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Book Review: *Grounded Theory: A practical guide* (Birks & Mills, 2011)¹

Astrid Gynnild, Ph.D.

What is grounded theory and how is a grounded theory study carried out? Several recent publications have been trying to answer these questions, building on a literature list on the topic that covers more than 40 years of research and scholarship. According to the authors, this book is aimed at beginner researchers, research students and experienced researchers from a variety of disciplines who are unfamiliar with grounded theory.

The first three chapters of the book deal with essentials, planning and quality processes of grounded theory research. Three later chapters deal with data collection, analysis and “theoretical integration”, and in the last three chapters the authors provide tips about presenting a grounded theory, evaluation and application of it and how it might be further contextualized.

The book aims to be an easy-to-read volume with learning objectives on top of each chapter, suggested reader activities, examples of memoing, and many figures and tables. So far, so good. The authors have obviously put much work into the overall design of the book to make it as reader-friendly and easily accessible as possible. As experienced teachers in nursing they seem to be aware that providing an introduction to a new field is a challenging task, no matter the topic.

However, as a “Practical Guide” in grounded theory, this book does not resolve any of the hitherto unresolved issues in the split grounded theory domain; rather, the book contributes to even more confusion. In their foreword the authors state that they “hope to demystify some of the complexities associated with grounded theory”. Their intent is to provide a balance between engaging in what they call the

¹ Birks, M. & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded Theory: A practical guide*. London: Sage Publications.

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internal intellectual dialogue that is required and “meeting the practical requirements of undertaking research at a graduate level”. Their ultimate goal appears to be of a bridge building character; they want “to provide a balanced view of grounded theory methods, without adopting a dichotomous position”, and they add that there is much to be learned “from all antecedent grounded theorists” (p. 3).

Signalling a stance as pragmatic bridge-builders of a scholarly method that has taken off in different directions might initially sound like a good idea, and it might work well with other methods. But it is inherently problematic in a book meant as an introduction to a methodological approach that is based on a thorough grounding of data. To the extent that there might be any propositions presented in this book, they are evidently not the result of a systematic analysis of data. Rather, the stated philosophy of apparent fairness, in this case, seems to be resolved by non-systematic switching between references to Strauss/Corbin, Glaser and Charmaz respectively, and next to a dozen other writers mostly from the Strauss/Corbin and Charmaz section. It appears that the authors have relied heavily on a rather diffuse method of skip-and-dip when collecting data for this book; they have picked a little bit here and a little bit there and created yet another mix which they call essentials of grounded theory methods. At the same time as they recognize that they are talking about different methods, the differences in methodological approaches between these methods are not explicated.

As a consequence, concepts like abstraction and conceptualization, which at least in classic grounded theory are fundamental for the generation of new theory, are hardly mentioned. Theoretical sensitivity is devoted one and a half pages, but without referring to the seminal work, “Theoretical Sensitivity”, by Barney Glaser from 1978. The use of gerunds in grounded theory, which was an important issue for grounded theory co-founder Barney Glaser in many of his books, are erroneously traced back to Cathy Charmaz. This just to mention a few examples of lacking respect for, or knowledge about, the use of primary and secondary sources.

To use a term from classic grounded theory terminology: this book is not well grounded in baseline data. On the one hand, the necessity of methodological congruence and

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procedural precision is emphasized throughout the book. On the other hand, as exemplified above, problems arise when authors of an introductory methods book themselves are not equally as systematic in their analysis thus, it appears paradoxical when the authors repeatedly state that the quality of a grounded theory study is demonstrated by the rigor in the conduct of one's research.

To clarify my point of departure with this book I would like to explain that my insights in grounded theory do not stem from the Strauss/Corbin or Charmaz branch. I have learned grounded theory from 'ground up' by reading the classical works of Glaser/Strauss and later by being taught grounded theory by Barney Glaser at his seminars and by studying his more than a dozen publications about the methodology. I have generated several grounded theories and know that the classical way of doing grounded theory works, and produces a theory that works, fits and is relevant. Since most of what is in this book does not stem from Glaser's grounded theorizing, I assume that it comes from other branches of the same root which have also been challenged for the lack of scholarly endeavour.

An important lesson taught in classic grounded theory is that of growing open. Thus, I started reading this book with an open mind, truly curious and excited of what new knowledge it would bring about grounded theory. The cover looked nice and the contents list sparked my curiosity even more. Since I have not conducted any study following the Strauss/Corbin, Charmaz or any other derived grounded theory procedures myself, I was really curious and interested in how that would be carried out. If I were a novice grounded theorist, I would probably have been even more curious to get a good overview of the field - in order to be able select a path that might best fit with my interests and personality.

The dilemma, then, is that this book does not present any new, well integrated approach based on a constant comparative analysis of grounded theory methods, nor does it clarify well what the procedures for existing directions are. A well integrated theorizing of "grounded theory methods" would have filled a void in the literature about grounded theory, and I would have been very happy to read it. But we will probably still have to wait for a while to get that.

What I did find interesting in this book in the end,

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though, was the last chapter, which deals with situating grounded theory in the context of current debate. Several issues raised here awaits further analysis and debate.

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