



# GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

## An international journal

---

The Literature Review in Classic Grounded Theory Studies: A methodological note

*Ólavur Christiansen, Ph.D.*

December 2011

*Grounded Theory Review*, Vol 10 (Issue #3), 21-26

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://groundedtheoryreview.org>

---

Originally published by Sociology Press

<https://sociologypress.com/>

Archived by the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies

<https://www.mentoringresearchers.org/>

## **The Literature Review in Classic Grounded Theory Studies: A methodological note**

*Ólavur Christiansen, Ph.D.*

The place and purpose of the literature review in a Classic (Glaserian) Grounded Theory (CGT) study is to situate the research outcome within the body of previous knowledge, and thus to assess its position and place within the main body of relevant literature. The literature comparison is conceptual, i.e. the focus is on the comparison of concepts. The literature comparison is not contextual, i.e., it is not based on the origin of the data. This, of course, means that the literature comparison has to be made in a selective manner.

It is obvious that relevant literature for conceptual comparison cannot be identified before stable behavioral patterns have emerged. Therefore, it is obvious that these literature comparisons have to be carried out at later stages of the research process, and especially towards the end. This restriction with regard to preliminary literature studies does not prevent the researcher from carrying out literature studies in order to find a loosely defined research topic that fits to his/her interests. However, if the researcher believes either that he/she can derive the participant's "main concern and its recurrent solution" from this literature, or that he/she can ignore the empirical discovery of this "main concern" as the first stage of research, the choice of CGT would be meaningless.

To study the literature as the first stage of the research with the deliberate purpose to define the research problem is a common pre-framing solution. If this were the case, the choice of CGT would be a meaningless choice. If the researcher wants to preconceive the research problem, he/she should choose another research method. The researcher may preconceive the research problem by defining it in accordance with what he/she thinks is most relevant, or what the literature claims to be most relevant, or by spotting gaps in the literature in order to identify untested hypotheses. If a

researcher has decided to use Glaser's GT, a preliminary study of the literature in order to derive the research problem would be waste of time. The research problem, when empirically discovered from behavioral data, may be very different from what the extant or originally identified literature assumes it to be.

To avoid the preconceiving and tainting influences from pre-existing literature and pre-existing concepts during treatment of the data, it is recommended that no literature studies in related fields are carried out before the empirical data work is finished and the theory has been generated from the data. However, studies that have applied CGT in closely related fields of enquiry could give some clues. Reading of them is recommended but only after the core category of a study has emerged when coding of data for "emergent fit" could be an option.

Reading methodological literature does not need to be avoided. To read literature on CGT methodology may be necessary during the entire research process. It is even recommended to read totally unrelated literature or fiction, poetry or drama for analysing and recognizing behaviour patterns and their relationships. Systematic reading or "explication-de-text-reading" of unrelated literature in order to obtain general training in the discovery of behavior patterns and of relationships between these patterns is also recommended.

To facilitate an appreciation of the delimiting of the literature review, it may be helpful to review the reasons behind the delimiting of the study itself. Due to the choice of research methodology, the research has been delimited to the main concern and its recurrent processing or solving for the people being studied. Essentially, what this means is that in generating the theory, the researcher has taken the approach of delimiting the study to what is highly important and/or problematic for those being studied. The agenda of those being studied - their substantive interests - sets the agenda for the research. The research outcomes are grounded in this agenda. The use of this particular research methodology is rare, and it is in a sense "contrary" to the accepted view in its avoidance of a pre-framed "professional interest" perspective. It avoids "a priori" and favours the "a posteriori", especially regarding concept fit and the avoidance of delivering research

that is grounded in the agendas of the established professional research communities rather than in the agenda of those being studied. The standard “professional interest” approach for delimiting a research work is different. The standard approach attempts to delimit research to what is seen as professionally important and hence suitably-professionally problematic for the researcher and the research community involved. This may be due to attachment to a particular research methodology, or due to adherence to a particular research program and its particular heuristic and “hard core”. Thus, the agenda of the researcher or his/her research community sets the agenda for the research by pre-framing it from the perspective of their own research community. These researchers deliver research outcomes that are grounded in this research agenda. All research is grounded, but this is a different concept of grounding that has nothing to do with the meaning of the concept of grounding, as this term is used in a CGT study. The consequence of the standard approach means a pre-framed grounding in pre-existent literature, in a pre-determined theoretical perspective and pre-determined conceptual usage. Thus, there is much “a priori” in place before the start of research, and the “a posteriori” requirements are fulfilled by statistical testing or data description. Thus, the criteria for literature review easily become standardised. These particular standards for a literature review cannot apply to a CGT study. This is not because a CGT study is considered better – it is not considered better, it is just different.

The different research approach of CGT methodology also means that the outcomes of it conceptually may be very different from what is almost all-pervading in the literature. This also means that the potentials for discursive and meaningful comparison to other literature may be restricted due to some degree of incommensurability. This also means that saturation in the literature comparison will be more easily achieved. Saturation means that the addition of new literature to the literature review does not provide new or noteworthy conceptual properties, or new or noteworthy insights or perspectives. Usually, literature reviews of CGT studies are much shorter than literature reviews of more traditional studies. Firstly, it is delimited to the emergent concepts. Secondly, by saturation, the comparison delimits itself.

Besides being conceptual, a CGT literature review should be discursive in its comparing - it should not be merely passive-describing or listing. A discursive comparison is marked by analysis and analytic reasoning. It may correct the pre-existent literature according to grounded indications, and it may give directions for new research, also evidentiary research. A discursive comparison of the literature also entails finding indications of fit to concepts in the pre-existent literature that may indicate usability. As mentioned before, "fit" is another term for validity, but it means fit in action and usage, not via testing. In a discursive comparison it may become necessary whenever possible to synthesize much of the literature, and thus in a sense to transcend it. This synthesizing may be carried out in different manners. It may, for example, be carried out by delimiting a comparison to a group of paradigms or research programs. It may, for example, occasionally also be carried out by comparing just one particular piece of representative literature (an article or book) that is fairly representative of vast amount of literature. A discursive and conceptually delimited comparison to the literature also means a process that is somewhat coherent from topic to topic. Unavoidably, some issues that some readers might find relevant will be excluded, and some issues others might find less relevant will be included – given their theoretical or methodological perspectives. Thus, much literature will be reviewed without being included or referred to in the treatise. That literature is bypassed in this manner does not mean that it is considered less meritorious or less relevant in general. The opposite may actually be the case. It only means that it is just not considered important in the given context of conceptual comparison – a comparison that follows the chosen methodology.

Thus, the literature review and comparison will be conceptually and not contextually delimited. Conceptual delimiting means comparing emergent concepts - substantive codes, theoretical codes, conceptual hypotheses - to pre-existent concepts and hypotheses in existing literature. No comparison will be made to literature where conceptual relatedness cannot be found. In a sense, the compared literature is seen as new "data" to constantly compare to the emergent theory. It is seen as new "data" that may modify or refine the theory, as new "data" that may give new perspectives on the emergent theory and its prospective role

## **The Grounded Theory Review (2011), vol.10, no.3**

in the literature, as well as “data” that might benefit from a different perspective.

### **Author:**

Olavur Christiansen, Ph.D.

University of the Faroe Islands

**Email:** OlavurC@setur.fo

