construction of this story involves the researcher stringing events together into a storyline. This ‘narrative’ has not been constructed or ‘strung together’ by the participant, but by the researcher. Indeed, Grounded Theory researchers look for consistency across accounts and it is as though the researcher discerns a narrative across time or different parts of the data set. The pieces might be in different places in and over the course of the interviews, but it is the researcher who brings them together. As such, the reader of the Grounded Theorising is not being provided with a continuous account which has been ‘poured out’, so to speak, by the interviewee.

Although the bringing together of pieces from across the data set was a characteristic of my Grounded Theorising, one point I feel is contentious for the methodology, from my experience of implementing it, is that the process involves having to cut up and fragment what the interviewee has said. The fragmentation, as mentioned in chapter one, is noted by Ruane and Ramcharan (2006) and proffered as one of the short-comings of Grounded Theory. However, the cutting up and fragmenting is not necessarily an oversight for Grounded Theorists. Indeed, I am not critical of this as a deficit in the methodology. I would argue that it is more that the analyst ought to be mindful that there is fragmentation occurring and that it will yield a different interpretation than if a more distinctly ‘narrative analysis’ had been undertaken. It seems the Grounded Theorist relishes the opportunity to experiment with different ways of carving up the interviewee’s accounts and, when there is concurrence between several ‘bits’, then the analysis can be considered to be advancing.
The cutting up and comparing of segments of data for consistency does seem reminiscent of the ‘triangulation’ principle that Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note as a feature of more traditional qualitative approaches. As such, it would seem akin to a neo-realist, naturalistic mentality which, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2003) note, is a found in certain types of ethnography. The ethnographic mentality runs through Charmaz’ (2006; 2008) texts as an approach to emulate when doing qualitative research. This pertains, specifically, to an ethnographer’s practice of comparing inferences with inferences and iterating between them, whilst taking pains to explicate this ongoing exploration in a audit trail of the fieldwork and analysis.

The emphasis upon piecing together smaller ‘fragments’ of what constitutes the activities of daily life does also appear to reflect the largely American Pragmatist underpinnings of Grounded Theory methodology. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine intricate linkages between the methodological components of Grounded Theory and the American Pragmatist framework. However, in brief, the idea, taken from a broadly American Pragmatist framework, is predicated on being able to attend closely to the fairly mundane activities which constitute ‘what is going on’ in the setting. Thus, there is an element of one needing to know what participants ‘do’ and how participants act ‘towards’ what they understand 49.

7.4 When to turn to the literature: issues relating to the development of concepts purely from the data.

Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology upholds the idea that the generation of concepts can be ‘data-driven’. The insinuation is that the analyst is in the position to identify a concept when a category which appears to work for the data has been discerned. The naming of a category, which will be amended through the course of the comparative process, will reflect the category’s components. Of course, in Charmaz’ (2006: 139) terms, in order to avoid positivist nomenclature, the category is said to ‘work’ if it ‘carries the weight’ of the analysis and not that the categories contain a high frequency of data. The categories that ‘work’ for the data will be taken as the beginnings of concepts. That said, it is apparent that she does not

49 It is perhaps in Capps’ (2010) Grounded Theory study highlighted in chapter six, that it is possible to see how this provides to see how ‘pragmatist’ approach has been executed. Indeed, Capps (ibid) emphasises what participants do and how this stems from their understanding of themselves in their predicament, or how they ‘experience’ this predicament.
claim it to be an automatic process whereby the concepts will simply come into view as the categories become larger or more inclusive.

A point of criticism I have is that Charmaz (ibid) appears to tread a thin line between working with quite technical coding procedures on the one hand and using an extant conceptual lens to interpret the data on the other. This is, incidentally, where her approach starts to divert most clearly from traditional Grounded Theory. Indeed, she is careful to disassociate from overtly technical prescriptions and to take a more interpretive stance, though simultaneously shows how interpretive coding can be grounded or remain ‘close to’ the data. Because the coding procedures may, she contends, be flavoured by concepts that the researcher may already be familiar with, it would seem that she has taken Grounded Theory methodology into rather a grey area. In other words, it is not especially clear whether concepts are generated from splitting and merging categories or whether there is a strong element of using a lens through which the analyst starts to see significance in certain data.

Constructivist Grounded Theory presents its case fairly coherently as a development of traditional Grounded Theory. However, it is presented, as the title of Charmaz’ (2006) text indicates, as a practical guide to analyse ‘qualitative data’. However, rather than her Constructivist Grounded Theory presenting a panacea for an interpretive qualitative approach, it seems she is offering something quite specific, particularly as far as her illustrations of the methodological processes are concerned. This is one closely aligned with Symbolic Interactionism. To be sure, Charmaz (ibid) is explicit in that Symbolic Interactionism, particularly in association with Erving Goffman, echoes through the names given to her codes and her overall theorising. The deployment of a broad theoretical perspective, she suggests is admissible. However, this begs the question regarding how much the researcher can employ a particular lens, such as that associated with Goffman, and still purport to be doing Grounded Theory as opposed to another methodology.

During the analysis, I endeavoured to adopt Charmaz’ (ibid) illustrations regarding the process of splitting and merging in order to arrive at the key categories within the schema. I interpreted her guidelines to mean one does not use specific concepts from literature in order to create codes and categories. Consequently, the categories I arrived at did seem tainted with a certain naivety or clumsiness as I was forming them. Further, there was a point in my analysis when I experienced much self doubt as the labels for my categories sounded so unfamiliar. Perhaps, I concede, this was because they were not flavoured in an overt way by extant theory or ideas I was familiar with. This was the case for ‘resisting a channelling’ and particularly the earlier categories, such as ‘staying true to one’s individual choice’, which were,
incidentally, discarded as the analysis became more refined. The labels for these categories had been generated from my understandings of the participants’ subjective experience. Moreover, I had not intentionally drawn upon concepts or approaches from literature to help shape this or create the name of the code. As such, I had followed what I considered Charmaz (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008) to have advocated in her texts. These names I had created for the codes were, I felt, closely aligned to the participants’ expression and, I hoped, communicated the sentiments inferred from their interviews.

Whilst I do consider my Grounded Theorisation, presented in chapter four, to be relatively cohesive, in retrospect, I regret not having homed in on a particular idea and sought literature which was most closely related to it at the time of data collection and analysis. For instance, my inferences surrounding ‘getting around’, ‘resourcing’ and ‘protecting’ stood out quite early on. My diagrams pointed to these ideas and I had alluded to them in my memos. This would, arguably, have been the particular point at which I could have drawn in extant literature. This would, however, have meant the Grounded Theorising would have taken a different shape. I could, for instance, have considered whether there were conversations in the literature which highlighted the idea that students have a particular outlook based on the somewhat pragmatic notion of ‘getting around’. This ‘point’ in the analysis, of course, is not an exact one whereby I would immediately put my diagrams and memos down and peruse the literature; rather, when I felt I was continually arriving to the same idea in the analysis of the data, it would suggest a turn to literature was indicated.

As the Grounded Theorisation presented in chapter four now stands, it holds together reasonably. Literature could even be drawn in now to develop the ideas generated within it. However, it might be more realistic that one aspect of the overarching idea of ‘operating within constraints’ is concentrated upon and developed. Indeed, as a whole, ‘operating within constraints’ was not directly congruent with concepts and ideas in the literature. Of course, as a largely ‘micro-substantive’ theorisation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2003), further data across contexts would be required to raise it to a more abstract level. Then there would be a greater propensity to make comparisons as the ‘specifics’ or substantive details would be less of the focus than more general ideas and broader concepts.

Despite the focus on the experience of ‘operating within constraints’ pertaining to participants in one context, that is not to say that my Grounded Theorising was purely substantive or descriptive. Relatively abstract principles such as ‘resisting’ and ‘containing’ were discerned. When this is brought to bear upon extant literature, generic concepts such as ‘identity work’ were starting to resonate. This is where I consider this to have adhered to Charmaz’ (2006:...
dictum that the aim is to ‘create a dialogue and enter the current conversations in your field’ and ‘think about showing how your work transcends specific works.’

What is evident in the data driven analysis presented as in chapter four is the meaning-making on the part of participants. This is inferred in the way participants spoke about key issues, what they chose to stress or reiterate and the type of language used. Furthermore, following Charmaz (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008) guidelines in the main will have imported, to an extent, the very broadly symbolic interactionist tenets predicated upon an individual’s reflection upon how others see them, that is, their image in the eyes of other people. Whilst not made explicit in her texts, what was enabled through following her guidelines was the gleaning of participants’ meaning-making in terms of self and identity. Furthermore, certain aspects rendered visible through the methodology were: the participants’ defending what they consider important and personally meaningful; how others may see them as they resist; their reflections on the moulds they feel they are expected to fit in the eyes of course staff; how they see what it is they are doing and how they describe themselves in relation to this. Perhaps what it brings less into focus, in an interpretive sense, is a way of understanding self and identity as ‘lived’, as suggested in conversations in the literature outlined in chapter six. That is, the social context and the relational aspects which go beyond listening to accounts in interviews pertaining to how they might feel they come across to others.

7.5 Issues encountered concerning interviewing

Interviewing raised issues which are fairly distinct from other coding issues and those pertaining to the use of extant literature. These are largely practical and surround the nature of the ‘intensive interview’ as advocated by Charmaz (ibid). The somewhat ‘roaming’ approach, as I might term it, that I adopted during interviewing was intended to give the participant space to think about which events linked together. In other words, rather than my seeking the answers to pre-formed questions, or pursuing pre-specified areas I wished to explore, I was open to issues and experiences the interviewee seemed to want to divulge. The very open approach, characteristic of the intensive interview espoused by Charmaz (ibid), I felt, allowed room for the participant to relate feelings and events together. For some participants, this seemed to come quite naturally and they appeared to relish the opportunity to talk in quite a flowing, candid manner. For others, however, it seemed as though, whilst they were enthusiastic, they expected more direct and less open questions. I felt it was prudent to try to pick up on what they were expressing in terms of body language and non-
verbal communication, not least in the interests of research ethics. I strived to take cues as to what they wanted to express or what came to mind as they were talking to me.

The openness with which I approached the interviewing technique is perhaps an aspect which, upon reflection, posed certain difficulties. My original intention was to discern what the participant first brought up when I used a ‘tell me about’ or ‘how would you describe’ question advocated by Charmaz (ibid). These descriptions would, I thought, aid in shaping my next question. This is perhaps not a conventional ‘interview’ format as it is popularly understood. Furthermore, the problems presented by my interpretation of Charmaz’ (ibid) guidelines were of having to think of the next question as well as listen and analyse as the interview was in progress. I had to ensure I listened fully, whilst digesting both what the interviewee was saying and also thinking of successive questions.

My decision to hold more than one interview with each participant meant it was not a rushed process, even though I had to think very quickly about successive questions during an interview. Conducting up to three interviews enabled me to pursue ideas I had not thought to ask in the first interview; but, also, it offered the chance to ask about anything that, upon reflection, I had not listened to as fully as I had liked to. By listening, I refer to taking time to consider the emotion or idea they were expressing and asking more about what certain things meant to them. Indeed, this is what Charmaz (ibid) espoused. Listening, I concluded, could potentially be hindered by having to think ahead to the next question. For instance, I regret not having tuned in a little more to Pauline’s talk of enrichment. Indeed, it would have been useful to have understood what she meant by ‘enrichment’ and what it meant to her as well as trying to empathise with the associated feelings she was describing as she spoke.

In retrospect, spending so much time trying to discern parity between participants may have also impeded my listening fully to individual concerns. I was, particularly in the first round of interviews, occupied with discerning cohesion across participants. The ideas forming in my mind and in early memos were those derived from earlier participants. It would, perhaps, have been preferable to not have tried to discern consistency across the participants. I came to understand that they presented a more heterogeneous group than I had anticipated. Moreover, interview questions devised from the answers of the previous participant were not always especially relevant to the next participant. However, I did manage to achieve flexibility and craft my questions around what seemed to speak to their own experiences and how they saw themselves in their time on the course.
7.6 Issues relating to the writing of the literature review

Issues concerning when to turn to the literature and opacity within methodological texts have already been addressed. However, producing the literature review itself presented certain issues for consideration. Again, guidelines in Grounded Theory methodological texts are vague and non-prescriptive.

From having turned to the literature after data collection and analysis, I would argue that literature aids in one’s thinking about data and analysis in alternative ways. For instance, I devised the idea of ‘channelling’ using a metaphor of being pushed through or squeezed. This was not explicitly drawn from extant literature. However, if I had been immersed in literature at the same time as the data collection and analysis, I might have looked at the general idea of resisting in a slightly different way. For example, the idea of a narrative that is being presented regarding ‘resisting’ and not being submissive in relation to overarching cultural narratives of feminism and empowerment might have led to my considering Pauline’s talk in another way. Then, of course, the analysis would have been flavoured by this way of thinking and the conceptual terms used in this literature. Another example would be that if I had adopted the idea of ‘presentation of self’ the construction of the categories and putative concepts they indicated would be different, again. In the case of the latter, I might have turned my focus to ways of presenting self on the course and possible tensions concerning the feeling (indicated in Pauline’s interviews) that one’s voice might be considered ‘challenging’ and ‘strong-minded’.

One aspect that Charmaz (ibid) may have understated in her texts is that there will be multiple genres within extant literature which are founded upon differing philosophical approaches. She concedes that a literature review will need to abide by the genres within disciplines as though she considers there to be one ‘genre’ per discipline. She has not especially addressed the possibility that there may be multiple ‘genres’, or that different paradigms can converge on a particular topic within a broad area such as education. Indeed, when considering self and identity, some researchers may be bent on examining change and perhaps linearity, whereas others may think more in terms of identity construction and fluidity. As such, they are not of the same ilk. This makes their integration with the Grounded Theorising potentially quite complex.
7.7 Summary

In sum, Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology is a way of thinking about data rather than a method to be observed in an entirely technical way. The technical aspects were, indeed, the most reassuring aspect in the early stages. Having gone through the entire process, it is evident that much flexibility is required. In the future, I would heed this from the start of the analysis whilst refining my use of analytic memos so that I can remain anchored. A combination of the diagramming containing short memos and advanced memos written as a storyline did aid my navigation through the data and analysis, though this will improve, no doubt, through further experience. Ultimately, I consider the methodological procedures as a matter of preference for the individual researcher and the research interest, provided the approach to thinking about data is aligned with core Grounded Theory precepts. What I did find most inspiring was the creativity afforded by Constructivist Grounded Theory accompanied by the development of certain ways of maintaining a plausible argument of one’s interpretations.
Conclusion

I deployed Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of participants’ subjective experiences. I was enticed by the possibility of constructing an understanding of what participants felt and ‘discovering’ what was important to them, rather than deciding what their concerns were at the outset. I was mindful that I wanted to go beyond rather clichéd ways of using ‘self’ and ‘identity’ in this study. Moreover, this would surpass static descriptors from participants of what their ‘identity’ was. Instead, I sought an understanding of self and identity in connection with the way the degree programme in question was experienced by participants. My findings in this respect have been presented in the form of a ‘grounded theorisation’.

The journey towards the understandings which comprise the ‘grounded theorisation’ has involved a great deal of absorption in and dissection of the methodology. The practice of Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology is not clear cut and necessitates much unpicking from methodological texts. The principles underpinning the methodology require careful consideration, particularly when implementing coding procedures, in order to achieve the distinctly ‘interpretive’ coding germane to Constructivist Grounded Theory. Indeed, it would be quite easy to divert from the tenets of the methodology if merely grouping for topics.

Through unravelling some rather opaque methodological texts, I have arrived at an understanding of what Charmaz (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) sought to achieve with Constructivist Grounded Theory. There are, however, several crucial points, as I have argued in this thesis, when her guidelines leave a novice Grounded Theorist abandoned. Having observed Charmaz (ibid) guidelines, it was only towards the end of the process of data collection and analysis that I achieved a clearer understanding of the centrality of memo-writing to the construction of the grounded theorisation. Moreover, the iterative process whereby diagrams are compared to memos became clearer through its practical implementation. During immersion in the analysis, I experienced much uncertainty as I was mindful of having to remain faithful to the tenets of the methodology. However, keeping these tenets firmly in view meant the practical implementation had to be deliberated over at length. Indeed, streamlining the data analysis and grouping for topics in the manner of more traditional qualitative approaches would have been more straightforward. However, any approach which diverted from the ‘initial’ and ‘focused’ coding procedures would have ultimately been at odds with the tenets of Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology which had spurred my interest at the beginning of this study.
While my initial rationale for using Constructivist Grounded Theory was to go from what inheres in the data rather than view the situation through extant lenses, my immersion in the workings of Constructivist Grounded Theory over the course of the journey has lead to my becoming more circumspect in this regard. My thoughts have altered somewhat with respect to whether a concept can be purely ‘data-driven’. It is evident that Charmaz (ibid), herself, advocates the gradual integration of concepts from extant literature with concepts generated from Constructivist Grounded Theory coding procedures. Thus it would seem that she believes it is not concepts in literature which drive the analysis, but the techniques of comparison and the scrutiny of one’s coding which lie at the heart of the methodology. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether or not this occurs at a certain point in the analysis. Moreover, thinking in terms of whether something is ‘actually there’ in the data, or not, can, perhaps, raise thorny issues regarding the manner in which the researcher can gain an understanding of that which is under study. In particular, is the methodology predicated on ‘grounding’ in the data, in realist terms, following an earthly-bound metaphor; or is it more the case that, provided the inferences made are supported by the data in plausible ways, ‘grounding’ can be considered to have been achieved? This has not been resolved in the thesis and connects with wider intractable debates that the methodology has prompted: questions of ‘forcing’ versus ‘emergence’ continue to occupy second generation Grounded Theorists (see Morse, 2009).

The ‘initial coding’ process does aid in deciphering certain constructs in the data and the examination of how phenomena are described by participants. Indeed, Constructivist Grounded Theory is oriented towards understanding participants’ perceptions of what is going on and how they act on the basis of this. However, initial coding was highly uncomfortable as it involved my trying to keep the data ‘grounded’, or connected very closely to the data, whilst simultaneously striving to construct a broader understanding of the whole. Furthermore, making the leap from ‘initial coding’ to ‘focused coding’ is not an exact process. Embarking on the integration of categories generated from initially being very close to the data was especially challenging. The strategies delineated in chapter three were developed to address such issues.

It was once I had achieved an overarching and reasonably cohesive understanding, generated largely through a process of ‘free writing’, that I could return to the transcripts and find more in the data than I had originally identified. Perhaps I had become ‘sensitised’ in light of the overarching meaning that was building in the diagrams and memos. However, I can appreciate, retrospectively, that this is why the overarching meaning ought not to be arrived at prematurely, but constructed in a painstaking way through paying close attention to words and phrases in the interview transcripts. I have argued in chapter seven that, without
assistance from concepts developed in extant literature, it is challenging to arrive at broader concepts if using a purely data-driven approach based on the splitting and merging of categories.

I am doubtful as to whether Constructivist Grounded Theory is amenable to streamlining or ‘sanitising’, so to speak. In more scientific terms, the robustness which one might seek resides in the supporting of one’s inferences with written memos. Importantly, memos contain codes which are woven into a story line which represents the researcher’s understanding of participants’ experiences. Despite the existence of such practices oriented to showing the connection between the data between the data and the researcher’s interpretation, it cannot be deemed a technical procedure, nor could it be replicated by others in a uniform manner. Moreover, the iterative process demanded by the methodology, requires tolerance of messiness, false starts and ambiguity. However, this flexibility could be considered a virtue: one has to become closely acquainted with or ‘immersed’ in the data through repeated readings and reconstitution of putative categories. I look forward to developing this way of thinking about data in future interpretive studies.

The understanding I have arrived at through the data-driven analysis is represented in the ‘grounded theorisation’ which constitutes the findings of this study. It paints a picture of participants ‘operating within constraints’, subsuming the key sub categories: ‘resisting being channelled’; ‘containing’; ‘monitoring and securing’; ‘forging a path’; ‘connection through shared commitment’. I consider my inferences surrounding participants’ understanding of themselves within the situation to be closely supported by the data. A degree of integration was achieved in the analysis as ‘operating within constraints’ seemed a common process which unified their experiences. Each different experience could be understood in terms of the key subcategories subsumed by ‘operating within constraints’.

A relatively diverse picture is painted in terms of participants’ trajectories into Higher Education. Further, the subcategories represent variations in the ways the constraints are handled and the way they pertain to certain ‘selves’ acting within the situation. While, in the main, the subcategories relate to individual concerns, particularly the way obstacles are circumnavigated by each participant, ‘containing’ denotes a more general process, abstracted from the individual. The subcategory, ‘connection through shared commitment’ spoke of a more collective concern than the other subcategories. The story that can be told from the ‘grounded theorisation’ was that this group of participants had constructed a way of operating. While this was more of an overtly practical nature for some, the recounting of practical strategies developed to deal with the demands of being on the course were, I
inferred, interlaced with varying descriptions of self and ways of being that they had imagined for themselves.

Variation was discerned across participants’ talk regarding how personally injurious experiences on the course were. For instance, Pauline’s three interviews threw light upon how being a student on the course could have quite a profound personal impact. However, of pertinence to the categories presented in the grounded theorisation of chapter four, was that the way she had imagined being at University did not align with what she felt she had to be in order to deal with the challenges of the circumstances. For others, what became apparent in the analysis of the data was that they had developed their own strategies for circumventing obstacles. Furthermore, as participants relayed their experiences, their fears and motivations could be seen in the context of the journeys they were taking. As such, there was a slightly different emphasis for each participant upon what frustrated them and how they thought of themselves as they confronted the challenges. Certain issues were heightened, such as the need to block out every day irritations in order to stay on track to reach that final hurdle of the submission date.

Much of the participants’ talk, their descriptors of self - including what they are not - is linked to self and identity. What can be discerned in the ‘grounded theorisation’ in chapter four is that choices made and the way they respond to course demands is linked to how they think of themselves. Indeed, certain selves such as the ‘bloody-minded’ self seemed to take precedence once the decision to temporarily abandon one’s ideals had been reached. However, a slightly clearer connection to the notions ‘self’ and ‘identity’ occurred when the ‘grounded theorisation’ presented in chapter four met extant literature in chapter six. This was the stage in the thesis when extant concepts could be considered in light of the findings of this study.

The literature centring on ‘identity work’ and ‘framing oneself as’ has, to some extent, helped to inaugurate certain aspects inhering with the subcategories of the grounded theorisation. I do concede, however, that the connections between the categories which constituted ‘operating within constraints’ only resonated faintly with such extant ideas in the literature. It was possible to make out, albeit tentatively, the way that resisting, developed in chapter four, could be married with the extant concept, ‘identity work’. This synthesis lead to consideration of how a student might be struggling to maintain a consistent identity or perhaps one that is palatable amidst turbulent times. The ‘grounded theorisation’ put into focus the reaction or response when a participant felt pulled by the pressures within the situation in a direction which challenged personal ideals. This reaction was most striking when the participant felt
coerced into acting in a way which felt out of keeping with existing beliefs about how one should be when studying in Higher Education. Another extant concept which resonated tentatively with the ‘grounded theorisation’ of chapter four was ‘framing’ self ‘as’. The idea that there was a shared commitment on the part of the participants to ‘getting through’ had already been identified in the grounded theorisation presented in chapter four. Indeed, a sense of resignation to this was betrayed by seemingly defiant phrases such as “so be it”. However, this understanding could be extended by the extant concept of ‘framing’, proposed by Capps (2010), whereby participants thought of themselves ‘as’ one thing or another as they engaged in certain courses of action and decision-making processes.

- The implications of the findings of this study for Higher Education Institutions

The findings of this study, or the ‘grounded theorisation’, have implications for Higher Education Institutions enrolling part-time, mature learners. Studying the perceptions of learners without a definitive conceptual framework, or without the researcher having decided beforehand what participants’ concerns are and how they should viewed, offers valuable insights. The avoidance of overlaying preconceived ideas on data collection and analysis affords in-depth understanding of how learners experience their time on the course, in their own terms. Building on what participants say in lengthy interviews, in the painstaking fashion demanded by Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, helps the researcher to place participants’ commitments and actions in context. This also yields greater understanding of their reactions as it is possible to hear their sense-making of the situation they are in. The study has shed light upon the way part-time mature learners can experience their time on the course in terms of constraint.

It is quite illuminating to hear how these learners present themselves in lengthy interviews as they are taking a certain course of action or reaching a particular decision. For some, such as Pauline, this has become consolidated into what could be considered a particular stance, as seen across her interviews, and she has shown how it has impacted upon her emotionally. Her constructs revolve around the idea of ‘us’, the group, versus ‘them’, the university staff in general. All learners interviewed speak of a protecting element as they face the demands of the course. One protective mechanism is ‘blinkering’ oneself, so to speak, to anything which may impede the clearing of the final hurdle of submitting the last assignments. Moreover, whilst there were varying personal goals and motivations, there is an alarming sense that this
group of learners feel they also have to be very steely. This staunchness, for some, is manifested in the way they resist or fend off an affront to their ideals, perhaps leaving these intact so they can be realised in the future. For others, there may be a slightly different emphasis. Indeed, some were primarily concerned with accepting that the austere circumstances meant taking a resolve to ‘get through’.

Within the ‘grounded theorisation’, it is starkly apparent that the challenges of working alongside a part-time degree are compounded by certain practices of the institution which, perhaps unintentionally, serve to disregard the individual journeys of these learners. What is highly conspicuous is the frustration that can be experienced when one is perceived as insignificant and anonymous in the eyes of the university, or when one’s professional experience is so unusual in the university’s eyes that it is pushed aside. The findings suggest that greater consideration ought to be given to the way learners, as individuals, can be recognised for what they wish to gain from their experience in Higher Education and what they bring to it. In addition, the streamlined approach which the learners describe in terms of ‘getting through’, or ‘getting over hurdles’ might have repercussions for self and identity, or at least, as illustrated in this study, the ‘selves’ they bring to the situation and are created in response to that same situation. As such, the findings point to a requirement for a greater appreciation of the impact of difficult circumstances upon learners.
References


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Appendix 7i

‘Free-writing’ exercise:

This is a study of...

...a set of mature students who are on a course at a University. They feel an identity as part-time and not 18. The key part of their experience is about carving a space for it (originally defining a window but then a window usually has bounded edges and this one is definitely fluid!). Although fitting ‘it’ in relates to time taken up for studying in the evenings and weekends, coming to lectures when other daily demands encroach, there is a more emotional component to it relating to how much it should take up, how much they have decided it ought to take out if their life, when to get excited about the future etc. One major aspect is that no matter what they feel, there are various constraints which overshadow whichever route they would like to take. Feeling a sense of ‘my means’ or ‘what’s possible’ is about being in a particular situation that makes certain options inevitable. It extends to a sense of getting it done, needing to almost step in for oneself and say, ‘look, time is of the essence here I’ve worked too damned hard for this to not graduate in July. My means and what’s possible is also about looking at the course as something to get around – an obstacle – an option or stepping stone that helps one to get to where one wants to be. In this instance - and this is the experience that is the most difficult to integrate – one aspect that comes through strongly is a sense of journey and feeling quite small in the face of this. Associated with this is an identity statement about ‘there’s so much out there to explore’ and ‘I’d never be so arrogant as to say I knew everything’.

There is a sense of frustration concerning these constraints. When the constraints are seen as imposed by the university, it is about ‘being cheated’. Other family demands squeeze the role and time for oneself to a minimum – this then makes one examine one’s proficiency in that ‘needed’ and more ‘natural’ role i.e mother, carer. Not fulfilling that role lead to guilt and then anger at being squeezed. The university is imposing constraints which are not necessary while, at the same time, expecting a certain degree of proficiency. A statement such as “I know you can all get firsts” is a statement of expectation that then leaves no room for that student who has a particular set of circumstances. There is no recognition of hardship in ‘the system’ but just a final grade.

Related to the ‘hope’ of finding what one wants and sense of living up to a role is a sense of wanting to find an opening, complaining, feeling that there needs to be an ‘opening’ as a
student with particular needs. This is a presentation of someone who is different, who doesn’t need to be treated as an 18 year old, but has seen a way.

Interestingly, how one feels one will look to universities is a matter of not being ‘proper’, not having done it the right way. My degree, although it is a first, is not the same as a first degree held by a “proper” traditional student. When talking about their achievement, who recognised/anointed it? – their mothers. Comparison – ‘you did better than your brother, he only got a non-honorary degree’….expectation/belief – ‘of course you got a first’

Returning to that matter of carving out a space, there is also the aspect of keeping it controlled and contained. The fear is that it will start to get beyond what is acceptable and start to change the dynamics of relationships as it may start to seep into evenings and change one into something that wouldn’t be acceptable i.e workaholic. This is particularly apt for those who have taken on the courses in a bit-by-bit fashion.