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Book Review: Beneficial Applicability of Grounded Theory

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Glaser, B. (2014). Applying grounded theory: A neglected option.
Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

For what good is grounded theory? How can it be applied? Who finds it useful, and are there specific issues that ought to be considered before, or during, deliberate application of grounded theories? These are but some of the issues that are raised in Barney G. Glaser's latest book, which deals with applying grounded theory. In this 190 page book, which is actually a reader, Dr. Glaser's new theorizing in the field is coupled with reprints of previously published material. In the first three chapters, Dr. Glaser contextualizes applying aspects of grounded theory in relation to previous literature and the variety of ways that grounded theories are implicitly used by researchers and laymen. Next, chapters from three of his earlier books are reprinted and thus recontextualized. The latter section of the book provides four reprint chapters on applying grounded theory provided by contemporary grounded theorists.

Initially, Dr. Glaser points out that the application of grounded theory has so far been scarcely focused in the literature. His aim in the book is to elucidate applicable connections to professions, literature, service to clients, and personal use. Thus, Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to discussing professional and private application of grounded theory respectively.

I agree with Dr. Glaser that even though applying GT largely has been a neglected topic in the literature, the application of abstract grounded theory concepts goes on constantly. A good concept might be enough to improve practice; in many cases, there is no need for the full theory to be applied. At the same time, Dr. Glaser makes clear that when an existing theory is actually applied, the researcher must ensure the theory's credible relevance to the application population. If necessary, the theory should be modified to ensure relevance, grab, and fit. In general, one should be careful in applying existing theories to a different population, because these individuals might have a different main concern.

The apparent generalizability of a substantive theory does not imply that it is a formal theory. Consequently it should not be used as if it were generally applicable, but only be applied to similar areas of like concerns. Dr. Glaser's example here is supernormalizing, which is a concern of both heart attack victims and football players. Doing grounded theory interventions with the goal of getting specific changes may, however, be just as risky as using any other kind of data, since purposeful goalsetting might be prompted by preconceptions.

In Chapter 3, Glaser presents one of his favorite topics; the value of applying grounded theory for personal use. As often stated in his troubleshooting seminars, memoing on personal problems or challenges helps work and reason with the problem. He explains how the patterns “soon jump out of the memos and yields thought on appropriate action” (Glaser, 2014, p. 36). The chapter is filled with illustrations provided by grounded theorists who have experienced the magic of applying grounded theory concepts or theories on issues with which they are grappling.

The value of this book lies in particular in the multiple perspective approach to the topic. The content of the book is written over a time span of 50 years, from 1965 till now, and comprises 11 chapters. The four last chapters are reprints with comments added by Dr. Glaser. Together, the great variety of chapters provides a unique blend of perspectives on the applicability of grounded theories. Dr. Glaser’s comments alone prompt individual reflection on the multiple and somewhat parallel theoretical discussions going on in the book. In my view, they stimulate the reader to explore further the topic while experiencing minimal preconceptions. Some readers may find the comments disturbing in the sense that the chapters are not allowed to speak totally for themselves. But I like this way of framing and modulating the ongoing discussion, as long as the chapters are published in their pure form.

In Chapter 4, we get direct access to the original chapter that first discussed the practical usefulness of Glaser and Strauss’ theory of awareness of dying (1965). In this nearly 50 year old chapter, the co-founders of grounded theory explicate four interrelated properties of application of theory to practice. They present requirements of fit, that the theory must be readily understandable by laymen in the area, that it must be sufficiently general to be applicable to a multitude of diverse situations in the substantive area, and that it must allow the user partial control over the structure, process, and substantive area as it changes through time. By controllable, they mean that the theory must provide a theoretical foothold in the realities of a situation.

For anyone interested in the gradual development of grounded theory, the next chapter, Chapter 5, sheds new light on what happened between the time that *Awareness of Dying* was published in 1965 until the same applying chapter was reprinted in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). As explicated in a footnote, only minor changes were made. The two interesting questions for the GT historian are, of course, the following: What minor changes were made? And, what changes or modifications are trackable from 1967 to 2014?

Of general interest is also the chapter on the uses of formal grounded theory, which is a reprint from Dr. Glaser’s book entitled *Doing Formal Grounded Theory* (2007). Uses that are discussed in this chapter include lectures, readings, guiding research, consultations, correcting extant theory by modification, giving deeper but transcending understandings, extending the general implications of a theory, and the cumulative building up of theory. In this chapter, the author returns to the major distinctions between conceptual applications, which are probable and modifiable to fit the area, and application of descriptive generalization, which seldom fit and soon become outdated.

I am happy that the seminal, but somewhat neglected, work on grounded action is made more widely accessible through this new book. The chapter entitled Grounded action: Achieving optimal and sustainable change, was written by Odis E. Simmons and Toni Gregory. As the authors explain,

Grounded action is grounded theory with an added action component in which actions are systematically derived from a systematically derived explanatory grounded theory. Actions are grounded in a grounded theory in the same way that grounded theory is grounded in the data. (Simmons & Gregory, 2014, p. 130)

The authors of this chapter distinguish between explanatory theory and operational theory. They see explanatory theory as a provider of a grounded theoretical foothold for action planning and implementation. They provide a number of arguments for engaging in grounded action when doing change. It is hard not to agree with their arguments for grounding plans for change in grounded theories. The question is of course to what extent is it possible to distinguish between explanatory theory and operational theory.

Finally, the three last chapters are reprints by Birks and Mills, Artinian et al., and Walsh. Whereas Birks and Mills argue that grounded theories should be evaluated before they are applied, Artinian, Giske, Satinovic, Hjalphult, and Cone discuss what they call the intervention mode of grounded theory, and Welsh argues that grounded theory might help avoiding research misconduct in quantitative studies. Dr. Glaser frames these chapters with his own comments.

Applying Grounded Theory: A Neglected Option is the second book by Barney G. Glaser this year. After writing more than 20 books and numerous articles on grounded theory, Dr. Glaser still finds methodological voids to fill and produces more GT literature than ever. He does so in an openminded, and yet somewhat strict manner which I personally find intriguing and inspiring. In the 190 pages of what Dr. Glaser insists is a neglected option, readers are invited to explore the potential application of grounded theories from many perspectives. The book systematically responds to all the issues raised in the introduction, and ends with two more pages where the author raises many questions that only future research can answer.

I learned a lot from this book. Dr. Glaser's ways of making the implicit explicit intrigue me in this book. His writings during the past 50 years provide a conceptual richness which is formally and informally applicable in most areas of life. So yes, I agree, you get far with a good concept, but it is good to know about the wider effects and potentials of conceptual creation, too.

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teaching PhD and DNS students, methods, and analysis. He published over 20 articles on this research and the dying research. Since then, Glaser has written nearly 20 more books using grounded theory and about grounded theory, and countless articles. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate from Stockholm University.

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