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Book Review: *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory* (Stern & Porr, 2011)¹

Reviewed by Odis E. Simmons, Ph.D.

Although Porr is a relative newcomer to grounded theory, Stern has been at it for many years (she received her PhD under Glaser and Strauss in 1977). She has been instrumental in introducing many students to grounded theory, particularly in the nursing field, as well as making notable contributions to grounded theory literature. As Stern's (1994) observations and insights suggested, constructivist versions of grounded theory emerged and spread in part because grounded theory was often being taught by teachers who themselves had a superficial, distorted understanding of the methodology, because they had learned it "minus mentor." Given her observations, insights, and writings, when I began reading *Essentials*, my expectations were high. But, after reading it, I concluded that, in some important ways, it falls short. Given Stern's considerable experience and previous contributions to grounded theory, it is ironic that *Essentials* contains more confusing and subtly inaccurate content than a book written for neophyte grounded theorists should. Although I think it is a noble effort with useful information, it contains material that is at variance with classic grounded theory, yet this isn't made clear to the reader. Because Stern and Porr failed to make a clear distinction between classic and other forms of grounded theory, many readers, particularly neophytes, will of course expect that what they present in this book accurately represents essential canons of all types of grounded theory, including classic. Readers will carry the understandings and misunderstandings gained from the book into their research and discussions with other neophytes and individuals who express interest in grounded theory.

As Stern (1994) herself pointed out, grounded theory has been "eroded" over the years. This erosion has led to the distinction pointed out by Charmaz (2000, 2006) between

¹ Stern, P.N. & Porr, C.J. (2011). *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

"classic" or "Glaserian" grounded theory versus "constructivist" grounded theory. Any book about grounded theory, particularly an introductory book that purports to be about the essentials of grounded theory, should begin by clarifying this important distinction, lest it not contribute to more erosion of the methodology. Stern and Porr neglected to make this distinction clear, which begets potential misconceptions throughout the book.

In Chapter 1, they use the general term "grounded theory" without clarifying whether they intended for the book to be about classic or other versions of grounded theory. The following quote suggests that they maybe meant for the book to be an introduction to classic grounded theory, because it is in these two books that the fundamentals of what eventually came to be termed "classic" or "Glaserian" grounded theory, are laid out.

In this book we drawn primarily from *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978) to lay out, as accurately as possible, essential groundwork and procedures for formulating explanatory theory (p.37)

However, in other locations in the book they legitimize and even encourage actions that are clearly outside the boundaries of classic grounded theory. For example, in Chapter Two, "Brief History of the World (of Science)," in their section titled, "Your Theoretical Lens" (pp. 30-33), they discuss, legitimize and encourage importing "theoretical lenses" and "explicit interpretive frameworks." They provide examples, such as Wuest's (1995) proposal that grounded theorists "can attach a feminist epistemological framework to grounded theory in an effort to privilege the voices of women," Kushner and Morrow's (2003) recommendation for constructing a framework consisting of feminist teachings combined with critical theory, "in order to adequately sensitize grounded theorists to issues related to alienation, power and domination," as well as their own research in which they say they used symbolic interactionism as their theoretical foundation and interpretive framework. Stern stated that she used an "eclectic" theoretical lens, combining symbolic interactionism, family dynamics and therapy, and dramaturgy. Using imported, preconceived theoretical lenses is proscribed in classic grounded theory, which suggests that

they may have intended for the book to be about constructivist grounded theory.

In my view, the main problem with the book is the authors' failure to inform readers of the critical distinctions between classic and constructivist versions of grounded theory. This theme appeared throughout my review because most of the other problems I see in the book could have been avoided, or at least mitigated, if they had made this distinction clear and informed the reader about the critical differences so that they could make an informed choice as to which version of grounded theory they wanted to pursue. This slurring² of classic and constructivist grounded theories will be misleading to all but the most informed readers, particularly neophyte readers. Readers who are uninformed of the differences between classic and constructivist versions of grounded theory will carry these misconceptions through the book and beyond, contributing even more to the erosion of grounded theory. It does a disservice to classic grounded theory to not clarify this critical distinction, at the outset of the book. Given that this was the original grounded theory, this is a major oversight.

It also made it difficult for me to know what methodological principals to use in judging the veracity and accuracy of the book. Although there is overlap, methodological principles are not uniform across the various forms of constructivist grounded theory and certainly not between classic and constructivist grounded theory. However, the principals of classic grounded theory have been clearly established and articulated, initially by Glaser and Strauss in *Discovery*, and many times since in Glaser's myriad grounded theory related books. So as not to contribute more to the erosion and slurring of classic grounded theory and because the principals of classic grounded theory are well laid out, I decided to judge the book from the perspective of classic grounded theory.

Thus, the primary aim of my review was to assess the extent to which what the authors present is consistent with and clear in its portrayal of classic grounded theory, rather

² It is a bit ironic that Stern was co-author of an article discussing "methodological slurring" between grounded theory and phenomenology (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992), yet *Essentials* commits the same transgression in relation to classic and constructivist grounded theories.

than the variations on grounded theory that evolved after *Discovery* and *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Had they made and adequately discussed the clear distinctions between classic and other versions of grounded theory I could have proceeded differently.

In particular, I looked at whether or not I think that the book will be useful to neophytes, because they would be the ones to whom it would be most essential. If neophytes find it useful others should be able to find it useful as well. I received my Ph.D. under Glaser and Strauss in 1974. Beginning in my grad school years, I have about forty years of experience teaching classic grounded theory (hereafter referred to simply as grounded theory, unless otherwise specified) to neophytes from academic as well as professional fields as well as supervising numerous grounded theory theses and dissertations. My substantial experience at helping neophytes understand and conduct grounded theory has given me a good sense of the difficulties and struggles that they experience in understanding and learning to conduct grounded theory and what it takes to overcome them. This made it easy for me to assess the extent to which I think the book will serve as a useful introduction to grounded theory.

In Chapter 1, " Why This Book?" Stern and Porr address their purposes in writing *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory* (hereafter referred to as *Essentials*).

As we see it, the published literature is written for the informed rather than the uninformed; translation: the language has tended to be what Phyllis calls sociologese rather than Standard English. The esoteric terminology has caused 2 problems: a) non-sociologists failing to grasp the jargon of the original text make up their own version of grounded theory or b) professionals, novice researchers and students alike attempting to understand this social science research approach throw up their hands in frustration...We have written this monograph in what we hope is a lucid, concise and accessible format in an effort to clear up some of the mystery and confusion surrounding grounded theory. *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory* will serve as a compass for trans-disciplinary undergraduate and graduate

students, neophyte researchers or institutional and community based experienced researchers wanting to conduct inductive qualitative research to generate theoretical explanation about a concern, issue or situation involving human phenomena. (pp. 13-14)

Unfortunately, beginning with the above introductory selection and continuing throughout the book, their discussion frequently lacks the clarity that would have been afforded by making a clear distinctions between classic and constructivist grounded theories.

Furthermore, in my view, ironically, their disregard for grounded theory jargon adds to the confusion that they purport to be clearing up. In my forty years of teaching grounded theory I have found it to be very important for students to become familiar with the jargon early in their learning process. Once the jargon is understood, it provides a language and means of cognitively imaging the components of the methodology and how they work together to generate a grounded theory, engendering sustained and enhanced understanding as they conduct their actual research. It helps neophytes understand what they are doing, why they are doing it, what to do next and how to do it. It also provides a common language for students to share their understandings with each other, which serves an important learning function.

Yes, it can be initially difficult to grasp for some learners, but I have found over and over that it pays off because it engenders a deeper, lasting understanding of the methodology that enables learners to become independent grounded theorists and carry their skills forward into their careers, including teaching others grounded theory. Without the advantages of grounded theory jargon, neophytes understanding of grounded theory is superficial and limited. One of my students recently telephoned me and said, "I'm worried about myself." I replied with some concern, "Oh, why is that?" She answered with a smile in her voice, "Because now when I read Glaser I *understand* him!" Our ensuing conversation made it clear that struggling with the jargon until she "got it" was very valuable, frustrating as it was at times. I can't imagine trying to teach or learn grounded theory without the jargon. The thought strikes me as being similar to trying to do a grounded theory without concepts.

Another confusion introduced in the above opening

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material comes from the phrase, "researchers wanting to conduct inductive qualitative research." Glaser has made it clear that grounded theory is a general method, not a qualitative method. As Glaser wrote:

Thus please remember that although grounded theory has captured the imagination and zest of qualitative researchers, that there are many monographs of inductive theory generation--usually published by the Free Press--done with quantitative data and that quantitative methods of data collection and analysis provide most of the underlying methodology models of analysis in grounded theory. (1992, p. 17)

Grounded theory does well with qualitative data, but it has rightfully no part in the wrestle between quantitative and qualitative.... Grounded theory was not discovered to foster a qualitative ideology. (1998, p. 43)

The authors could have clarified this issue had they included Glaser's distinction between qualitative analysis and qualitative research. As Glaser (1992) wrote,

It is important to keep the distinction clear between qualitative analysis and qualitative research to forestall confusion...Qualitative analysis means any kind of analysis that produces findings or concepts and hypotheses, as in grounded theory, that are not arrived at by statistical methods. To repeat, qualitative analysis may be done with data arrived at quantitatively or qualitatively or in some combination. (Glaser, 1992, pp. 11-12)

Without this clarification, readers may be left thinking that quantitative data are not appropriate and useful in a grounded theory study. Although, on page 50 they do introduce the Glaser dictum that in grounded theory "all is data" (see e.g. Chapter 11 in Glaser, 2001), and they do include "surveys," they don't mention the word "quantitative" or make it clear that "all is data" includes all forms of quantitative data, despite the fact that Glaser (2008) published an entire book on quantitative grounded theory. If neophytes don't understand this they may place unnecessary limitations on their study.

One of my biggest concerns about *Essentials* is that it

subtly encourages what might be termed "*constructivism light*." An important distinction to make here is that between *fundamental* (unavoidable) versus *intentional* constructivism. Because we necessarily use language, through which meaning is formed and conveyed, fundamental constructivism is unavoidable in both classic and constructivist grounded theories. However, intentional constructivism was designed out of classic grounded theory. To the contrary, it is designed *into* constructivist grounded theories. However, although *Essentials* doesn't overtly encourage extreme forms of intentional constructivism, it unwittingly encourages constructivism light, which can nonetheless derail the full grounding of a theory. The constructivism light I see in *Essentials* occurs because of lack of clarity and seemingly minor departures from tenets and procedures of classic grounded theory, innocent as they may appear. Here again, I see this as problematic primarily because of the authors' failure to clearly distinguish between classic and constructivist grounded theories. Had they made this distinction, at least readers would know that they were not being encouraged to neglect one of the most important canons of classic grounded theory--to be as non-constructivist as possible.

The Role of Constructivism in Grounded Theory

To serve as proper context, it is important to clarify the relationship of grounded theory to constructivism. At its base, the constructivist position is that all meaning is constructed by humans--what Glaser and Strauss referred to as "meaning making." This is in contrast to "objectivism." In the social/behavioral sciences, the objectivist position holds that social reality exists independent of the human mind, or as Durkheim (1938) put it, "society is prior." Although I suppose one could argue otherwise, these two positions are often assumed to be contradictory to one another. There are two categories of constructivism that are relevant to all versions of grounded theory, including classic grounded theory--constructivism related to the people being studied and constructivism related to the researcher.

Participant constructivism

Some authors claim that Glaser is an objectivist, assuming an underlying objective reality, despite much

evidence to the contrary and a paucity of evidence that supports that claim. They appear to infer this from his graduate school studies in sociology at Columbia University, which had a positivist, quantitative methodological bent,³ as well as his use of the theoretical code "basic social process." In relation to participant constructivism, they ignore such clear statements as:

GT is a perspective based methodology and people's perspectives vary. And as we showed in "Awareness of Dying" (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) participants have multiple perspectives that are varyingly fateful to their action. Multiple perspectives among participants is often the case and then the GT researcher comes along and raises these perspectives to the abstract level of conceptualization hoping to see the underlying or latent pattern, another perspective. (Glaser, 2002, p. 2).

This and other statements made by Glaser make it clear that he sees grounded theory as being about ongoing behavioral patterns of research participants, including latent patterns, with full recognition that meanings are emergent social constructions. As he states (Glaser, 2002, p. 3), "The constant comparative method discovers the latent pattern in the multiple participant's words..." In other words, the patterns are an outcome of meaning making.

Researcher constructivism

Staunch constructivists maintain that all meaning is a human construction, without exception, a sentiment with which I agree, at the fundamental level. However, it is important to distinguish between *fundamental* constructivism which is universal (and therefore unavoidable) and *intentional* constructivism on the part of the researcher. As I mentioned above, it is important to note and for readers of *Essentials* to understand that intentional constructivism was designed out

3. Although he was influenced by this, particularly its rigorousness and the ideas of the social statistician, Paul Lazarsfeld, Glaser didn't adopt it; he used it to inform grounded theory. By the same token, the Sociology Department at Columbia was also heavy in speculative theory. He didn't adopt this approach either. His ideas that led to grounded theory were to a great extent a reaction to what he termed the "theoretical capitalism" of that approach to theory. With what he learned and observed at Columbia, he designed a rigorous methodology for generating theory systematically grounded in data that was open to anyone.

of classic grounded theory. To the contrary, it is designed *into* constructivist grounded theories. Of course, *fundamental constructivism* is endemic to both constructivist and classic grounded theories. However, researcher formulated *intentional constructivism* is not an all or nothing category. It comes in gradations.

Just because pure objectivity is unattainable does not mean that as grounded theory researchers we should throw out the baby with the bath water and embrace researcher constructivism. Intentional constructivism may be appropriate for other methodological approaches, but embracing it violates what may be the most central canon of grounded theory, which is to be as non-constructivist as possible and let the theory emerge from the data. For this reason, although I think the term is apropos, I regard constructivist grounded theory as an oxymoron or at best quasi-grounded theory. Glaser (2002) referred to it as a "misnomer."

Another important distinction to make here is the difference between the underlying objectivism of the objectivist position and merely being *conceptually* objective. Glaser's position on conceptual objectivity:

Let us be clear, researchers are human beings and therefore must to some degree reify data in trying to symbolize it in collecting, reporting and coding the data. In doing so they may impart their personal bias and/or interpretations—ergo this is called constructivist data. But this data is rendered objective to a high degree by most research methods and GT in particular by looking at many cases of the same phenomenon, when jointly collecting and coding data, to correct for bias and to make the data objective. (Glaser, 2002, p. 6)

This is not a claim of pure objectivity; it is merely a statement regarding maximizing objectivity to the extent possible. This is what classic grounded theory was designed to accomplish. Neither Glaser or Strauss ever claimed pure objectivity.

A few examples of discussions in *Essentials* that encourage constructivism light follow. There are many more scattered throughout the text but not enough space here to cover them all.

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One example of constructivism light can be found in Stern and Porr's discussion in their "Literature Review" section (pp. 49-50), where in reference to a preliminary, or what they call a "primary" review, they write, "whether grounded theory or one of the other qualitative research methodologies, a search of the relevant literature is not only needed, it's required." Although uninformed dissertation and IRB committees may require it and you respond by gaming the system (see my below discussion about this), doing a preliminary literature review of the relevant literature most certainly is not part of classic grounded theory because you don't yet know what literature is relevant. If committee pressures make it unavoidable, classic grounded theory mentors should at least help students develop the skill of being able to suspend what was derived from a preliminary literature review, serve as honesty brokers when they see preconceptions creeping in, and watch to make sure the student is remaining honest to the data. In most, if not all, of the many classic grounded theory dissertations I have supervised, the data took the research and eventual theory, and thus what literature became relevant, to a place that could not have been imagined at the outset. Preliminary literature reviews could have derailed the natural emergence of the theory, or at least been a waste of time.

Another example of constructivism light can be found in their "Variation" section (p 31-32) in which they stated,

Grounded theory methodology should encompass data from multiple sources as a way of clarifying and validating the meaning of behaviors. Different slices of data will ensure a proportioned view of participant perspectives as to why people are behaving as they do. The back-and-forth checking rechecking of various viewpoints correct for partiality to any one point of view you will want to grow concepts on several slices of data of all shapes, sizes and colors. For example, including participants representing more than one demographic characteristic or multivariate ethnicity constitutes data diversity.

There appears to be an assumption inherent in this selection that there will be a single "correct" meaning of the behaviors of different participants, rather than multiple meanings and behaviors and that different data sources are required to

clarify and validate it. However, the different meanings and behaviors of participants is *variation*, which is important in generating a grounded theory. One does theoretical sampling to discover variation, but although Stern and Porr included a Chapter (13) on theoretical sampling much later in the book, they don't mention it here which suggests that the above selection is not about theoretical sampling. Who's meaning shall prevail; the researchers? If so, that is researcher constructivism.

The statement is also an example of what Glaser (2001) terms "worrisome accuracy." Rather than concerning oneself with which meaning is worthy of "validation" (*all of the meanings are valid!*), which implies that accuracy trumps conceptualization, a grounded theorist should view the data as a source of indicators to be coded and conceptualized. Although what I have said here may not reflect what the authors intended to say, what they said is unclear enough that even I, far from a grounded theory neophyte, couldn't discern their intended meaning. I can't imagine that a neophyte could discern it more accurately.

Yet another example of constructivism light can be found in Stern and Porr's discussion of interviewing, in which they encourage the use of interview guides for the initial interviews (they provide an example on pages 54-55). Their justification is that "Both the researcher and the participant are nervous during the first interview" (p. 52). They do say that "Once the first few interview transcripts are coded, however the interview guide can be discarded" (p. 53). Interview guides require the researcher to surmise what is relevant or at least potentially relevant. But, grounded theory is about *what is relevant to participants*, not the researcher. And, that is to be discovered, not presumed. It is usually the first few interviews (assuming the initial data source is interviews) in which what is relevant to participants begins to emerge, which sets up the direction of the research. The use of researcher formulated, preconceived questions at the outset could easily lead the research away from what is most relevant to participants and towards the researcher's preconceived relevancy. A suitable way to avoid this is to begin interviews with a "grand tour" inquiry related to a

general topic area.⁴ This allows the interviewee to talk about what they want, on their terms, within the topic area. The process should not be derailed through the use of interview guides, particularly at the outset. As Glaser (2002) states,

If the data is garnered through an interview guide that forces and feeds interviewee responses then it is constructed to a degree by interviewer imposed interactive bias. But, as I said above, with the passive, non structured interviewing or listening of the GT interview-observation method, constructivism is held to a minimum. (p. 3)

Another example from *Essentials* that encourages constructivism light and even constructivism not-so-light, and may also contribute to the defensive status that grounded theory seems to be stuck in, is evident in Chapter 4, "The Launch." In this chapter, Stern and Porr encourage acquiescence to dissertation and IRB committees when it comes to meeting expectations and requirements that may be appropriate for deductive forms of research, but are inappropriate for grounded theory and most certainly for classic grounded theory. With this advice they encourage students to game the system rather than stand up for the integrity of grounded theory. Grounded theory was first introduced in 1967 and because of the dominance of deductive research and speculative theory has been on the defensive ever since. Rather than continue to give in to this, I think it is time that grounded theorists at least try to push back.

Isn't it about time as classic grounded theorists that we at least attempt to educate non-grounded theorist dissertation and IRB committee members? If the efforts don't succeed in individual situations, the student can always rewrite and re-submit, which eventually may at least open some eyes and

⁴ A grand tour inquiry is a broad inquiry that elicits a response from the interviewee, but does not lead them towards a specific focus, response, or set of responses. I prefer "inquiry" over "question" because phrasing it as a question can introduce subtle preconceptions that can be inherent in words that are typically used to introduce questions, such as why, how, what, who, when, and such. For example, rather than phrasing it as, "What's it like to work here?" which would steer the interviewee towards an evaluative response, a more open inquiry might be phrased, "Please tell me about working here" Phrased in that manner, the respondent has the opportunity to begin with what is truly relevant to them.

make a difference over time.⁵ Unless we begin to encourage and do this, grounded theory will be perpetually relegated to second class status, despite 45 years of ever expanding world-wide use in theses and dissertations. Waiting for this to be resolved on its own and gaming the system hasn't worked yet, and it likely won't unless we encourage and train our students to be better prepared and more confident in their defense of the methodology. *Essentials* would have been a good opportunity to at least introduce students to this possibility. I have urged and aided my students in doing this, and over time it has worked because before they submit their proposals they understand the method well, in large part because they understand the jargon and how to explain it to others. My students can now write, and defend if need be, honest dissertation and IRB proposals, without gaming the system by creating preconceived research questions, doing premature literature reviews, formulating interview guides, and such, all of which for neophytes may lead to constructivism light, particularly if they are not closely supervised by an experienced classic grounded theorist who can serve as an honesty broker.

When reading through *Essentials* I encountered many other locations that were at variance with classic grounded theory, as well as some that were unclear and apt to cause confusion, particularly for neophytes. They were too numerous to make note of. I decided to focus primarily on what I see as the main problem with the book, which is the absence of a clear distinction and explanation of the differences between classic and constructivist grounded theories and the constructivism light that results. If the book were about constructivist grounded theory I would have fewer issues with it because once you allow intentional constructivism boundaries are fuzzy, making it more difficult to find fault. The boundaries of classic grounded theory have been well established and articulated, first by Glaser and Strauss in *Discovery* and then by Glaser in his many subsequent books and papers. *Essentials* does not do justice to classic grounded theory. Instead, unfortunately, I think it may only contribute to the further erosion of the original methodology.

⁵ It may be less advisable to risk this on grant applications unless maybe it is part of a mixed method design.

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It is personally difficult for me to be as critical as I have been in this review of the work of valued colleagues, particularly one of such long standing as Phyllis Stern. But, as a reviewer, I had to call it as I saw it. In short, although I appreciate the effort, I will not be recommending this book to my students for fear that it would promote more confusion than elucidation.

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