GROUNDED THEORY REVIEW
An international journal

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December 2013

Grounded Theory Review, Vol 12 (Issue #2), 35-45

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 Grounded Theory Review (2013), Volume 12, Issue 2

Generalizability and the Theory of Offsetting the Affective Filter

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Abstract

When online, post-secondary foreign language learners wrestle with the course material and environment because of their inexperience or misguided expectations, frustration and anxiety often ensue. The resulting imbalance often hinders satisfactory progress in the course. Classic grounded theory was used to develop the substantive theory of offsetting the affective filter, which explains the behaviors of learners in the substantive area of online, post-secondary foreign language classes. With the grab and conceptual generalities of this substantive theory, it is valuable for novice researchers to understand that the possibility is strong to continue the research and develop a formal theory. In this paper, the author examines the aforementioned theory in light of possibly developing a formal grounded theory.

Introduction

An important element involving the classic grounded theory method (CGT) proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and subsequently by Glaser (1978) is the idea of generalizability. Generalizability, along with the other components—"fit, work, relevance, and modifiability" (Glaser, 1992, p. 15)—allows the researcher to "broaden the theory so that it is more generally applicable and has greater explanatory and predictive power" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 24). In grounded theory terms, the newly discovered endogenous (1967) theory must apply to a variety of situations and environments within and outside of the substantive area not just one situation (Glaser, 1996). The idea of generalizability—especially for doctoral candidates—has important ramifications for researchers inside and outside of the initial substantive area. In this article, I will present (a) the five pillars of grounded theory, (b) a brief discussion of generalizability, (c) an overview of the grounded theory process vis-à-vis generalizability, (d) a theory—Offsetting the Affective Filter—developed using CGT, and finally, (e) a brief analysis of generalizability vis-à-vis the aforementioned theory. By illuminating the importance of the substantive theory (Glaser, 1978) outside the field of online foreign language education, I hope to present a potentially bigger picture of the theory thereby demonstrating generalizability and to show that generalizing "a core category is strong . . . [and] hard to resist" (Glaser, 2007, p. 14).

The five pillars

When a novice researcher uses CGT as a design—perhaps for a doctoral dissertation—he or she quickly learns about its five pillars necessary for developing a satisfactory theory: fit,

grab, work, relevance, and modifiability (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998). To negate or minimize one of them is to create a unbalanced and inadequate theory. Because these terms are vital to grounded theory, each is discussed briefly in this research.

In the world of classic grounded theory, in order to have fit, researchers must ask whether a "concept adequately [expresses] the pattern in the data which it purports to conceptualize" (Glaser, 1998, p. 18). If such a connection exists between the concept and the data, fit exists. With theories discovered using grounded theory, it is vital that the researcher not force the data into preconceived patterns. If the theory is indeed developed through detailed analysis of the data according to the precepts of CGT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1965, 1992), the theory is said to have fit (Glaser, 2002a). On the other hand, if an idea is forced and therefore not directly and solely derived from the original data, the theory has validity issues and does not fit the data (Chametzky, 2013a).

Grab is the ability of an idea to snag the attention of a person quickly (Glaser, 1978). When a reader senses that he or she understands the idea and what is going on (Glaser, 2002a), grab is achieved. Grab and generalizability are closely related as one aids the other. Similarly, without one the other becomes difficult to achieve, as each depends on the other.

In examining a theory developed via grounded theory, a researcher must ensure that it speaks to "the major variations in behavior in the area with respect to the processing of the main concerns of the subjects" (Glaser, 1992, p. 15). If the theory is sufficiently multidimensional to tackle any variations within the substantive area, the theory works. A theory that does not work is insufficient. Further, should a theory not work (though implausible as it might be), a researcher will find generalizing the theory challenging because it is not sufficiently multidimensional.

According to Glaser (1998), relevance is synonymous with importance. If a theory has relevance, it has appeal to people. Thus, relevance has a direct connection with grab; if one exists, the other is suggested (Glaser (1998).

Finally, a theory derived using grounded theory needs to be sufficiently flexible. If a researcher obtains new data representing variations in any of the "properties and categories" (Glaser, 1992, p. 15), the theory needs to be adaptable and modifiable to accommodate the new data. If the theory is appropriately flexible to accommodate new data, it is modifiable. Together, the five pillars form a foundation for all theories derived via the classic grounded theory method.

Generalizability and transferability

In research studies—especially doctoral dissertations—the concept of generalizability is often mandatory. When talking about external validity, a researcher asks him or herself whether the findings or conclusions of the study are equally applicable to other people, in different places, and at different times (Schram, 2006; Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). If the response is positive, the study has generalizable results.

Such an explanation of generalizability is foundational in the field of education. In CGT however, the term *generalizability* has a slightly different meaning. Following the precepts presented by Glaser (1978), a theory developed via grounded theory is based on the ideas a researcher finds in the data and not from the contributors or respondents in the project. Thus, a theory must have "conceptual generality [rather than] unit generality" (Glaser, 1998, p. 125). In other words, the theory must be conceptual rather than descriptive (Glaser, 2007) and thus not tied to any specific location, occasion, or person (Glaser, 2007).

There exists, however, a potentially satisfying medium between the two definitions. Generalizability, perhaps more accurately termed transferability, as Glaser (1998) used it, is the ability to extend the relevance or appropriateness of the study beyond the substantive area of the researcher and delineate the relevant boundaries (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the study. With this extension, the researcher would be able to have the "theory . . . apply to less obvious areas" (p. 65). Because ideas and theories are conceptualized in CGT, and because theories must have grab, a certain amount of generalizability (in the educational sense) is appropriate and present. Such generalizability may aid the researcher should he or she wish to develop a formal grounded theory (Glaser, 2007).

Overview of CGT

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is "the discovery of theory from data" (p. 1). The objective of a researcher using grounded theory is to uncover a theory explaining the behaviors of participants within a specific interest area (Glaser, 1992). The non-linear (Glaser, 1978; Simmons, 2008) process by which a researcher uncovers the theory is multipartite, "iterative, [and] cyclic" (Chametzky, 2013a, p. 14) though some researchers (Gatin, 2009; Jones & Alony, 2011) have endeavored to display its non-linearity in a two dimensional representation.

As soon as data collection begins, the researcher attempts to connect the elements of the data with more general concepts and then those concepts with other ones. Such conceptualizations lead the researcher to formulate a theory that explains behaviors or problems in the particular area of investigation. Developing conceptualizations occur through a process of constant comparison of data (Glaser, 1965) and memo writing (addressed later in this article). As a researcher conceptualizes, compares, and memos, he or she uncovers these emerging themes (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser, 2002b) and organizes these "emergent conceptualizations into integrated patterns, which are denoted by categories and their properties" (Glaser, 2002a, p. 23). By iteratively comparing (Mavetera & Kroeze, 2009) the codes, a researcher begins to discover code relationships (Raduescu & Vessey, 2011). As these relationships and groupings solidify (Glaser, 1992) and richen, theoretical saturation occurs (Holton, 2010). Ultimately, a core category and a single core variable emerge (Raduescu & Vessey, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A core category is necessary in the study "as it resolves the main concern" (Glaser, 1998, p. 115) and forms the heart of the theory. It is the concept that reflects what the researcher believes is the principal issue in the substantive area (Glaser & Holton, 2005).

Memos form the "ideational and conceptual" (Glaser, 1998, p. 180) link between the codes, categories, and properties (Glaser, 1998). The purpose is to write down any ideas about concepts and their possible connections with one other. Memos are the conscious manifestation of the preconscious (Glaser, 1998) thought. Memo writing, like the process of coding, is iterative.

As a researcher raises the conceptual level of the codes and categories, and as the memos become increasingly conceptual, two things will invariably happen. First, the researcher will explain (without preconception) the behaviors of participants in the substantive area. Explaining (without preconception) the behaviors of participants is the heart of any theory developed using CGT. Second, the conceptualized theory will not be tied to "time, place, [or] people" (Glaser, 2009, p. 24). As previously mentioned, grab is one of the pillars that form a good theory developed using CGT. When people can relate to a theory (or its elements), because of its grab and "conceptual generality" (Glaser, 1998, p. 125), the theory has a certain amount of generalizability (in the educational sense) outside the substantive area (Glaser, 2007).

Does this "conceptual generality" (Glaser, 1998, p. 125) of a core category mean categorically that a substantive theory is a formal grounded theory? The answer to this question must be *no* at least initially. Though a certain amount of applicability or transferability of a substantive theory may exist, the leap to a formal theory must not be made without additional work (Glaser, 2007). The amount of work is not trivial. However, "doing [a formal grounded theory] is just a natural, next step to the general implications of a [substantive grounded theory's] core category" (Glaser, 2007, p. 40).

Offsetting the affective filter

The substantive area for the research involving offsetting the affective filter is post-secondary, online foreign language classes and learners. Given the continued increase of online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010) throughout the world, it is reasonable to presume that research dealing with e-learning—even tangentially—would be relevant to many people. Further, because of (a) the limited amount of research in the field of online foreign language learning, (b) the incidents that learners experience (Myers, 2008), and (c) the general nature of individuals to be inquisitive (Gazzaniga, 2009), it is reasonable to presume that the study regarding Offsetting the Affective Filter has appeal (Glaser, 1992) and relevance to many people in the field of education.

Students in an asynchronous, online, post-secondary foreign language class might not have the experience or understanding of how learning occurs or why online course presentation methods are not always complementary with their preferred methods of learning. Their lack of experience and understanding will increase their stress and anxiety levels. In these courses, learners often get out of their realm of familiarity (Chametzky, 2013b). When students feel anxious with an online course and its technological tools, their affective filters—the psychological barrier that prevents people from internalizing the subject

matter, concepts, or ideas presented to them—become elevated. The result is the progressively challenging task of completing the foreign language course successfully.

When some learners step beyond their zone of familiarity and comfort (Chametzky, 2013b), they have great problems overcoming challenges caused by an increased affective filter while simultaneously trying to grasp onto any positive components in the course. Based on the theory of offsetting the affective filter (Chametzky, 2013b), students in online foreign language classes attempt to strategize and to stabilize themselves in their academic lives in three ways: (a) through interacting with other people, (b) by adapting to the situation, and (c) by negotiating the importance of the given task.

Because of their increased affective filters, foreign language learners will interact with classmates, relatives, or instructors in order to vent their frustrations. When such interaction is insufficient to reduce their elevated affective filters, some learners feel overwhelmed. As the feeling of being overwhelmed persists or increases, some learners isolate themselves.

Another way that that students counterbalance their discomfort is through adapting. At times, learners need to focus on the course material in a highly myopic manner in order to complete the course successfully. Simply lumbering through the course and adapting to the suboptimal environment as much as possible is mandatory for other learners. Throughout the online course, students need to be independent, self-directed, and highly motivated in order to succeed and to "move past the 'daunting' feeling of 'Am I really the only one not understanding?'" (Chametzky, 2013a, p. 132). Sadly, as with any venture, some learners give up because they are unable to restore the needed balance.

Every activity people do is accomplished because a choice was made. Making decisions "is based on several criteria not the least of which is balance" (Chametzky, 2013b, p. 13). For example, when an activity is easy to accomplish satisfactorily, stability is easily sustainable. An overly complicated or unimportant task, however, might cause the learner to discontinue or not start it (Lee, 2010). As learners try to offset their affective filters, they negotiate "what elements [are] overly stressful and what they [are] willing to tolerate" (Chametzky, 2013a, p. 123). Stability might be restored when learners are aware than an imbalance exists and when they engage in activities to counterbalance the instability such as interacting, adapting, and/or negotiating. Such "give and take" (Chametzky, 2013a, p. 138) helps compensate for an elevated affective filter and is often crucial for online foreign language students to succeed in the course.

Generalizing the theory: Its implications

The objective ofgeneralizing the theory of offsetting the affective filteris possible with and because of CGT. As a researcher codes and writes memos, he or she takes the conceptual codes, properties, and categories, and further conceptualizes relationships without forcing any connections. Ultimately, when a core variable and theory are developed, both address

the behaviors of participants in the substantive area as well as people outside that area. As Glaser (2007) commented,

> Core category implication applications are seen all around in social life. They start to compare to see variation. It is only a short step to conceptualizing the comparison into a category or property of a category to start a FGT. (p. 42)

Again, a researcher must be careful not to presume categorically that a substantive theory equates to or will become a formal theory.

With respect to anxiety,it is perhaps not difficult to see how a person might want or need to regain balance when his or her affective filter—the psychological barrier between the person and the object (whether it be knowledge, satisfaction, need, safety, or desire)—is elevated. During times of high anxiety, when a person wishes to regain stability, he or she needs to negotiate with him or herself to determine whether the objective is sufficiently important, to interact with other people in order to make his or her anxieties known, and/or to adapt his or her perspective. Specifically how a person attempts to regain stability depends on the situation and theindividual's abilities and attitude during the stressful situation.

While the theory of offsetting the affective filter has its roots in the field of education, the theory may also have wider implications across multiple areas. Offsetting the Affective Filter is "pervasive [and may] occur over time [. . . . It is] abstract of any specific unit's structure and [thus] can vary sufficiently to go on in very different other units" (Glaser, 1978, pp. 100-101). The idea of regaining stability, through negotiating, interacting, and adapting, could be a universal behavior.

A theory discovered using CGT could and should have implications not only within the substantive area but also in other areas. I am intentionally not stating that the substantive theory of Offsetting the Affective Filter *equates* to a formal theory but merely that the possibility exists for further research to develop one. "It is only a short step to conceptualizing the comparison into a category or property of a category to start a FGT" (Glaser, 2007, p. 42).In order for the theory of Offsetting the Affective Filter to develop into a formal theory, it will be necessary for the researcher to"[extend] the general implications of a core variable by sampling wider in the original substantive area and in other substantive areas and then constantly comparing with the purpose to conceptualize the general implications" (Glaser, 2007, p. 5). If a theory does not have the potential to be transferable to a wider audience beyond the substantive area, it is potentially inadequate and possibly too descriptive. The grab and thus transferability of a core category is a desirable thing.

Conclusion

In grounded theory, researchers attempt to explain people's patterns of behavior. The behavior patterns of post-secondary, online foreign language learners, as evidenced in their

attempts to offset their affective filters, are easily transferable to people in other environments because of "concept generality rather than unit generality" (Glaser, 1998, p. 125). Because of this transferability, it is reasonable to state that the consequence of stepping outside of one's comfort zone results in a person's need to reestablish stability through negotiating, interacting, and/or adapting. The specific way a person accomplishes this task—regardless of the cause that elevated the affective filter—is not "a one-step, linear process; [it] requires people to employ . . . different strategies depending on different external influences affecting the participant at a given moment" (Chametzky, 2013a, p. 148). The implications for this substantive theoryare potentially far-reaching and generalizable to areas outside the initial substantive area thereby naturally leading to a formal grounded theory (Glaser, 2007). However, additional research is warranted before the substantive theory could become a formal grounded theory.

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