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 of 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

Adapted from Clarke et al. (2018)
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
THE AUTISM ARENA OR ‘COMMUNITY’

PRIMARY CARE SECTOR
- GP surgeries
- Mental health services

SECONDARY CARE SECTOR
- Psychiatric clinics
- Therapists

EDUCATION SECTOR
- Universities
- Schools

RESEARCH GROUPS
- Entertainment
- Independent

CHARITIES
- Adult Autism and ADHD Service

ACTIVISTS
- Devon
- #ActuallyAutistic

THE MEDIA
- The Autism Community
- Online

THE TWITTERSPHERE
- Imagined

THE AUTISTIC COMMUNITY
- Sub-World

Key Organisation
- Devon Adult Autism and ADHD Service

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’

Position A
If they think they’re autistic, who am I to judge?

Position B
What’s the point in speaking to doctors – what do they know?

Position C
A diagnosis confirms what I already know

Position D
Anyone can claim to be autistic – that’s the problem

Position E
You don’t truly know you’re autistic until you get a diagnosis

Position F
It’s not me to say if I’m autistic, that’s the job of professionals

THE RIGHT TO SELF-DEFINE

THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT
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](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


