

Discovering Constructivist Grounded Theory's fit and relevance to researching contemporary mental health nursing practice

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KEY WORDS

Constructivist Grounded Theory, contemporary mental health nursing practice, developing partnership, developing understanding, virtue ethics, therapeutic relationship.

ABSTRACT

Objective

This paper explores the Constructivist Grounded Theory research methodology informed by Charmaz (2006). Comparisons are drawn between the Constructivist Grounded Theory position and the ethical principles of Deontology, Utilitarian, Virtue ethics and fidelity that inform contemporary mental health nursing practice. Conclusions are made between the relative fit of the interpretivist nature of constructivism and contemporary mental health nursing practice. The aim of the paper is to describe the synthesis that exists between Constructivist Grounded Theory as a research methodology and its consistency with contemporary mental health nursing practice.

Primary argument

Constructivist Grounded Theory as a research methodology is an appropriate and consistent approach to use when researching in the area of contemporary mental health nursing practice.

Conclusion

This paper explores the origins of Constructivist Grounded Theory and the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism and constructivism. Comparisons are drawn between the ethical principles that inform contemporary mental health nursing practice and relative fit between the interpretivist nature of constructivism and the contemporary nature of mental health nursing practice. Concluding that Constructivist Grounded theory as a research methodology is an appropriate and consistent approach to use when researching mental health nursing practice.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to describe the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach as described by Charmaz (2006) which was used as part of a PhD study to investigate the process of therapeutic engagement and professional boundary maintenance by mental health nurses. The interpretive nature of this theoretical perspective is consistent with contemporary mental health nursing practice from a post-modern perspective (Laugharne and Laugharne 2002; Corey 2009) where the mental health nurse seeks to understand and work with the client's perspective and has close alignment to the ethics and principles that underpin contemporary mental health nursing practice.

Constructivist Grounded Theory as a qualitative research methodology is explored in greater detail, with comparisons being drawn between the ethical principles of Deontology, Utilitarian and Virtue ethics that inform contemporary mental health nursing practice. The relative fit between the interpretivist nature of constructivism and the contemporary nature of mental health nursing practice are also explored.

The researcher – a practising mental health nurse and academic has had an interest in how clinicians manage the professional boundary for many years before researching in this area. Therefore the researcher does acknowledge their own subjectivity in that they cannot be distanced from the research. However using a constructivist approach to research fosters reflexivity on behalf of the researcher, culminating in the co-construction of a theory that is a combination of the researcher and the participant's stories and views. Charmaz (2006, p.16) outlines the importance of having a broader definition of the concepts of 'theory' when considering the development of a grounded theory and argues that an interpretive 'definition of theory emphasises *understanding* rather than an explanation. The important distinction being made here is that an interpretive theory relies upon the researcher's interpretation and analysis of the data and seeks an understanding of the social phenomena rather than an explanation or prediction of events.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

The Constructivist Grounded Theory research approach is informed by Kathy Charmaz's work from 1994 through to the release of her book *Constructing Grounded Theory – A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (2006). However Grounded Theory as a methodology has existed for some time (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded Theory is a research approach which has its roots in both positivism and pragmatism. Its theoretical base is derived from symbolic interactionism and social constructivism (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Bowers 1988; Blumer 1969; Mead 1932). Symbolic interactionism is recognised as an interpretivist methodology supported by pragmatism as the basis of the theoretical perspective (Blumer 1969) and (Mead 1932). Similarly Constructivist Grounded Theory takes an epistemological position of subjectivism, meaning that we understand that researchers cannot be completely objective, rather it is acknowledged that an interrelationship exists between the researcher and the participant (Mills et al 2006). Ontologically a relativist position is assumed, meaning that we can only understand concepts such as reality and truth within a broader framework, which is contextually positioned within a certain time, place, and culture (Charmaz 2006).

Methodologically Constructivist Grounded Theory is interpretivist in nature, meaning that the notion of a shared reality is interpreted or discovered by the researcher and that '...reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts.' (Charmaz 2000, p.523). Hence this perspective denies the existence of an objective reality, rather assuming that reality, society and the self are socially constructed and that we make sense of our world by developing shared understandings through social interaction with others also known as social constructivism (Gardner et al 2010). This particular approach facilitates a researcher's understanding of how people negotiate and manipulate social structures; how a shared reality is created and how meaning is developed through the social interactions with others within defined contexts.

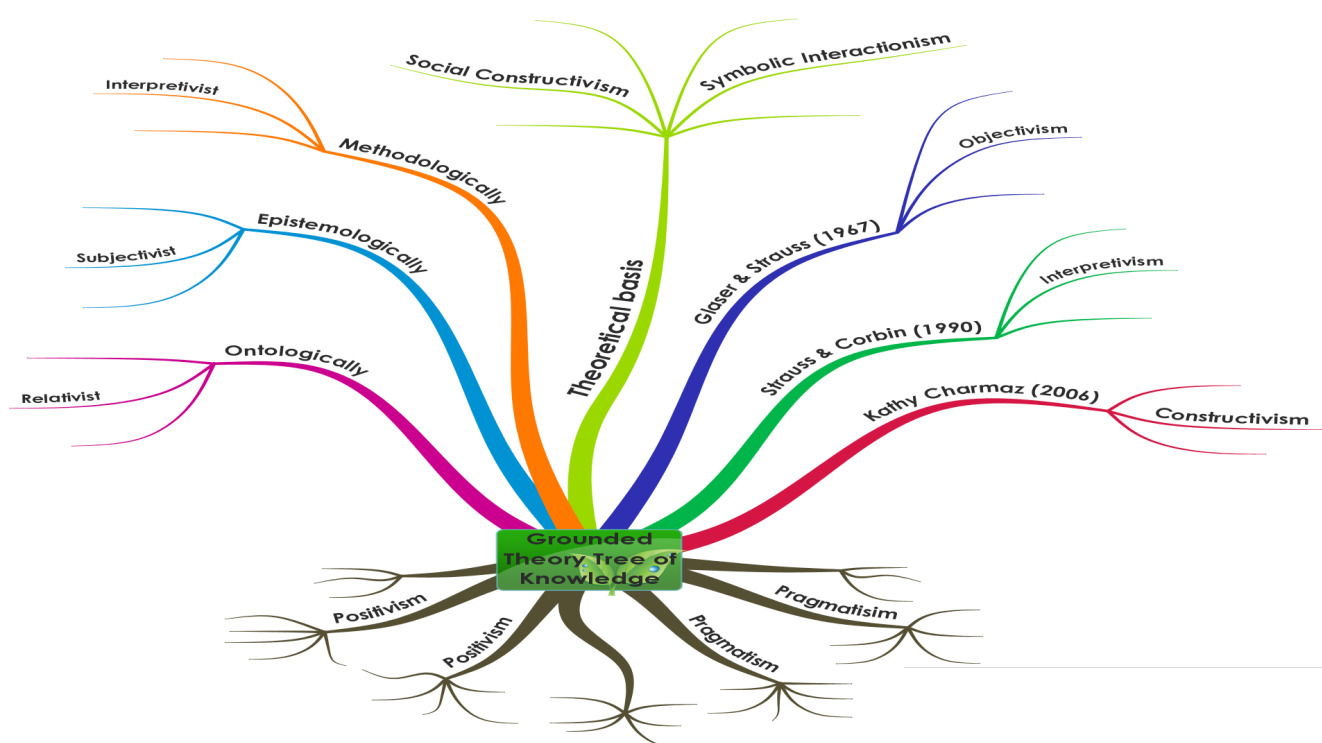
The development of Grounded Theories

Grounded theory as a research approach was developed by Glaser and Strauss and illuminated in a book titled *"The Discovery of Grounded Theory"* (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The publishing of the discovery of grounded theory and their approach challenged the dominant quantitative research paradigm. Classical Grounded Theory (McCutcheon 1997) discovered by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 developed systematic methodological strategies that could be used by social scientists to investigate social or psychological processes. Today classical Grounded Theory can be considered more of an objectivist approach to generating mid-range theories.

Over the next few decades Grounded Theory was adapted as subtle shifts in epistemological positions began to influence theorists and researchers alike (Bryant and Charmaz 2007), adjusting their positions to suit the sociological context and nature of the specific research being conducted at the time. In 1990 Strauss and Corbin developed the grounded theory approach further in their book *"Basics of Qualitative Research; techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory"*. This particular grounded theory approach has been referred to as contemporary grounded theory (Fedoruk 1999). Straus and Corbin (1990) argued that they had further developed grounded theory. However Charmaz (2006) would argue that their approach is more aligned to verification and that it is now '...known for its rigor and usefulness, but also for its positivistic assumptions' (Charmaz 2006, p. 9). Second generation Grounded Theory developed by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 built upon the early Grounded Theory approach and moved the method more towards an interpretive approach to developing theories.

Throughout the 1990's and early into the 21st century Charmaz (2006; 2005; 2004; 2000; 1995; 1995b; 1990) has continued the evolution of grounded theory developing a constructivist approach to Grounded Theory research, which stresses flexible strategies (Creswell 2008), and acknowledges the role of the researcher as an active 'passionate participant' (Lincoln and Guba 2000, p. 166), who pays attention to relationships, the voices of participants and ensures the co-construction of a theory of the social phenomena. Figure 1 below is a diagrammatic representation (Grounded theory tree of knowledge) of the authors' view of the theoretical position that supports the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach and how Constructivist Grounded Theory has further developed from the original grounded theory approach.

Figure 1: Grounded Theory Tree of Knowledge



Constructivist Grounded Theory

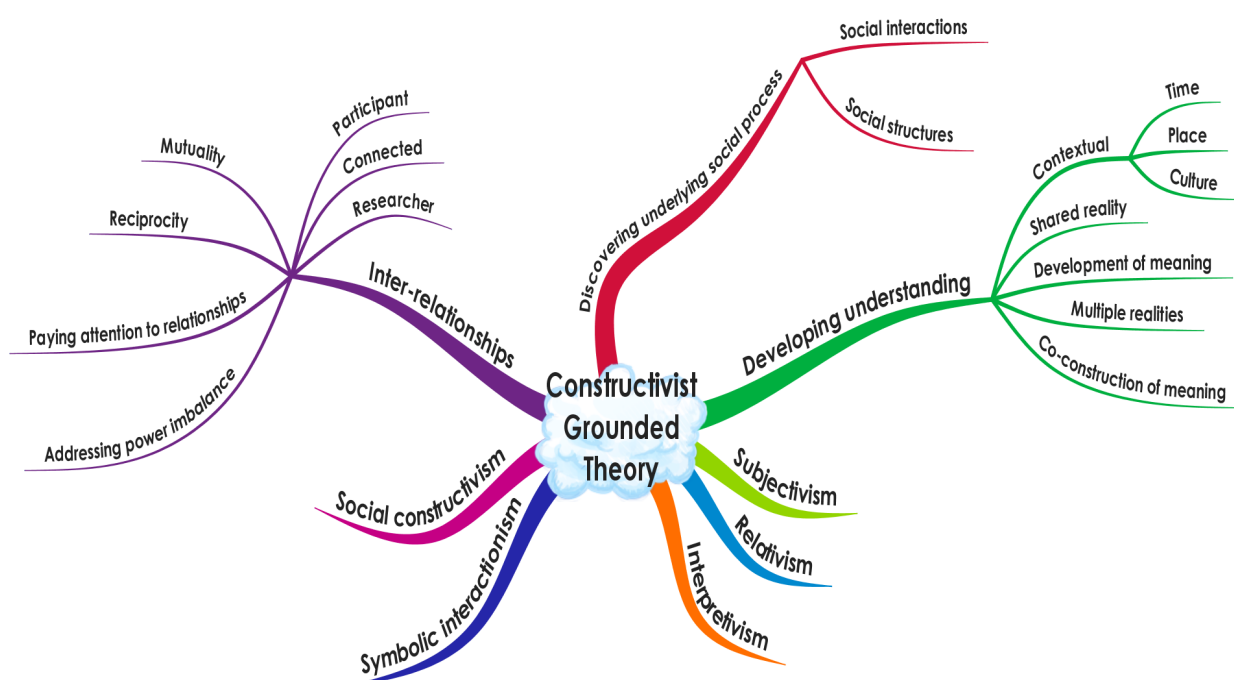
In 1994 Kathy Charmaz named her research approach as Constructivist Grounded Theory, situated between positivism and post modernism (Charmaz 1995). Asserting that as researchers we are a part of the world that we study and the data that we collect. We therefore construct our theories through our past and present interactions with people, perspectives and research practices. Some researchers (Clarke 2003 and Mills et al 2007) have argued that Charmaz was more aligned to post modernism at this time and ‘...was living out a post-modern position’ (Clarke 2003, p. 62) theoretically speaking, but ‘...was reluctant to name it as such’ (Mills et al 2007, p.74). However Charmaz is not a postmodernist, but does share some assumptions with them (Charmaz 2009 personal communication).

Charmaz has accepted the invitation from Glaser and Strauss (1967), to use the original grounded theory approach in a flexible way. Furthermore stating that she adopts a more flexible approach to data analysis by ‘...creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 9) and that a constructivist approach to developing a grounded theory has ‘...[loosened] the method from its positivist roots, [and] moves it into interpretive inquiry, [however] preserves and enhances its pragmatist heritage’ Charmaz (2008, p. 133).

Constructivist grounded theorists recognise that mutuality exists within the research relationship and that the relationship is privileged where a connection exists between the researcher and the participant in this context and must be respected as such by the researcher. Charmaz (2008, p. 133) puts it this way ‘*Entering the phenomenon shrinks the distance between the viewer and the viewed. Subsequently, we might better understand our research participants multiple realities and standpoints*’.

Constructivist Grounded Theory aims to develop a detailed understanding of the underlying social or psychological processes within a certain context (Charmaz 2006), by exploring in more detail social interactions and social structures. From a research perspective the notion of a shared reality is discovered by the researcher through the interview process with research participants (Charmaz 2000). Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach allows the researcher to focus attention on the underlying social process that might be occurring in any given context (Charmaz 2006), which may not be immediately apparent but emerges over time as the data is analysed and theorising begins.

Figure 2: Constructivist Grounded Theory



Developing understanding and the development of a mid-range theory is an interpretation made by the researcher, informed by the data and '...is contextually situated in time, place, culture and situation' (Charmaz 2006, p.131). Furthermore, Charmaz emphasises the voices of the participants and the views of the researcher as a co-constructor of the developed theory through the exploration of multiple realities and the development of understanding and meaning. Therefore, interpretations are a shared reality and ultimately the co-construction of a theory has a combination of the participants and the researchers' stories and views. The research process is therefore a dynamic interaction between the actors and the researcher with the views of the researcher incorporated with the understandings that have been developed, and shaped as more and more data is collected and analysed. Figure 2 represents this author's interpretation of the Constructivist Grounded Theory position as conceptualised for this research. Focusing on discovering the underlying basic social process, developing understanding of mutual realities, and emphasis on inter-relationships.

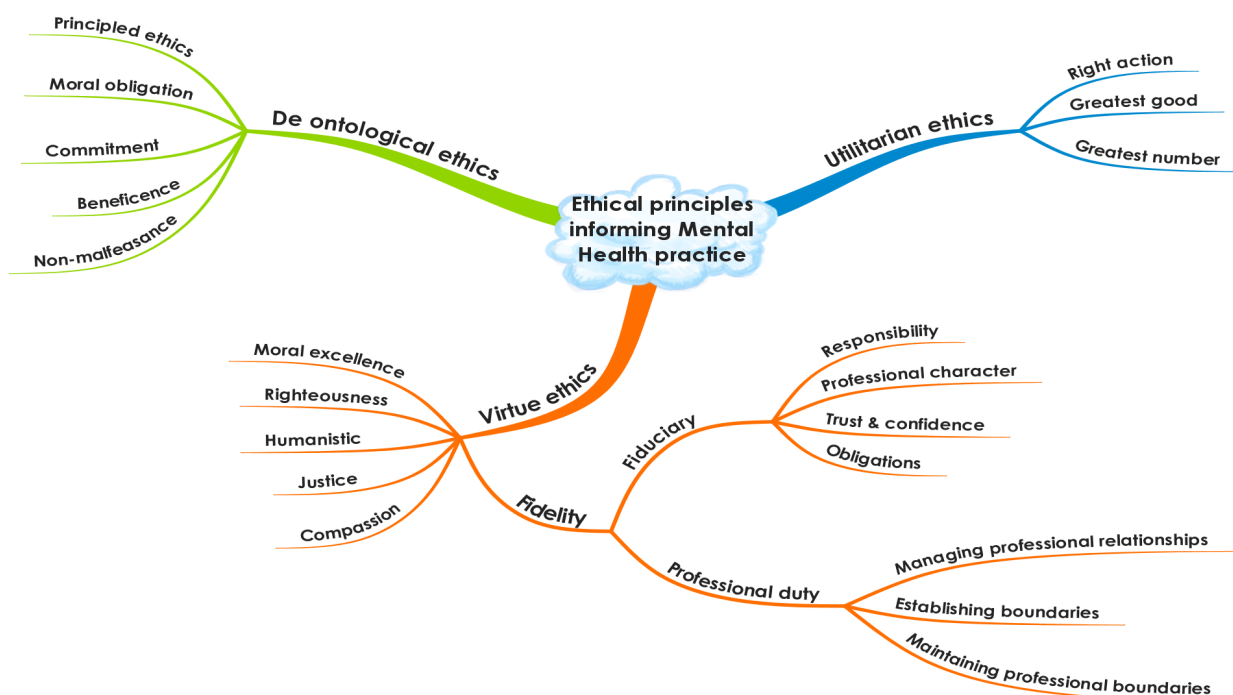
Ethical Principles Informing Mental Health Nursing Practice

Exploring the ethics and principles that inform the practice of mental health nurses led the researcher to determine that a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach was appropriate for this particular research. Deontological, Utilitarian and Virtue ethical theories have been identified as applying to all health care professionals (Morton 2004). The ethical framework that informs professional mental health nursing practice is also derived from these three ethical positions. Deontological ethics is derived from the Greek word *deon* meaning duty. It describes a professional's moral obligation and commitment or principled ethics. Deontological ethics is the basis on which the concepts of beneficence and non-maleficence or 'doing good things' and 'doing no harm' are based. Utilitarian ethics is premised on the concept that the right action is the greatest good for the greatest number, or a set of rigid rules that should be adhered to in order to ensure that there is maximum benefit for as many as possible, for example all clients will be treated equally.

Virtue ethics on the other hand, are concerned with the practice of moral excellence or righteousness and 'offers a more humanistic and realistic perspective' (Morton 2004, p.257). Virtue ethics are underpinned by three principles: justice, compassion, and fidelity. For the purpose of this study fidelity or fiduciary duty was considered as the most important principle as it relates more closely to the concepts of professional duty within the therapeutic relationship and the establishment and maintenance of professional boundaries.

The fiduciary duty within the professional relationship could be considered under either virtue ethics, for example based on the *professional's character*, or also under deontological ethics, specifically beneficence (to do good or the right thing). A fiduciary relationship exists '...when one party, the fiduciary, accepts the trust and confidence of another party' (Jorgenson et al 1997, p.51). Therefore, a fiduciary duty or responsibility from a professional's point of view is understood to mean that the professional, is acting as an agent for the client and assumes a special relationship of trust, confidence, and responsibility in obligations to their client.

All health professionals, but more importantly mental health professionals due to the vulnerable nature of the client group, are considered as being obliged to discharge faithfully a responsibility of trust toward their clients. A connection also exists between the fiduciary relationship and the boundaries of that relationship in that '...the range of permissible behaviour on the part of the fiduciary is often narrowed, and the boundaries within the relationship [are] viewed as less permeable' (Jorgenson et al 1997, p.51). Hence it is clear that each mental health professional is responsible for not only maintaining the therapeutic relationship associated with trust, confidence and fiduciary responsibility but to also be responsible for ensuring that the appropriate boundaries are maintained. Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach to research the process of how mental health nurses establish therapeutic relationships and how they maintain the professional boundary seemed consistent with the fiduciary ethical position. Figure 3 represents this author's interpretation of various ethical principles related to contemporary mental health nursing practice as discussed above.

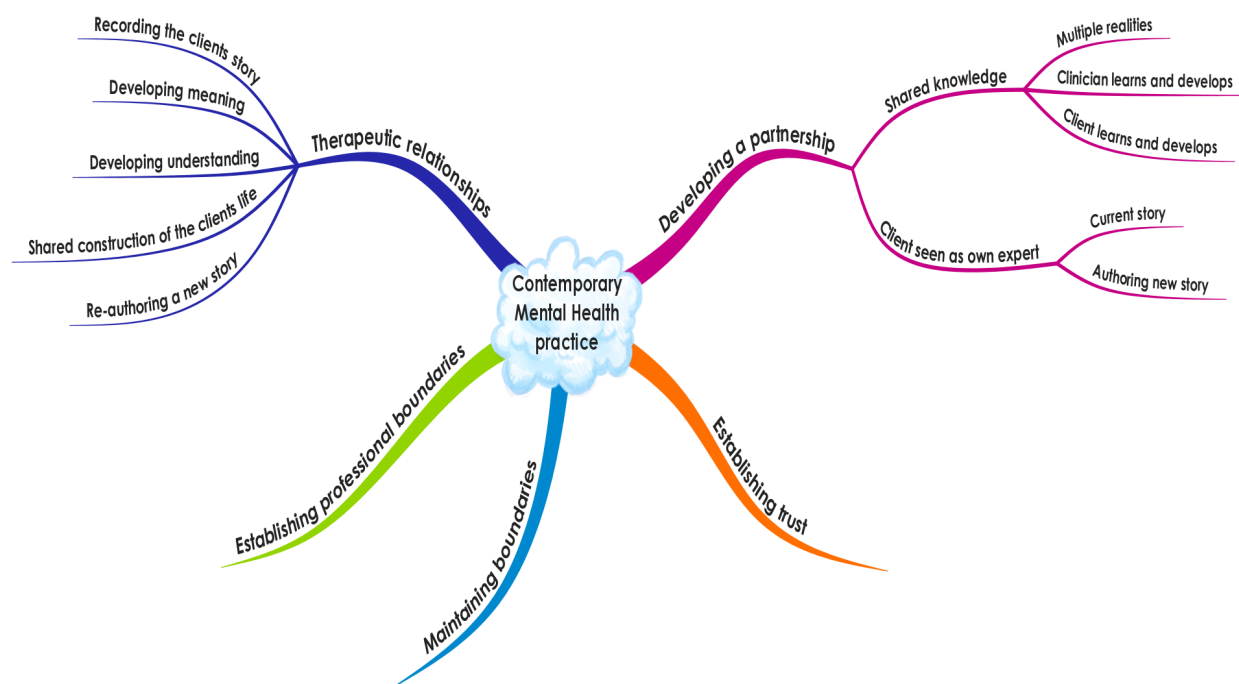
Figure 3: Ethical principles informing contemporary mental health practice

Contemporary Mental Health Nursing Practice

Contemporary mental health nursing practice is premised on establishing trust and the establishment and maintenance of the professional boundary. Once trust has been established and boundaries determined a safe space is created for both the clinician and the client to exist. When the clinician and the client operate within the boundaries of the professional relationship a level of predictability occurs in terms of what behaviours are acceptable and expected (Peterson 1992).

The therapeutic relationship facilitates the development of meaning and understanding as the client's story is told and recorded. With the telling of the client's story, the naming of events (actions) within a certain context, meaning and understanding is further developed until a shared position of mutual understanding is developed between the client and the mental health clinician. Whilst it is recognised that the clinician brings a multitude of knowledge and experience to the relationship they cannot know the client's personal perspective until their story is shared. The interaction between the client and the clinician is central to the process of developing this shared construction of the client's life and multiple realities. Through the process of telling and retelling their story a new shared construction is developed. In this way contemporary mental health nursing practice and Constructivist Grounded Theory share some assumptions with the postmodern position. For example the client is seen as the expert of their condition, where their thoughts and behaviours are interpreted within a social and cultural context, and where the client can re-author or develop new understandings about their own life through the retelling of their story.

Developing a partnership is not a new concept but does build on the notion of the therapeutic relationship, where knowledge is shared and multiple realities are acknowledged. In this space both the clinician and the client learn and develop through the process of the therapeutic relationship. Through this partnership the client is seen as the expert of their own condition and it is here where the client and the clinician work together to author a new story. Figure 4 below represents the philosophical assumptions that underpin contemporary mental health nursing practice within the postmodern paradigm.

Figure 4: Contemporary Mental Health Nursing Practice

Constructivism and Contemporary Mental Health Nursing Practice

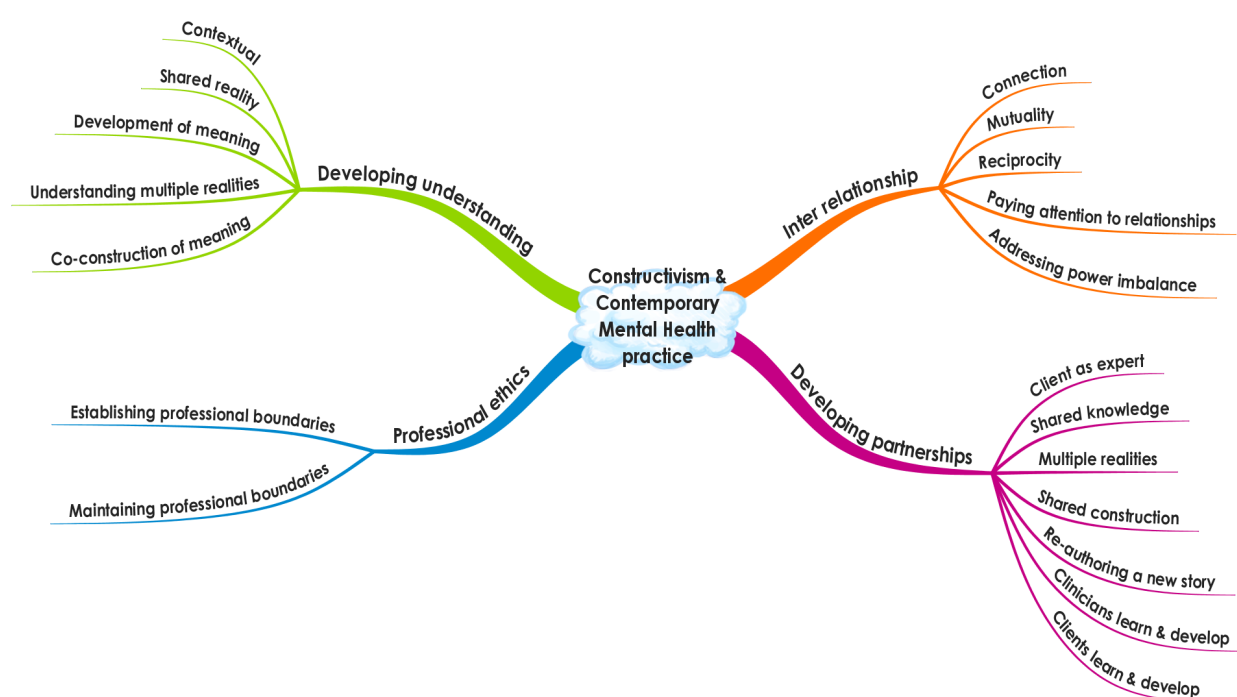
Merging the comparable elements of constructivism and contemporary mental health nursing practice will now bring this discussion to a close. Firstly inter-relationships, both constructivists and mental health clinicians are interested in forming a connection with interview participants or clients. They understand that their relationships have an element of mutuality and reciprocity. They know that they must pay attention to the relationship and must attempt to address the existing power imbalance.

In developing partnerships mental health nursing recognise that the therapeutic encounter is based on a partnership. Where the client is viewed as the expert of their own condition as interview participants are seen as the ones who share their knowledge as multiple realities begin to emerge and a shared construction develops. Whether, that is about a new understanding of a social phenomena or the re-authoring of a client's new story. Through the process of the partnership the mental health clinician recognises the potential through every therapeutic encounter for them to learn more about their craft and through reflection to learn more about himself or herself as a therapeutic agent. Similarly, Charmaz (2006) shares the view that the researcher cannot be completely distanced from research participants, and acknowledges that the researcher is connected with the actors and develops more understanding of the phenomenon under study with each person being interviewed. In a similar way research participants and clients learn more about themselves through the therapeutic encounter or by being a part of the research process and reflecting on the content of the interview conversation.

Whilst it is acknowledged that a constructivist researcher and a mental health clinician are connected to their research participants or clients there is always the need for appropriate professional ethics to be demonstrated in terms of establishing boundaries and by maintaining professional boundaries. Finally in terms of developing understanding constructivists and mental health clinicians recognise that the development of meaning and shared realities are contextually based and that multiple realities are possible as we strive to co-construct a sense of meaning.

The Constructivist Grounded Theory approach was used to explore the phenomenon of how mental health professionals successfully establish a therapeutic relationship and safely negotiate the professional boundary. As the interpretivist nature of constructivism was consistent with contemporary mental health nursing practice where the mental health professional seeks to understand and work with client's perspective. From this point of view the client is seen as the expert of their condition. The interaction between the mental health professional and the client facilitates mutual understanding which is commensurate with the constructivist approach between the researcher and the interview participant as they explore a mutual understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Figure 5 below brings together the philosophical positions of constructivism and contemporary mental health nursing practice.

Figure 5: Constructivism and contemporary mental health nursing practice



CONCLUSION

This paper brings together the philosophical positions of constructivism and contemporary mental health practice. Comparisons between the ethical principles that inform contemporary mental health practice and the relative fit between the interpretivist nature of constructivism and contemporary mental health nursing practice have also been explored.

The use of Constructivist Grounded Theory informed by Charmaz (2006) as a research approach has facilitated an investigation into how mental health clinicians engage clients in a therapeutic relationship and how they maintain the professional boundary. Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology is consistent with contemporary of mental health practice and is a suitable framework for ongoing research in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers who are interested in developing shared understandings of sociological phenomena, especially in the area of mental health research should consider the constructivist position as a research methodology. Particularly Charmaz (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory research approach.

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