

Situational Analysis: An Introduction

Thomas Lister, PhD student (2nd year)

University of Exeter

Supervisors: Prof Christabel Owens, Dr Ginny Russell, Prof Susan Kelly



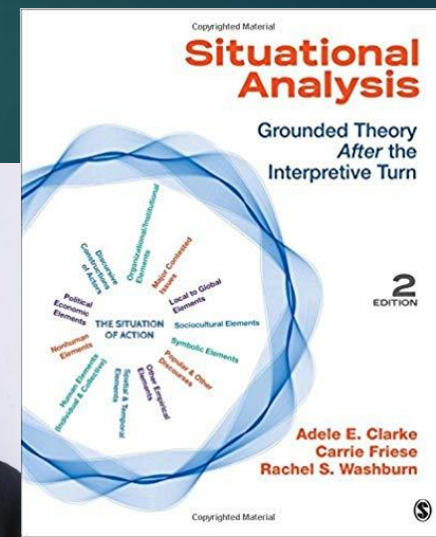
Overview of talk

- ▶ Brief introduction to situational analysis
- ▶ How I came to use the method
- ▶ Illustrations of situational analysis
- ▶ Some reflections on using it



What is situational analysis?

- ▶ A method of qualitative analysis that has evolved from grounded theory (GT)
- ▶ It was developed by Adele Clarke (2005) and colleagues (2018)
- ▶ It involves situating social phenomena within the 'big picture' (Park, 1952)
- ▶ Replacing the action-centred 'basic social process' focus of GT with 'the situation' as the key unit of analysis
- ▶ This is done by creating and analysing three kinds of maps:
 1. Situational maps
 2. Social worlds and arenas maps
 3. Positional maps



Conceptualising the situation

- ▶ 'The Situation' is a **sensitizing concept** (Blumer 1969)
- ▶ The situation is **the contextual whole** in which a person, object or event is situated – the 'big picture'
- ▶ This can include human, non-human and discursive elements, amongst other things (e.g. political, symbolic, temporal)
- ▶ Dewey (1938: 66-68), Goffman (1964: 133), Mills (1940: 904) have written about the **importance of situations** and how they warrant **sociological analysis** in their own right
- ▶ A situation is not a single event, encounter, moment or sequence of events – but it could include all of these
- ▶ It is an **emergent and loosely bounded entity** to be empirically grasped across the trajectory of a project (Clarke et al., 2018: 49)



Mapping the situation

1. **Situational maps** lay out the major human, non-human, discursive and other elements of the situation of inquiry and provoke analysis of relations among them
2. **Social worlds and arena maps** lay out the major collective groups (organisations, social worlds) and the arenas of commitment with which they are engaged in
3. **Positional maps** lay out the major positions taken and *not* taken in the discussions and debates on important issues



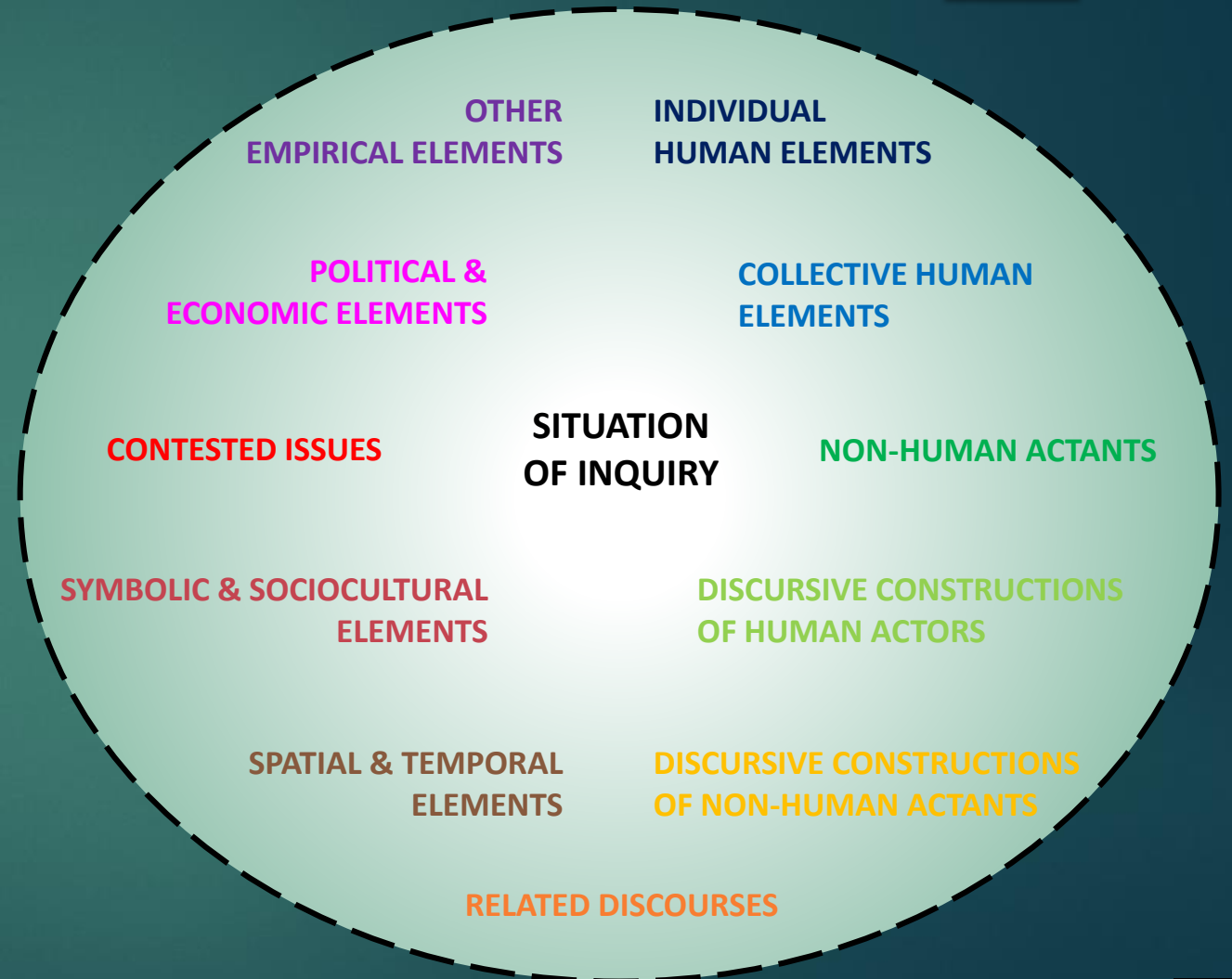
How did I come to use situational analysis?

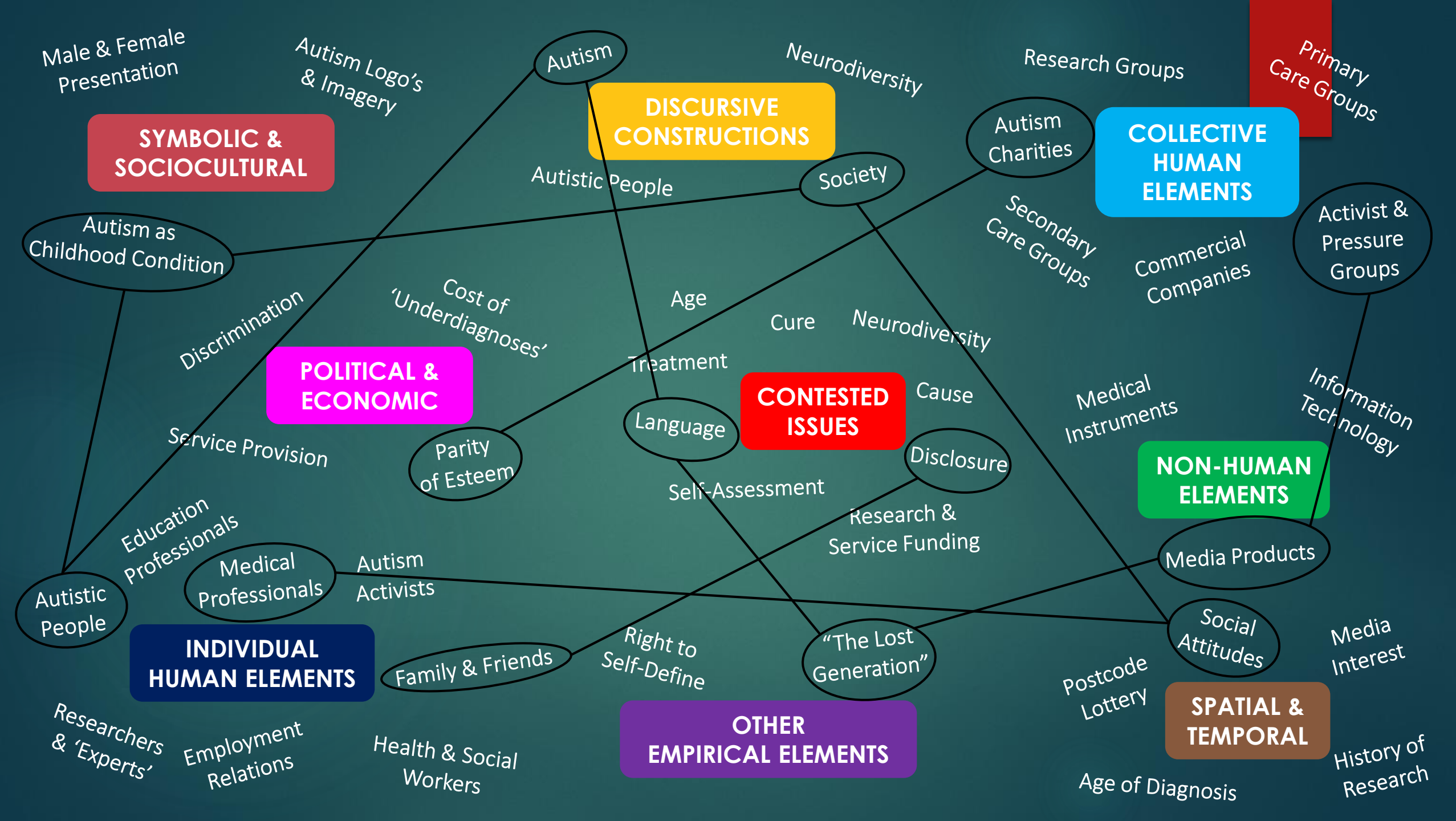
- ▶ PhD exploring autism diagnosis and self-identification in adulthood
- ▶ Conducting semi-structured, qualitative interviews
- ▶ Incredible complex phenomenon, drawing on different types knowledge, experiences and encounters with other people
- ▶ Method to manage the messiness and analyse the big picture



1. Situational maps

- ▶ The analytical focus is the situation broadly conceived (Clarke et al., 2018: 127)
- ▶ The goal is to descriptively lay out these elements and detail the relations among them





1. Situational maps

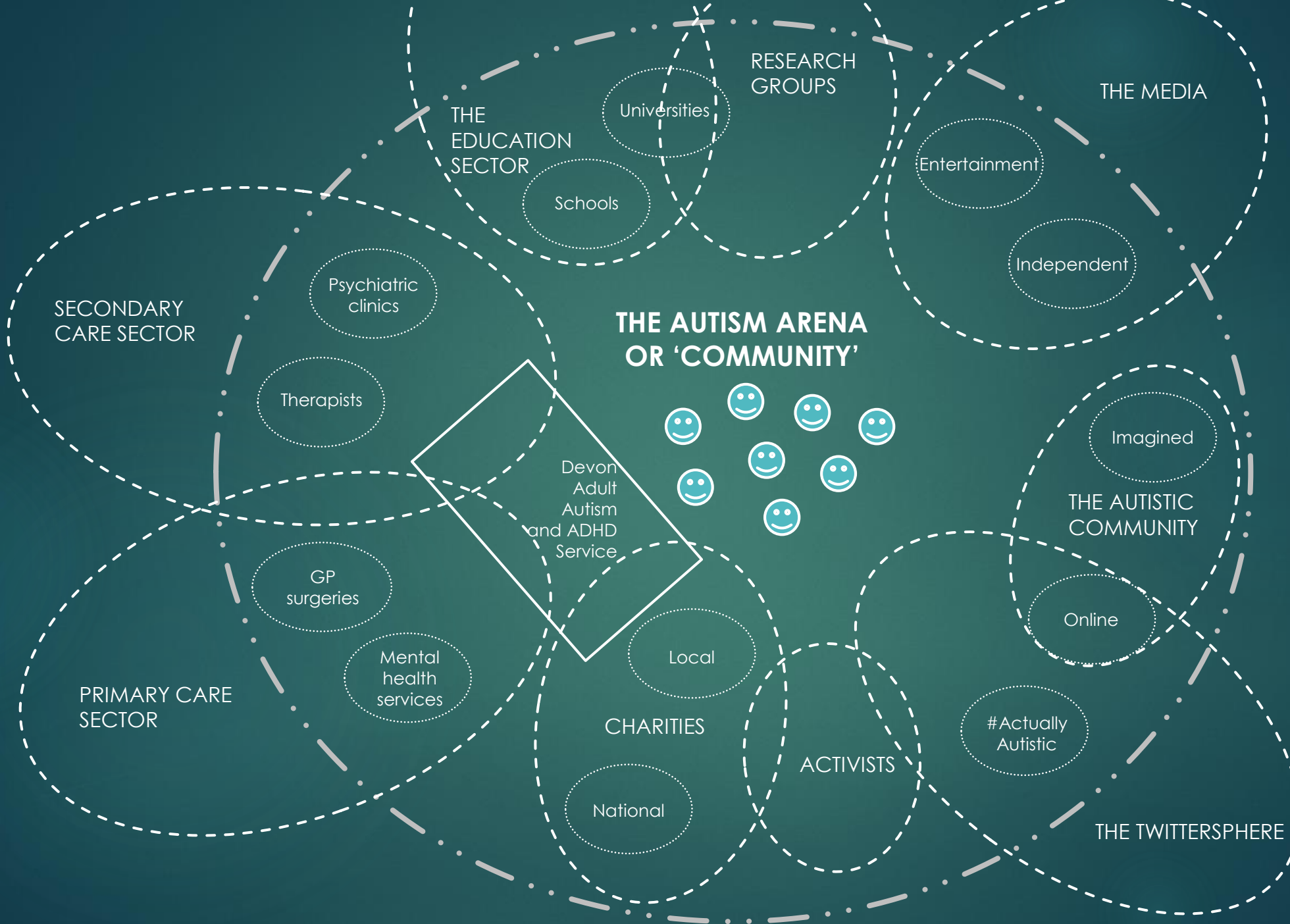
- ▶ Easy to create and play with
- ▶ Helps to systematically analyse the data
- ▶ Prompts theoretical sampling
- ▶ Prevents analytical foreclosure




2. Social worlds and arenas maps


- ▶ These maps focus on the relational ecology of collective entities found in the situation (Clarke et al., 2018: 150)
- ▶ Social worlds are collective groups with a shared perspective or identity committed to collective action (Strauss, 1978)
- ▶ Arenas are made up of multiple social worlds all committed to particular issues
- ▶ The goal of these maps is to locate the analysis at the organisational, collective level









Arena




Social World



Sub-World



Key Organisation



Implicated actors
(e.g. autistic people)

Social worlds and arenas maps

- ▶ Offers a meso- or macro-level perspective
- ▶ Brings the 'social' into the picture
- ▶ Highlights the 'conditions of possibility' (Foucault, 1988)
- ▶ Powerful representational device

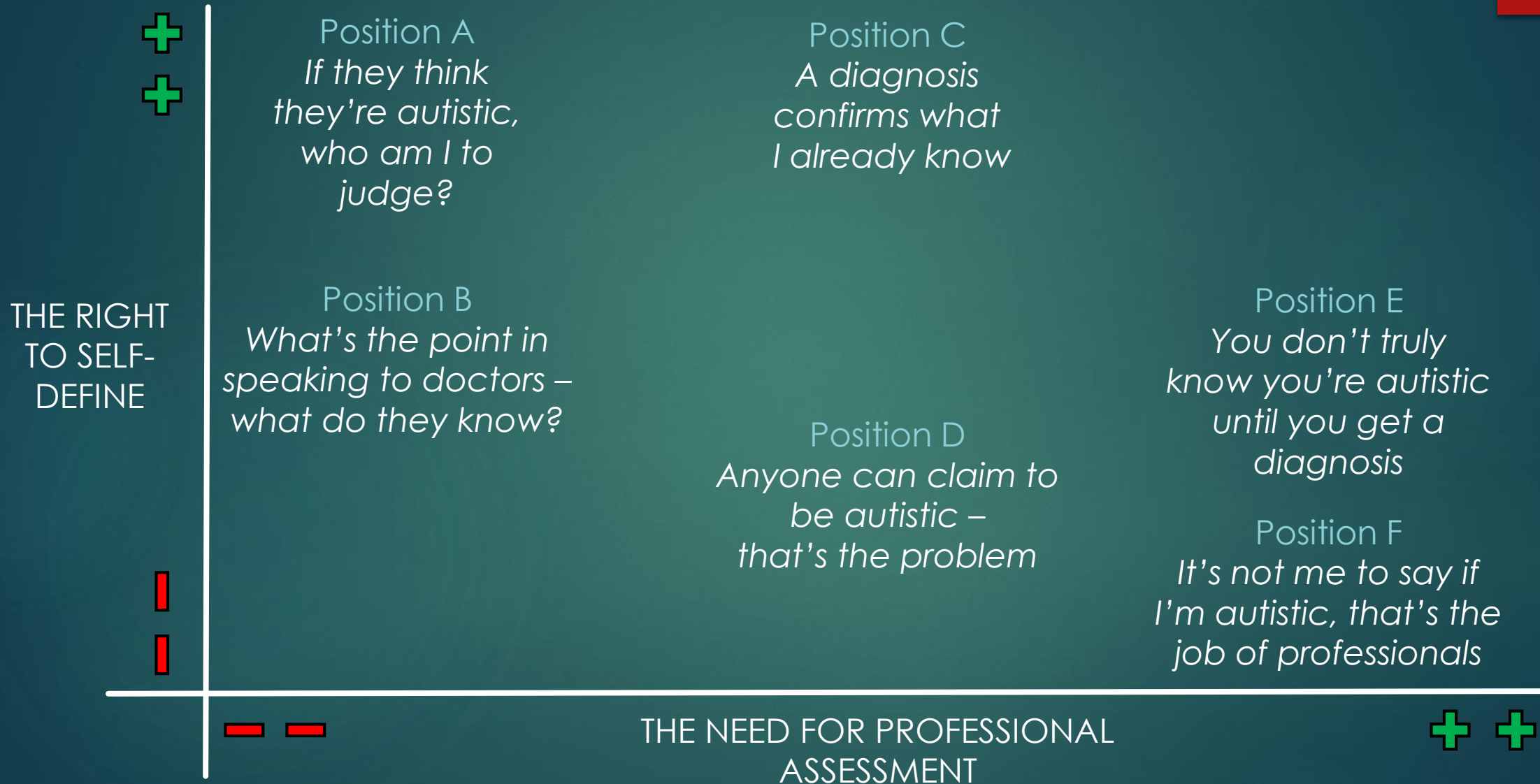


Positional maps

- ▶ This is where **discourse analysis** is integrated with GT (Keller, 2013)
- ▶ Positional maps focus on the **discourses** found in the situation (Clarke et al., 2018: 165)
- ▶ They lay out the **major positions** taken and *not* taken in the data
- ▶ **Disassociated from actors** because people and groups can often hold competing and contradictory positions



Claiming the label 'autistic'



Positional maps

- ▶ Highlights the heterogeneity of positions taken
- ▶ Highlights silences in the data
- ▶ Useful tool to construct a narrative about discourse



What do these maps do?

- ▶ Situational maps provide a strong idea of the **key elements** in the situation
- ▶ Social worlds/arenas maps provide an insightful portrayal of the **major collective entities** in the situation
- ▶ Positional maps provide a dynamic understanding of the **key issues** in the situation and the **positions** taken and not taken
- ▶ Together, these constitute the situation of inquiry broadly construed



When to use situational analysis?

- ▶ Useful for answering 'how', 'what', 'who', 'where, 'when' research questions
- ▶ Suitable method of analysis for interview, observational, ethnographic, document and discursive materials
- ▶ Less compatible with narrative approaches (e.g. autoethnography, narrative analysis)
- ▶ Has already been used in a wide array of disciplines
(<https://study.sagepub.com/clarke2e/student-resources/exemplars-of-situational-analysis-projects>)



Final thoughts

- ▶ Situational analysis broadens the analytical focus of GT
- ▶ The situation is the key unit of analysis
- ▶ The analyst constructs the situation of inquiry using 3 types of map (situational; social worlds & arenas; positional)
- ▶ Understanding the elements in the situation and their relationality is the primary goal
- ▶ The outcome being a 'thick analysis' (Fosket 2015: 196)



References

- Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Clarke, A. (2005). *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clarke, A., Friese, C., & Washburn, R. (2018). *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Interpretive Turn* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York City, NY: H. Holt.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault* (pp. 16-49). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Fosket, J. (2015). Situating knowledge. In A. Clarke, C. Friese, & R. Washburn (Eds.), *Situational Analysis in Practice: Mapping Research with Grounded Theory* (pp. 195–215). London: Routledge.
- Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goffman, E. (1964). The neglected situation. *American Anthropologist*, 66(6), 133–136.
- Keller, R. (2013). *Doing Discourse Research: An Introduction for Social Scientists*. London: Sage.
- Mills, C. W. (1940). Situated actions and vocabularies of motive. *American Sociological Review*, 6, 904–913.
- Strauss, A. (1978). A social worlds perspective. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 1, 119–128.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

