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By Barney G. Glaser PhD, Hon PhD

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The Grounded Theory Perspective: Its Origins and Growth

By Barney G. Glaser PhD, Hon PhD

The book is about the origins and growth of grounded theory (GT) as developed and written by Barney G. Glaser. It is not written to compete or compare with other QDA methods. The competition with other perspectives is up to the reader to write up, if he so desires. My goal in this paper is to write up the GT perspective clearly and historically to date so it can be used by others in research and the rhetorical wrestle between different perspectives. As GT spreads throughout the world a clear view of the GT perspective is constantly needed and requested from me by researchers for doing GT and for trying to explain the method to others, particularly supervisors and peer reviewers.

There is an immense amount of writings on aspects of the GT perspective, often mixed with other perspectives, thus confusing its use. I trust this paper will help clarify GT's perspective with no remodeling. I am not saying that GT is better than other methodologies. I am just saying the GT method stands on its own and produces excellent conceptual theory. Let other QDA methodologies stand on their own as they wish. This paper will just show the difference in methodologies, as the reader may see. It is not written to correct other methodologies. I have written many books on the GT perspective. I trust this paper will bring most of the GT perspectives under one cover.

GT emerged as a fledgling methodology when analyzing the data on dying in hospitals, (*Awareness of Dying*, 1965). Awareness Context theory took the world of research by storm. We were constantly asked how we did it. In 1967 we published our beginning formulations of GT in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by Glaser and Strauss. It was our first attempt to write a method that closed the gap between theory and method. We focused on procedures for grounding theory not on verification of theory. We called the methodology Grounded Theory. We put to rest the 100% focus on the verifying of grand theory which was all conjectured. We discovered that GT provided us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications that fit.

It was our explanations that were the beginning of codifying GT as a methodology. The key elements of the theory were that the concepts in the theory should have fit and relevance. So many concepts in the world of social research were conjectural, that is reified and not relevant to the area or the participants. To gain fit and relevance the concepts had to be based on data in the field and be relevant to the participants. In short, they had to be grounded. They also had to be conceptual so that they could be integrated by a theoretical code into a conceptual theory. The theoretical code that seemed to fit the dying study was context theory. The total product was an emergent grounded theory of Awareness Contexts.

How to generate grounded concepts for a grounded theory needed to be articulated. So, I wrote a paper explaining how to generate grounded patterns to be named as concepts. It was the "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis" published in 1965 in *Social Problems*. It dealt with the comparing of data from different respondents to find interchangeable indicators which showed a grounded pattern. This became a GT procedure to generate enough concepts for a theory. In generating the concepts, a main concern of the participants emerged with a core concept that continually handled the concern. The emergent concepts often run as exceptions to the conjectured trend. Thus our perspective was to start off knowing nothing, in contrast to the typical research plan of knowing the problem before hand. GT became a no preconceptions method. We let the participants tell us what to research with fit and relevance. When their problem emerges, the participants will spill with data talking about it. The emergent problem is the focus of a GT research, no matter how distant it is from the original conjectured problem. This always happens as part of the GT perspectives: that is, no preconceptions. GT only researches the patterns which emerge as going on.

In our book on awareness of dying, theoretical coding emerged as a procedure for organizing the concepts. It was context analysis. Soon the theoretical code "basic social process" became popular. These organizing codes came after conceptualization, however easy it would have been to force them ahead of emergent conceptualization. With *Awareness of Dying* the grounded theory perspective had begun.

The power of theoretical codes was hard to resist for forcing data. Anselm liked the theoretical code of status passage. He wanted a book about dying as a status passage, so we wrote *Time for Dying* (1968). It was part emergent and part forced. It never sold well. It did not have the grab that *Awareness of Dying* did. For me it proved the value of staying 100% open to the emergent.

Theoretical codes have general implications which are hard to resist. Thus Anselm and I wrote a formal theory called *Status Passage* in 1971. The first systematic study of society as a negotiated order of interlocked careers and changes in status. It was based on various readings that could be conceptualized as status passages, infused with the conjectural wisdoms of advanced academics. It did not sell beyond a few copies. Again it proved to me the value of staying 100% open to the emergent. Again *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity* (1969) was a formal theory by Strauss based on conjecture. It did not sell but a few copies. Again convincing me of the grab and power of staying 100% emergent to keep a theory relevant with conceptual fit.

The power and grab of a 100% emergent grounded theory thrilled me personally with prospects. Thus I wrote three pure GT monographs about how real life goes on. They were easy to write since there was no conjecture, just conceptualization of data. They almost wrote themselves as the data (conceptualized) come through me. The first of the three books was *Organizational Scientist: Their Professional Careers* (1964) which dealt with scientists receiving an average amount of recognition for their research. Second was *Second Deeds of Trust: How to Make Money Safely* (1969) which was about mortgage backed investments, the investments in my finance firm. Safety of investment was the main concern. And third, *Experts Versus Laymen: A Study of the Patsy and the Subcontractor*

(1972). The main concern was how to build a house without a contractor when not knowing construction. In writing these books and the dying books I discovered that writing up data was much faster than thinking up conjectures to suit a perspective which could be very irrelevant. Also I discovered that GT writing was a write-up, not a writing from groundless conjecture. Further, the main concern of these areas in these books had much interest to readers. Their relevance and fit gave them grab and sales.

Further, to make the GT perspective known I published three very thick GT readers full of GT papers. They were *Examples of GT* (1993), *More GT Methodology* (1994) and in two large volumes *GT 1984 to 1994* (1995). I had discovered that exemplifying was a very good way to spread the GT perspective safely. GT sells itself with its grab and its general universal implications. In short, I realized that discovering a theory from one data source gives it a general conceptual application to many data sources. For example, "supernormalizing" theory, discovered in a study of heart attack victims, can be used in many areas that produce physical stress. I extended my theory of exemplifying as a way of training researchers to do GT in my introduction to another reader put out by Judith Holton and myself, *The GT Seminar Reader* (2007), in which we included 24 well done GT papers. I also used exemplifying theory to produce a reader in 1996 which exemplified eleven basic social process theories. At the time basic social process was a popular theoretical code. The BSP theories came from dissertations that led to awarding the authors a PhD.

I also realized that a reader of several articles on a problem area or topic could be data for a formal grounded theory, so in 1968 I edited a reader *Organizational Careers: A Source Book for Theory*. It had 63 articles on organizational careers, which were suitable for generating several formal theories. My general perspective on GT methodology use and production was growing. To show this procedure I used formal theory methodology to compare all the articles in the reader *The SAGE Handbook of GT* (2007), Bryant and Charmaz editors. My formal theory ended up a book called *Jargonizing: The Use of the GT Vocabulary* (2009). I had discovered that GT was not only a methodology but also a vocabulary for expressing all QDA methods that had no, or limited, vocabulary of its own. Jargonizing is powerfully used in remodeling QDA to sound like GT. The main concern is how to make QDA sound like it is GT in both lofty talk and research procedures.

In the early 2000's jargonizing helped the increasing spread of GT, but it did not help the clear spread of GT research procedures. As jargonizing helped the versioning of GT it generally distorted several of the GT procedures which supported its general perspective of emergence. To clarify GT's emergent procedures I planned three books and wrote them on specific procedural perspectives to clarify their GT use. The first was *The GT Perspective: Conceptualization Contrasted with Description* (2001). This book was my effort to clarify the distinction of conceptual theory generation compared to QDA's descriptive methods and their positivistic claim on data. I wanted to show that GT humbly stands on its own as a generalizing conceptually generated method and was not descriptive.

This book helped, but still descriptive methods were remodeling GT, so in 2003 I wrote another GT perspective book called *GT Perspectives II: Description's Remodeling of GT*. It dealt extensively with the procedural contrast and conflict between descriptive and conceptual procedures. The effort was to insure the GT procedural perspectives as

conceptual and scientific compared to normal descriptions of everyday life. In these two books I emphasize the differences in generalizing between GT and QDA methods. GT produces conceptual generality that is abstract of time, place and people. In comparison, description depends on data accuracy to prove a generality. It is stale dated, as description changes quickly over time. Conceptual generality is simply modified conceptually to suit the data it is being applied to. But conceptual generality does not need to be applied to data, as it stands on its own. For example, "routing" theory can be applied or can just be discussed generally. Worrisome accuracy is a big issue in description for asserting accuracy. In contrast the GT constant comparative method makes sure that the emergent concepts are grounded patterns which remain no matter what and without forcing. The conceptual perspective on generality of GT is vital to maintain.

These two books went a long way toward maintaining the GT perspective, but more was needed. A book was needed on staying open to the emergence of theoretical codes as opposed to using the everyday theoretical codes (such as dimensions, conditions, causes, types, processes etc.) which are so easy to force on the data, as they are based on everyday parlance. They prematurely provide a theoretical code by forcing formation onto the confused states of GT that are necessary for emergence. For this perspective I wrote the book *The GT Perspective III: Theoretical Coding* (2005). Theoretical codes are needed to integrate the write up of a GT and have powerful grab if left to the emergent from sorting memos. They can be simple like a process, types or a dimension or complex like amplifying causal looping. They put the ceiling on emergence of the GT theory.

This book on theoretical codes started a confusion with the formal theory perspective. They sounded alike, especially as when a theoretical code led to a theory when the data was left out. For example, a paper on desisting residual selves, without the data, sounds like a formal theory, but it is not. A formal theory is a GT based on several different groups of participants or data. For example, a theory of proximity ethics can be based on several populations and thusly becomes a formal theory. Many substantive GT's based on one population have formal theory implications and are used as such. To make them formal theory just add to the research on different populations. In sum, to clarify the confusion between theoretical codes and form theory I wrote the book *Doing Formal GT: A Proposal* (2007). My GT perspective was growing and in print with these four books.

As I was writing these books to clarify the GT perspective, researchers were asking me how did my book *Basics of GT Analysis* (1992) fit in. It was written about perspective when GT was barely named and known only from reading *Awareness of Dying*. In 1988 Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin wrote a methods book called *Basics of Qualitative Analysis* that emphasized GT as a forcing procedure of analysis, that was considered GT. I was upset and asked Anselm to correct the forcing perspective to emergence. He said "no," and "if I do not like it, write a book about it" ...I did and published *Basics of GT Analysis: Emergence vs Forcing* (1992) in an effort to set the GT perspective straight. *Basics* still sells well 24 years later. The general GT perspective was rescued.

I published two more books with Strauss to broaden the GT perspective in the 1970's. They were *Anguish: A Case History of a Dying Trajectory* (1970) and *Chronic Illness and the Quality of Life* (1975). The theoretical code of status passage became

popular and was brought out theoretically in these two books. We wrote the book *Status Passage: A Formal GT Theory* (1971) grounded in our growing knowledge of various status passages. Dying and chronic illness as patient status passages were grounded in GT research in various hospitals.

All these books dealt with qualitative data and I was continually asked what about quantitative GT. Does it exist. It did in my book *Organizational Scientists: Their Professional Careers* (1964). To bring this book into the GT perspective I wrote a methodology book: *Doing Quantitative GT* (2008) to show how to do research for generating a quantitative GT. The first chapter was a history of GT based on quantitative data using Larzarsfeld's methodology called elaboration analysis. I also backed up my books with a reader called *Organizational Careers: A Source Book for Theory* (1968). It had 63 articles in it to use for generating more career theory. Organizations offer careers, I wrote, let's have some theory about organizational careers, which are so vital.

By the early 2000's I was satisfied that the GT perspective was in good use in papers and dissertations, in spite of the increase in remodeling and multiple versioning in books and articles. Many people were getting their PhD and having their GT accepted in journals. *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of GT* (1978) and *Doing GT: Issues and Discussion* (1998) I published to answer many perspective questions and procedural research issues to reinforce the GT perspective. They sold overwhelmingly and still sell well today. Researchers tell me that they want to do GT "right."

But given the worldwide spread of GT, I was receiving a large number of emails which were cries for help, especially with GT procedures. Thus, I started and did write five more books on GT procedures which adhered to the GT perspective. They were *Getting Out of the Data: GT Conceptualization* (2005), *Stop Write: Writing GT* (2012), *No Preconceptions: A vital GT Dictum* (2008), *Memoing: A vital GT Procedure* (2014) and *Applying GT: A Neglected Option* (2013). These books on procedures answered a multitude of questions originating from the start of doing a GT research project to finalizing it in a paper or dissertation. They preserve the GT perspective as fully grounded.

To further support the answers to the 100s of requests for procedure clarifications, Judith Holton and I published a reader, in 2012, of 19 articles taken from our journal the GT Review. It was the *GT Review Methodology Reader*. Again it preserved the GT perspective which is always under the rhetorical wrestle about which methodology perspective is best.

One frequent cry for help is "how do I convince my supervisor that GT is ok to use for a dissertation." This is a very fateful question of certification. A PhD candidate will put much time and money into getting the PhD. During his research his life will be on hold. Convincing the supervisor wedded to another QDA perspective is difficult for a beginner researcher. To answer the question, I wrote *Choosing GT: A Part Book and Part Reader of Expert Advice* (2014) for candidates to learn the pro GT arguments and to simply show the book to a supervisor to read for himself. Again I codified the GT perspective.

As the reader can see, over the last 40 years and over 35 books I have put out much energy and many books to establish and grow the GT methodology and keep its perspective pure and safe from remodeling. As a result, it is spreading throughout the world as a no

preconception concept generator of conceptual theory methodology. It suits a methodology for the PhD dissertation, since it automatically provides the desired original contribution required for the PhD.