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Naomi Elliott, Trinity College Dublin

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Book Review: Memoing – a GT Essential

Naomi Elliott, Trinity College Dublin

Memoing: A Vital Grounded Theory Procedure, Barney G. Glaser (2014) Mill Valley:
Sociology Press

This book, on memoing, is intended to support grounded theory researchers and scholars who want to deepen their understanding of what the procedure of memoing is about. For doctoral candidates, who are learning the craft of doing GT, it provides an academic reassurance that memoing is free-style and there is no one “correct” way of memoing. For researchers who are supervising or teaching others the craft of doing GT, it is a practical resource and provides a springboard for scholarly discussions about memoing and how it can be used in the development of grounded theory.

Having reviewed the use of grounded theory over the years, Barney G. Glaser identifies the problem that memoing is being neglected as a GT procedure, hence the reason for dedicating this book to memoing. He also identifies a problem of uncertainty - which many GT researchers experience about whether they are memoing “correctly”. As an experienced teacher, Dr Glaser dispels these uncertainties with the notion of free-style memoing and gives permission for researchers to tap into their own creativity and problem-solving ability by developing their own style of memoing. In this he motivates researchers to DO memoing and to avoid getting hung up on following a pre-set or someone else’s style of memoing. The book title *Memoing* in itself is important as it is a gerund, an action verb, which conveys the importance of *doing*. Glaser’s invaluable teaching point that should not be missed here: it is that the process of doing memoing that is essential to the work of the GT researcher. Through the *doing* of memoing, the researcher captures ideas which seed the meaning analysis, and as Glaser explains, these become a “constant source of stimulation for meaning growth of emergent analysis” (p. 49). As the researcher works through the GT methodological procedures of constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and theoretical coding, the memos capture the ideas that emerge from this work. Memos, therefore are tracking the analysis and also sensitising the researcher to ideas that can eventually mature as the grounded theory research progresses. A key to understanding how memoing works is found on page 39: “To repeat, memos are the latent thought that collects concepts and puts substantive theory together as a vital ongoing procedure”.

Memoing is a welcome addition to the current list of GT publications. Since 1998, Glaser’s book *Doing Grounded Theory* has been one of the *go to* books for many researchers looking for practical advice on memoing. Although Chapter 12 of *Doing Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1998) explains memoing concisely within the ten pages, Glaser’s 160 page book *Memoing* (2014) provides an expanded explanation of the original work including a scholarly discussion of the contemporary literature on memoing. This is particularly useful to GT researchers and scholars who need to discuss their research either at *viva voce* examination or at conference presentations.

In *Memoing*, Glaser’s thoughts on the procedure are gathered together into one book. The advice is practical and grounded in actual queries that GT researchers have asked Glaser at his workshops and seminars over the years. He covers the challenging

aspects of memoing such as sorting memos and provides 11 analytic rules to help guide researchers. There is always a risk that GT researchers can get lost in following such analytic rules, which is why Glaser's advice is to remember that:

...the world is empirically integrated, not logically modeled. GT is designed to tap this empirical integration. GT taps the multivariate social organization of patterned behaviour. To discover this integration is the GT researcher's work...The final integration from sorting is his theory of what is going on in a sector of social organization (p. 83)

is so important as an over-riding principle that guides the work of sorting memos.

Glaser highlights that memoing is not a standalone procedure in GT, but rather it is an integral part of the GT procedures. As GT researchers progress from sorting memos, the next step involves theoretical sorting. Again Glaser makes a key distinction that this involves conceptual sorting, the sorting of ideas and not data. Theoretical sorting of memos is vital in theory generation as the researcher moves the analysis from the level of description, to that of explanation, of how the concepts relate to each other and how they are integrated into a theory which accounts for how people process a problem. In this chapter on theoretical sorting, Glaser provides useful analytic rules for the sorting of memos which lead to theoretical integration. He also deals with the complex concept of completeness and its variant forms: theoretical completeness, comparative completeness, logico-deductive completeness, and scholarly completeness, which is especially useful for doctoral candidates who may need to be able to answer this question within their thesis.

To generate a substantive theory is a major challenge for any researcher. Yet it is the main objective of grounded theory and Glaser brings the reader to the final section of theoretical memoing. Here Glaser explains how memoing is used in the process of generating theory as memos are used to support the process of conceptualisation, identifying properties, considering relationships between categories, identifying clusters of categories and considering relationship with other theory. This level of conceptual, and abstract, work is challenging for most researchers and Glaser provides more practical tips on theoretical memoing. The first one, keep memos and data separately, sounds too simple, yet having firsthand experience of doing this during my own GT I can recommend it as a strategy which freed me from being bogged down with the minute detail of descriptive data to instead being able to work with the ideas that were captured in my memos and ultimately, enhanced my ability to develop a theory.

In the last chapter, Glaser returns to some key points on memoing to emphasise the importance of free-style, tracking ideas, interrupting coding to write down and capture ideas, and memoing to build theory. Memos are a core device that follow from the GT procedures and capture-track-preserve conceptual ideas. Glaser's parting advice, on avoiding technological traps of computer data management software, is sound advice to anyone who considers such programmes are a substitute for the intellectual requirements of theory generation. This book on memoing is full of practical advice for anyone doing GT research and focuses the spotlight on the power of memoing - a vital grounded theory procedure.