

The Grounded Theory Approach: Experience from a Covid-a9 Study

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has caused many changes, including the conduct of research. We conducted a grounded theory study to develop a model explaining how people exercise their social responsibility during the early COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia and encountered many challenges throughout, therefore we want to share lessons learned from this study as novice researchers. We conducted twenty-three (23) in-depth interviews (IDI) through phone calls and one face-to-face IDI. Adults from various backgrounds were selected purposively based on their experiences during the pandemic like being parents, taking care of the elderly, hosting weddings or religious events, having business or holiday trips, working in the healthcare setting, and individuals who were tested negative for COVID-19. As our study progressed, theoretical sampling was applied by interviewing individuals who could provide data to address gaps in the emerging analytic theory. Interview guides were revised several times to clarify issues from previous interviews and initial data analysis. After each IDI, we had debriefing sessions which helped in: improving our skills and seeing the unforeseen challenges in conducting IDI and gaining immediate reflection on emerging data. Data analysis was done concurrently involving coding, grouping, constant comparison, memo-ing and sketching. We used Microsoft Excel to facilitate team members in analysing data simultaneously in a shared master file and transferred it to NVivo for final management of the dataset. The codebook was developed to standardize definitions of all codes. We referred to works of literature and had discussions among multi-disciplinary team members to incorporate different perspectives and views, and to resolve disagreements. Memo-ing and sketching were done to record ideas, discussions, and thoughts during the study. We proceeded with model construction and sketched several drafts before concluding the final abstract model which explains that the public's adherence to preventive measures is a result of negotiation between perceived societal role responsibility and perceived risk of infection. This was an iterative process. Challenges we faced were: respondent issues like difficulties in getting respondents; busy respondents; lack of rapport and technical issues like poor phone line connection; noisy surroundings. Getting respondents was difficult initially as our circle of friends was small and most were busy in healthcare premises during the time of research, but we managed through good networking with friends and community. Furthermore, respondents were occupied with work from the home schedule and not committed to being interviewed. When we conducted IDI through phone, respondents were reluctant to share their experience sufficiently due to lack of good rapport establishment; we couldn't grasp respondents' body language in order to interpret their thoughts and feelings. Poor phone line connection and noisy surroundings caused inaudible recording. We strategized and made prior communication with respondents, we relistened carefully to the recording, and rescheduled IDI sessions to be done in respondents' own comfort. Doing a grounded theory study for novice researchers during the pandemic was challenging especially in collecting and handling overwhelming data. However, we managed by reconciling different views and ideas through continuous discussions guided by the research question, experienced qualitative researchers' feedback, and literature reviews. Valuing diversity and seeing things through a constructive lens was also important in this journey.

Keywords: Grounded theory, social responsibility, COVID-19, journey, lessons learned, challenges