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The Roots of Grounded Theory¹

Barney G Glaser, Ph.D.; Hon Ph.D.

I studied sociology at Stanford 1948 to 1952, which was partially fine but limited in those days. But then I knew I wanted to be a sociologist. Returning to the USA from the army in 1955 to study sociology at Columbia confirmed my goals. I bought the program 100% on doing sociology as my life work. All I do is sociology in every facet of life; work, recreation, family etc. My life is sociology driven and directed.

Now let me give you a quote from Barton's (1955, p.246) article of Paul F. Lazarsfeld [PFL], "Analyzing the logic of research operations to clarify concepts remained a key to PFL's life". It has been the key to my life also.

"All is data" – that now sloganized tenet of Grounded Theory [GT] - clearly came from PFL per Barton's words. Robert K. Merton's [RKM] brief flicker of light - to admit to emergence (see Barton, p. 255) - became the key to GT's theoretical stance.

The Four Dimensions of being a Sociologist

In buying the program 100%, I bought the four dimensions of doing sociology - autonomy, originality, contribution and the power of sociology. All dimensions are interrelated; they became a part of my sociological identity and led eventually to my originating GT. Now let's consider each of these dimensions of my training, how they affected me, subsequently found their way into GT and how they may serve as food for thought in your training.

Autonomy

PhD training is a training for autonomy. One becomes the doctor, so to speak. One claims one's own pacing. One claims one's own ideas and the connections between

¹ From a keynote presentation given to the 3rd International Qualitative Research Convention, Johor Bahru, Malaysia 23rd August 2005

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them. One becomes the theorist and/or research author. Therefore, one must stand on what one has said and achieved.

This puts a call on one's seniors, on faculty and the social structure of departments to allow the PhD candidate to do his own thing, irrespective of faculty and supervisor desires to have the candidate work on their ideas. It puts a call on author idol worship of "grand theorists"; it puts a call on theoretical capitalism; it puts a call on supervisor control and ownership of the candidate's work in favour of giving him/her full freedom and license. It is a claim that the candidate must stand for irrespective of senior or supervisor obstruction and efforts to the contrary. Try it; you will like it.

Please remember, I did my dissertation totally on my own on secondary data from the survey research center at the University of Michigan. It passed easily. My supervisor Hans Zetterberg was delighted. PFL was overjoyed by the core variable and the development of new method analytic techniques. RKM was confounded since it cast grave doubt on his famous paper; "Recognition in Science". My dissertation was published immediately, given the recalcitrant forces of action. It was requested, not sold by me – since I did not have a clue.

Throughout my whole training I resisted the efforts of both PFL and RKM to co-opt me to work for them and those who did were not very smart. I had no time for them personally, just their ideas. It was clear in RKM's writings on the sociology of science that the key to creativity was to study ideas with autonomous freedom in order to put them together by seeing the connections at will, hopefully, for maximum yield and creativity.

This PhD stance, of course, fed into my origination of GT. GT gives total autonomy, by the nature of emergent discovery and more PhD candidates can claim this autonomy through GT than do at this point. More can than do through other methods and consequent subservience to supervisor demands based on social structural power. As GT spreads through out the world, researchers are

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discovering this autonomy in their own departments. They are in demand for lectures and consulting. Supervisors become humbled, often with delight.

Originality

PhD candidates are supposed to produce original research with originality of ideas and methods. RKM clearly delineated the composition of originality. He said quoting the literature, "There is seldom an idea that hasn't been said before somewhere else. Originality comes with the putting together of ideas into new connections." Yes, I studied the sociology of science and wrote the famous paper on comparative failure in science. See my reader (Glaser, 1993).

RKM implicitly put a call on relevance with the new connections idea. I saw clearly that my research for a dissertation was generating a whole new and very relevant set of connections leading to a theory of recognition in science that was relevant, worked and fit. Probably that is why it was published so quickly. Virtually 75% of the chapters were published as papers. Earned relevance became a strong requirement of GT analysis.

This of course, fed into the origination of GT: It had to be field-wide with fit, relevance and workability (explaining what's going on). GT provides new (valid) categories and a theoretical interrelation between them based on theoretical codes (Glaser, 2005). I was the originator of GT as a discovery method; Anselm Strauss did not have a clue about these ideas on emergence (Glaser, 1992).

PFL of course seeded me with four important methodological beginnings. Firstly, the index formation model based on accumulation and summing of indicators from survey data to generate indexes or concepts is fundamental in GT. GT is just a simple index formation, inductive method based on using any type of data. That's all. Sorry qualitative researchers!

Second, PFL's discovery of the interchangeability of indicators used to generate concepts was major. No matter what indicators were used in multiples of three, the

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generated concept had the same relationship to other concepts. Based on this, he confessed to me one day in privacy, that crude indexes gave the same findings as elegant, perfected indexes based on latent structure analysis. So the latter was a waste and expensive.

With this notion I was off and running and further developed the analytic techniques of consistency analysis that I used with his elaboration analysis model and mine of theoretical saturation. The interchangeability of indicators and theoretical saturation subsequently became prime ingredients of GT procedures for generating substantive theory. These two procedures led to essential delimiting of research content, data collection and time for generating theory with completeness, depth and scope. It allowed dissertations to go very quickly, rather than take the laborious long time exhaustion always heard expressed by candidates (Glaser, 1978).

Third, PFL missed this one. So near and yet so far. He missed the constant comparative analysis approach (Glaser, 1978, chapter 9). It is so simple. At the time, in order to do a survey, a researcher from the Bureau for Applied Social Research would go into the field to do qualitative research on what to ask as questions in a survey; that is, as indicators. They summed the indicators with Likert scales into an index to get the concept. It never occurred to them to systematically and carefully compare the indicators' meanings to generate conceptual properties of the soon to become index or concept. The power of this procedure to generate theory is phenomenal. What a theoretical yield of discovery. What a miss! The constant comparison technique became the influential analytic procedure of GT to generate and discover theory.

Lastly, PFL showed clearly in the academic mind that core variable analysis explained so much of what is going on and resolved the main concern of the participants. Lazarsfeld and Thielens (1958) proved the core variable analysis model has great yield. I used it in my dissertation with the recognition index and it literally opened up the data to a plethora of findings about the quest and

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consequences of recognition. I transferred the analytic notion of core variable to qualitative data and did the book on the core variable "awareness of dying" (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). This book was a big hit. It became a classic and was subsequently published in several languages. Thus I made core variable analysis the key to generating GT. The core variable, as you know, is the category that all other categories and their properties are related to, and by these relationships explain what is going on to continually resolve a main concern (Glaser, 1978, chapters 4 and 6). Connecting these methodological ideas, of course produces the originality emergent in the GT method. All this was beyond Anselm Strauss because he was an expert in qualitative analysis – which means mostly description.

Truth is stranger than fiction, yet fictions rule the world as they are built into and are a part of vested social structures. Thus socially structured vested fictions are a functional requirement of formal organization and the social organization of life. The effect of these fictions often leads to a miss of what is really going on in a social arena. Thus these fictions usually lead to preconceived professional problems upon which to do research despite their non-existence.

I cannot count the number of PhD candidates, using the GT method, that have called me to ask what to do about researching for a professional problem that is just not there. I always recount the story about RKM when he had a large grant to study his theory of professions. He hired six PhD candidates to do the research. None got their degree since what they were to study, his theory of professions, yielded only independent correlations [no findings and no data]. What a tragedy!

To discover what is going on using GT is first to discover the problem or main concern in a social area - to discover it conceptually, which is not necessarily in the participant's view. Preconceived problems seldom, if ever work, unless fictions are needed; but not to worry, the discovered problem will, in the end, relate back to the

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professional one in some way. Again GT ensures originality on this dimension: the problem. What one is supposed to study does not often produce a study! Thus GT is exciting, motivating and fast as discovery emerges. Product proof is in the making. Discovering the problem is just the beginning of the originality in GT generation; subsequent to which is the discovery of new concepts and their connections which are then modeled by a theoretical code (amplifying causal looping, basic social process, typology, continuum, etc.).

Could I have done originality or origination of GT without my claiming my freedom and autonomy? No, I would have just been a pleaser of seniors. PhD candidates bring problems of autonomy to me constantly and I always answer the same thing. "Get the degree and you will be autonomous after if not before". See chapter six in the Grounded Theory Perspective (Glaser, 2003).

Contribution

PhD candidates are in training to contribute to science. They are supposed to innovate and to contribute to their field. I bought this aspect of the program hook, line and sinker immediately when entering the sociology department at Columbia University. I have, of course, by now succeeded in producing a series of about 20 books – both monographs and methodology. I have published many papers in peer review journals – too many to count. Two of my books have been translated into four different languages. As I have said, my dissertation was published immediately. *Discovery* (1967) has sold thousands of copies and still sells 39 years later. These publications have fostered the use of GT; correctly or not. I started Sociology Press to keep my books perpetually in print and to satisfy demand since typically publishers drop books after a few years. It also keeps me in touch with those doing GT throughout the world.

Thus the mandate to publish and therefore to contribute to the field at large worked in my case. Keep in mind, however, that I discovered in my dissertation that one achieves the most recognition not by publishing and

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peer reviews, BUT by being subsequently referred to, used and footnoted. The noted take the cake.

So the problem I confronted as a PhD candidate and you do too is how to get into print as fast as possible. Careers hang on it! Let me give you a few ideas.

First: you write papers for your Professor. Give me a break! What difference does it make what he or she says or how they grade it. For the autonomous PhD candidate, this is too particularistic and holds little or no career prospect – as yet. Better to send the paper to a journal for peer review and possible publication. Peer review notes will give the author knowledge of how the field will receive his work and what needs to be done to improve it. These are the true gatekeepers for a career in the “publish or perish” academic world. Why wait? Readiness is in the hands of peer review not a particularistic professor. Make every paper count and send it out there for the “test”. Submit, submit, submit! I required all my students to write papers for submission, NOT for me. It takes a clear view of one’s autonomy and originality to do this with hope of success, but many are pleasantly surprised. Remember, in the final analysis, you are being tested by the field, not your professors with their immediate social structural power.

Also, if your lectures are good enough to take your time, then take notes carefully, as you probably do, and write them up into a paper to submit. See if the class is worth it. I did it and was amazed at what others thought anonymously of RKM’s role theory, which I wrote up and submitted the American Sociological Review. It made me realize how important it was to ground concepts systematically from systematic research. I was told it was reified gibberish, by whom, I do not know. And don’t worry about intellectual capital; it is over-rated in the academic professions where one gives to the field as much as it can and will take. This is not heresy.

Also, two more grounded items to remember. First, when circulating a working paper for comments, never put on “citations only permitted with the permission of author”

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or “no parts of this paper can be used without permission of author”. Rather, say “when using parts of this paper please give proper citation and help yourself”. Be delighted if someone wants to quote you.

Second, there is no such thing as full coverage in GT, there are no misses. It is what you do that you offer as contribution - not what you did not do. Full coverage is impossible. Thus any senior colleague who points out misses is just wrong or off track, since he missed the fact that a GT fosters flooding out in all directions with general implications and research possibilities and new ideas. GT is very stimulating to what is next, not what is missed.

Built into the GT rigorous procedures package is the goal of ending the research – the generated theory – as a publishable product. It is a carefully delineated set of procedures for doing so. Otherwise why do it? And GT produces contributions to the field. So many PhD students using GT are being published; it amazes me. It is practically a sure thing to see one’s originality as fostered by GT reaching a wide public in whatever the field.

Power

The power of GT is phenomenal. Sociology itself is very powerful and GT, by discovering and conceptualizing latent patterns, potentiates that power. It is the mandate of the PhD candidate to use this power humanely, morally, as often as possible. It was my mandate. I use it everyday in every facet of my life, using GT studies I know of and doing GT all the time by keeping notes.

GT potentiates the power of sociology through its conceptual categories and their properties integrated into theory to explain the continual resolving of what is going on in an action area. The discovered categories have earned relevance with tremendous grab and endurance. They are remembered decades after their discovery.

This conceptual relevance provides high impact dependent variables to explain and vary a theory. GT’s discovered in vivo substantive categories have great meaning to people reading and using GT. They fit the

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action scene so that people can virtually see the GT in action and application. GT has much general implication; that is, one can see the application of a GT in many other substantive quarters. And with conceptual modification through constant comparison, one can use the GT in areas different than that in which it was initially grounded. See for instance, Wendy Guthrie's mystifying and pseudo friending in her study of client control (Guthrie, 2000). She found this in a veterinarian practice but it is seen everywhere.

GT grab can be favourably compared with immaculate conjecture of concepts generated by 'grand old men'. Deductive, immaculate conjecture, usually from logical deduction, often has little or no power since it is not grounded in data with earned relevance. Its use is preconceived and doomed to little or no relevance unless forced on the data. Witness again the professions study as featured in Glaser (1998, chapter 6). In order to avoid the miss of preconceived problems and concepts, PFL would always suggest running all items against all items to discover the patterns that emerged from multi-relationships and then write up the patterns.

GT conceptualization has tremendous grab. Its endurance and power overwhelms the power of description. Description is stale-dated soon after the research whereas conception goes on forever. The grab of GT is also found in its jargon. Many now give it lip service to justify and "OK" otherwise ungrounded qualitative research. It is powerful even at this rather "empty" level. As I have said it draws people from all over the world, by its excitement of discovery and its truth and its quest of appropriateness to the task. This worldwide use indicates both its power and adds to it. GT is powerful also in its ability to use all data and in its procedural pacing which allows the flex time we all need in PhD work. And, GT is powerful in its sure approach to achieving by doing its lock-step procedures for getting a research project finished. Finishing is necessary and very fateful for the PhD candidate.

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