



# GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

## An international journal

---

Preserving Autonomy: The Cry for Help

*Barney G. Glaser*

December 2019

*Grounded Theory Review*, Vol 18 (Issue #1), 3-12

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/>

## **Preserving Autonomy: The Cry for Help**

Barney G. Glaser

Editor's note: Preserving Autonomy was first published in Glaser's 2016, *The Cry for Help: Preserving Autonomy Doing GT Research* and re-published as the first chapter in Glaser's 2019 *Chapter One: A Grounded Theory Review Reader*, both published by Sociology Press. Preserving Autonomy has been lightly edited for clarity and context.

The most desirable cry for help is a specific question requiring only a direct specific answer. However, this seldom occurs in over half the cries for help. Most requests are not that simple nor answers that brief. In this chapter we see the amazing variations in request and replies for help. The novice proceeds as best as possible to the highly valued goal—the PhD.

The cry for help with a specific question getting a specific answer can free up the novice to maintain his autonomy in completing his dissertation. Some questions are too general for a specific answer and thus the novice may be referred to a training seminar, a network of GT researchers, or a mentor, etc. Sometimes the learning answer can change the novice's way of thinking about life. When the answer clinches getting the PhD, the novice can become so thrilled that he may email and phone the mentor many times to thank him. The value of CGT [classic grounded theory] research for obtaining a PhD is so great it can stimulate a long period of sweet talk between novice and mentor. There is much appreciation for a good helpful answer beyond belief on the part of the novice.

New novices are usually very shy about getting help from a senior GT mentor. They usually focus on one next procedural question in their research. The shy novice often says, "I have one last question for you." One question and answer is usually not enough to put the novice's autonomy at stake. If the mentor knows a lot about the area of study and the next procedure . . . in the research, the novice's autonomy could be at stake for a time. Novices best stick with one humble question and trust their autonomy. He should avoid a takeover by a non-experienced GT mentor, who can change his view of a GT. The academic mentor from a non-GT department can use the power of a departmental perspective to take over the novice. Then the novice could lose the control of his GT autonomy to the social structural department power. The mentor can be a supervisor, committee member, peer reviewer, or just a friend.

A little brief help can last for years with positive results. A little can go a long way, punctuated at the end of researched final theory by obtaining a PhD and excessive thank yous from the novice. A novice from the Philippines wrote me, "I am pleased to inform you that after two years from the troubleshooting seminar that I have successfully passed my final PhD defense. The trouble shooting seminar helped me a lot. I could not have done the PhD without your help. My gratitude to you."

The novice must be careful not to yield or give away his power of autonomy given by the GT methodology. He may yield his autonomy to satisfy his desperate need for help. But no matter how desperate he may feel the need, he should be careful not to give up his power of autonomy to a mentor who takes over control of the research. And the mentor

may know little about GT and advise according to a descriptive QDA [qualitative data analysis], sanctioned by a departmental perspective. A true GT mentor will usually not take this control. The goal of the novice is to be freed up, not entrapped, by a mentor.

Some cries are too general for a specific answer and the novice is referred to a training CGT program, a seminar or a mentor with time to train. The cry can get an answer that changes the novice's whole way of thinking about life, such as stopping preconceptions, looking for behavior patterns and letting things in life emerge. The novice becomes thrilled with the CGT method and shares his joy with many colleagues. Another answer can clinch receiving the PhD and the novice is so thrilled that he cannot stop emailing his mentor his appreciation. For some mentors this is a nuisance, for others they share in the joy and even boast to colleagues how effective their help was. In some cases, the successful novice will ask to join a CGT research team as a strong and ready CGT researcher; however doubtful this may be to others or his mentor.

The cry for help in research for obtaining a PhD is so valuable that it often stimulates much sweet talk when requesting a helpful answer and when an effective answer is received it can stimulate effusive sweet talk thanks. Appreciation beyond belief can easily flow from the novice who is getting the PhD. It can be overwhelming for the mentor and seem like an apparent sacrifice of the novice's autonomy by a novice wanting more and more help. Keeping up the successful help can become a problem for the mentor, when he must cut off contact with the novice for lack of time and resources.

I shall deal with these issues previewed above and many other issues in the cry for help, a major issue being preserving autonomy while being helped—as the reader can see from the preview of problems above. The reader will likely think of many more problems. The goal of this book is to help, maintain, use, and enjoy the autonomy provided by GT, while getting help. My data includes emails from over 100 novices throughout the world crying for help while doing GT research for obtaining the valued PhD degree. This goal is highly valued as GT spreads throughout the world and novices devote their total lives to earning the PhD using GT. I deal with the many patterned consequences of type of cries, threats to autonomy, and how they are dealt with by novices and mentors. Sweet talk and excessive thanking are major variables for novices in this situation.

The reason for offering this book is clear. As grounded theory spreads, its use to produce dissertations to obtain the PhD needs help to preserve generating GT correctly and to maintain its value. Novices, soon to become "doctors" based on GT dissertations, need this support and reputation of their mentors. They sacrifice a few years of life to devote themselves to GT research for achieving an approved dissertation for the PhD. Solving important research issues correctly is very important to these novices and especially so at the beginning of their GT research.

Many problems emerge throughout the GT research, especially at the beginning when no preconceptions lead to much confusion. Help is necessary, vital, and very valuable to get to a conceptual level. We experience many cries for help from beginners from all over the world. Thus, I hope this book will supply some of the help that is surely and so fatefully needed. GT methodology is not simple; thus, GT questions are not simple, nor are

the answers simple. Help is needed on a myriad of GT procedures as GT spreads with “grab” throughout the academic world and the cries for help increase and spread with it. Hopefully this book will help those novices in need of help to find the help they need to produce worthy GT theories.

### **Autonomy**

One reason many novices choose using GT is that it offers individualized autonomy. No academic department, as yet, has chosen GT as their perspective and methodology. The choice of GT is individualized and can put the novice in conflict with his departmental perspectives, which is usually a version of a QDA methodology. GT attracts on the individual level with its autonomy. GT does not attract on the group level. Most often, then, the novice has the task of convincing his supervisor and PhD committee of the value of his choice of GT. This conflict puts his autonomy at risk.

By autonomy I mean total freedom for the researcher of letting the research participants main concern emerge with the core conceptual variable and sub-core variables that continually resolve it. Many other GT procedures require and provide autonomy also. Avoiding a takeover by a senior mentor is vital, especially by a supervisor with a different methodology, but also with those mentors who have the GT perspective and are just controlling. Most QDA versions of qualitative data research require preconception of the research problem and its solving before research begins. In contrast, GT methodology allows a do-not-know approach to an emergent full discovery to put into a conceptual theory. Correcting existing research conjectures is not the goal. Just generating an emergent conceptual theory is the goal. Correcting existing research may be a consequence of a GT if it emerges. Losing the autonomy GT gives the research is a major loss. Hopefully, this book will stop any block on autonomy and help preserve the joy of freedom of discovery in doing GT.

This autonomy that is so attractive to many novices has many problems with several dimensions. Claiming autonomy when doing research with a structure of control by superiors can be highly problematic for the novice. Level of success varies from losing all control, thus failure to get autonomy, to achieving a high level of autonomy and being sometimes quite alone with no help. Most PhD candidates have been trained in their student careers to seek expert help from mentors and to seek and “ok” as their research proceeds. Though autonomy is a big draw to choosing GT for a dissertation, it can become very frightening about doing it right. “Am I using the GT procedures correctly?” [...] “Am I doing it right?” is their constant question. So, they seek help, if only a constant OK.

Also, many who have chosen CGT for its autonomy do not realize until they start their research that they cannot tolerate autonomy. They need a constant OK and some help and are almost paralyzed without it. They need a mentor available at a moment’s notice. Trusting to mentors for a cry for help can be difficult at times of research difficulty. Thus, the autonomy offered by GT procedures is a mixed bag. The autonomy varies with the proper use of GT procedures. It is not a manifest glory of freedom that it sounds like to many novices at first glance when choosing GT.

Generating a grounded theory when done correctly with autonomy at all stages goes fast, taking less than a year to generate an emergent theory. Yet, I have talked with novices who have taken up to five years waiting for OKs. They are bogged down, especially at the beginning stages of confusion. "Am I doing it right" and "will my supervisor approve" are constant concerns for novices who have foregone their autonomy. They are constantly questioning for help.

Tolerating the beginning confusion and "not knowing" that goes with starting a GT research project can become intolerable autonomously. Patience with confusion and trusting to the emergent is required so existing frameworks and preconceptions do not force the research. The "aha" eureka moment will come soon from constant comparisons of interchangeable indicators, but not immediately. The experiential growth with clarity that comes over time in doing GT requires autonomy from routine help. Only experienced GT researchers are suitable to giving moments of help that enforce the novice's autonomy with direct, brief realizations.

The initial confusion that comes with coding by constant comparisons of indicators before emergent conceptualization taxes autonomy to the maximum. Preconceptions and seeking authoritative help eases the autonomous responsibility, yet undermines it if not careful. Few novices can take it. Many cry for help to be sure they are "doing it right." Once concepts emerge for a main concern and a core category and a few subcategories, autonomy can go into full force. The autonomous novice now can go it alone and be told nothing to threaten his autonomy. So, novices with some doubts should trust to emergence and preserve their autonomy. It will be solidified by emergence of conceptual discovery. Do not yield autonomous control for safety out of fear. Confusion from constant comparisons and preconscious processing are part of the beginning GT research process. Only a well-trained, experienced GT mentor will know how to help without taking away autonomy with preconceptions from a departmental perspective. Good help only takes a few moments of support and with foreign students adding a little help with a methodology written in English.

The intense rhetorical wrestle between senior researchers on the merits of GT versus other versions of jargonized GT and also straight QDA may also threaten or erode the novice's autonomy. He may be forced by his academic department to support and adhere to a methodology perspective that denies of limits autonomy on many aspects of GT, for example in collecting data procedures of choosing a problem before it emerges. . . . The novice is too new in research GT to argue with a sophisticated senior researcher his way out of these controls that erode autonomy. It takes a very strong novice to win such rhetorical wrestle theory arguments, and thus keep his autonomy in the face of such pressure. The senior often has the PhD degree in hand to use to win by pressure the argument. Autonomy is easily eroded in such cases.

"Am I on the right track" is a question expressed by many autonomous novices, no matter what stage of GT theory generation they are at. Their autonomy may leave them without normal ongoing "OKs" on current progress from PhD supervisors or committee members. This is a normal need of the autonomous novice and should not be allowed to erode autonomy, especially at the beginning stage of GT research. Toward the end of

research, the "OK" may become more important as a generated theory is about to be submitted to seniors for the PhD. Thus, there is a growing need for the "OK" for final drafts that will confirm the novice's autonomy and success in obtaining the PhD award. The novice is not left alone forever. Approval is necessary now. GT is not like other QDA methodology. GT has a delayed action learning curve. It requires patience with autonomy in the beginning stages. It moves forward much faster during the sorting memos stage and the resulting first drafts should get a brief "OK" as the novice plans his submittal for the PhD. In short, autonomy does not mean totally alone at the end. It means that the novice's judgments prevail among "OKs" on submission issues with committee and defense of the dissertation.

The autonomous novice is rewarded as the complete owner and discoverer of his theory as he seeks necessary approvals. Autonomy pays off with self-satisfaction as he approaches the PhD. Novices needing constant help and "OKs" at later stages may never experience this rewarding self-satisfied autonomy, though they may get their degree under supervision. GT can offer the autonomous reward that attracts many an independent-oriented novice. These novices tend to be independent in every day life as a natural inclination. This explains why GT is still independent based and not yet department based. The excitement that comes with discovering a main concern and the core category that continually resolves it confirms for the novice his safe autonomy that can be finally shared as a discovered grounded theory as real. It is no longer to be evaluated and corrected.

Autonomy helps the novice decide on his own many vital procedural issues when doing CGT. Some are: how to vet the participants without preconceiving their thoughts, when to theoretically sample, when are memos mature enough to sort, when is enough interchangeable indicators enough for generating a concept so data collection can stop, is a main concern with a core category "OK," and many more issues to decide, which materially affect the resulting generated theory. These many decisions keep the research going at a good pace. Needing constant help from senior mentors and colleagues before making these procedural decisions can slow the research down too long and usually unnecessarily. Autonomous decisions can keep the research moving at a good pace and the decisions become self-correcting to achieve "grabby" emergence. "Am I doing it right" gets self-answered all along the way by what is generated by autonomous self-correcting decisions. Waiting for supervisors with lingering adequate office hours to review and comment can take much time and bog down the GT research. Autonomous deciding can keep the novice on the "right track" with a comparatively early pay off with an emergent theory. Discovering a significant main concern and core category clinches the autonomous novice's position. The personal reward backed by others praising the GT is wonderful for the autonomous novice. Collaborators and heavy supervision were not necessary.

## **Mentoring**

Of course, the right kind of help helps if it is help with supporting autonomy. Here is an expressive note from a recent honor-receiving PhD who received autonomy maintaining support from three experienced GT mentors. "There are no words to describe the sense of "awe" and deep honor to be trained in GT from the master seminal theorist, himself, Barney. It was a life-changing experience. I used several of Barney's quotes supporting

my autonomy like 'you are confused, stay that way, just do it or drop the ideology.' I wish to thank Dr. Helen Scott and Dr. Judith Holton for their methodological mentoring and counseling." Thus, good mentors help preserve the autonomy provided by GT methodology and they ensure excellent results.

I have many colleagues who give the right kind of help, fully supporting the novice's GT research autonomy leading to successful PhD dissertations. Also, many of them are giving trouble-shooting seminars like I do to help novices and help them help each other with methodological issues. Thus, autonomy allows the novice to be "whatever" to help other novices. They have and establish networks of support using the internet. In these networks and trouble-shooting seminars autonomy is not threatened by heavy evaluation of seniors steeped in other perspectives. It is supported and applauded by the joy of discovery shared by others. This is in stark contrast to the usual demanding use of preconceived formats typical in academic practice of routine QDA methods. My model of the trouble-shooting seminar is now used all over the world by my former students. Many excellent GT dissertations have come from these seminars, often done by novices who were incredulous at first and wanting to be told preconceptions on what to do.

### **Coding**

Constant comparative coding of interchangeable indicators often leads to much confusion for novices in the beginning of a research. The cry for help with "Am I doing it right" is strong, which threatens autonomy. Open coding can shock the novice researcher when he discovers that the emergent main concern can be strikingly different than the one he preconceived and especially so if the preconceived one was according to the academic departmental perspective of a field. And the preconceived problems mostly are preconceived since research on the field's academic problem is supposed to contribute to the field. Emergence of the main concern can take the novice into a different field. I have seen this many times. It is to be expected. Staying open with no preconceptions is the procedure that leads to emergence.

For example, studying the risk behavior of steplejacks turned into a study of voyeurism. Studying the low self-image of prostitutes in a Reno House turned into a study of perfection of service. Studying the career perspectives of financial executives turned into a study of financial crisis survival. Studying the abandonment of family home life in the Height Asbury turned into a study of vaguing out. I could go on with many more examples. Many novices call me with wondering what to do when the emergent problem is so different from the preconceived one. "I am supposed to study XX and it is not there" is their cry for help. The answer to end their confusion is simply to do a theory of "what is there." The answer gives them back their autonomy to study the emergent concerns. Studying what is supposed to be there and was not there threatens their autonomy from superiors who could not tolerate not knowing in advance. To repeat, tolerating confusion and no preconception while waiting for the emergent main concern takes autonomy. Performing the data with standard field jargon to get rid of confusion is a loss of autonomy. It blocks the thrill of discovery that is so exciting to share with others. It blocks autonomy and the surety of generating a contribution to the discovered field. Allowing emergence of a "grabby" main concern and core category confirms the novice's right to his autonomy offered by the GT

methodology. If the novice asks a supervisor who is not GT aware, he is liable to be derailed by another descriptive version of a QDA and lose his autonomy. Keeping autonomous and following GT coding procedures soon results in preconscious generating discovery. So, the novice tolerates with autonomy the coding confusion and patiently engages in the excitement of discovery. The cry for help becomes a cry of excitement over being the sole generator of a discovered theory. Supervisors can no longer undermine the novice's confidence in his autonomy.

The preconscious processing that goes on during constant comparative coding and feels like confusion requires autonomy from others. Otherwise, preconscious processing that yields realizing patterns in the data can easily be snuffed out by preconceived forcing suggested by others who cannot tolerate confusion. This is especially so with senior mentors who cannot tolerate their student's confusion and require it being structured with the perspective demands of a departmental PhD program. Procedures of analysis from other QDA methods that allow pre thought are often used to structure confusion by forcing clarity on it. They are rescue efforts that undermine autonomy from a GT point of view.

Constructive help encourages keeping up comparative coding of interchangeable indicators with patience waiting for emergence of categories. The eureka moment will happen. Pattern emergence is natural and normal. It happens for all of us in every-day normal life all the time. In GT, it is simply seen and tapped as a conceptual procedure to discover what patterns are going on in the data. Confusion should not be seen as ineptness by senior mentors with other methodological perspectives that force data by reporting perspectives to avoid confusion.

The interminable rhetorical wrestle with no solution between multiple versions of GT and QDA methodologies can easily entrap the novice into a loss of GT perspective and into confused perspectives that can result in a loss of grounded autonomy. He will join any perspective to rescue his self-confidence and a bit of autonomy from the wrestle confusion. In any case, the probability is high that he will lose autonomy by commitment to a QDA method that requires forcing categories in lieu of autonomous emergence. Only GT provides the clear autonomy that allows emergence of whatever discovery may emerge, irrespective of whatever version perspectives a QDA may provide beforehand. Self-confidence is required to accept with patience GT autonomy for its no preconception purpose.

I always advise, "Just do it" regarding GT. The rhetorical wrestle will not stop. It is academic life to constantly argue for perspectives one over another; even more as an academic ages. Novices are often forced to adhere to a perspective to be part of an academic department and part of academic life. It takes a lot of self-confidence to ignore these socially structured perspectives and just stay open with autonomy to what GT procedures allow. To choose autonomy in the face of fear of getting no emergent categories takes knowing oneself and liking the autonomy given by GT and following GT procedures and trusting to the coming of the eureka moment that comes with the emergence of the main concern and core category. For help, the novice should trust only an experienced GT mentor. As one student wrote me, "The results are fantastic if GT is used as designed." Then, the novice can glory in his autonomy of contribution and the rhetorical wrestle is

forgotten, as it could not achieve the goal of discovery and contribution of a good product. Preserving the novice's autonomy preserves the general strength of GT procedures used autonomously. The rhetorical wrestle undermines this strength to no advantage in achieving a worthy contribution.

I often receive a copy of a GT PhD dissertation for one or both of two reasons. One is great pride in achieving the PhD with a GT dissertation and two is thanking me for my help along the way. There is a great threat of being required for major revisions to make it consistent with department perspectives and imagery. Thus, I receive a desperate cry for help in dealing with the PhD committee. My success in helping with revisions in this final stage of obtaining the degree is iffy and questionable. The novice's autonomy that got the novice this far can be strongly resented by committee members. Thus, the cry for help can go on and on until the committee signs off to accept the dissertation. Revisions can take months and often need the constant help of experienced GT mentors. During all this, the novice's autonomy is lessened or lost, hopefully just for the time being.

### **Jargonizing**

Jargonizing satisfies to a minor degree the cry for help and preserving the novice's autonomy. It gives a language to the confusing procedures of one's GT research. Thus, the novice can explain what he is doing in the GT research like he knows what he is doing as an autonomous researcher. This jargonizing can go on irrespective of what he is actually doing at whatever stage of the research he is at. In short, he can sound in autonomous control. This jargonizing can make his research autonomy unassailable on the word level. It is only by having his actual procedures exposed that his autonomy can be in question. For example, saying he is theoretically sampling sounds great, but is the novice actually doing it. Solid autonomy comes in action, not words.

As noted grounded theorist Hans Thulesius wrote me, "GT jargon is slowly spreading all over the world in different languages. The spread of doing the method is way behind it and novice oriented questing for action help and assurance is beyond the jargon." Jargonizing when used wisely can be very helpful in maintaining autonomy while the actual research progress catches up with action. Often enough, the novice will need a senior mentor to jargonize the PhD committee for patience that an impending dissertation will be a significant contribution. Such polite pleasing jargonizing help by a senior to a committee can be crucial to the novice's finalizing the PhD dissertation with autonomy.

### **Post PhD**

Post PhD can be a very needy time for help to maintain autonomy. The intense priority attention to the novice PhD and his research is over. The PhD returns, in all likelihood, to the mixed methodological and theory perspective of an academic department that can make him feel quite alone. It can be quite demanding on his autonomy to be perpetually in the middle of the rhetorical wrestle with no solution in the offing. The wrestle is perpetual in academia, so his autonomy is subject to the continual stress of no resolution to an unsolvable conflict. One solution is to travel globally to conferences on GT to network and share on the strength and joy of autonomy in research. Skype and email provide the solution to a lesser extent in connecting the lone PhD novice for autonomous strength from

sharing. This networking and regrouping among GT post PhD novices is very important to keep GT going and subsequent research from not slipping back to QDA forcing and thereby losing the autonomy GT provides its next novice dissertation researchers. Networking also helps post PhD depression that comes from being alone with no more intense interest and supervision in one's autonomous work.

### **Flattery**

The introduction to a cry for help for dissertation research is typically some form of flattery to me or a senior mentor. The flattery indicates how important and strong the GT perspective and methodology is for the dissertation research. Novices relate how GT methodology has changed their lives and how it has changed the way they see the world. And then they say they need help with this change in research method perspective. Then the problem is stated typically as a major conflict with supervisor and committee. Of course, there are several resolutions to this conflict. . . . But, simply giving support for the novice's GT perspective helps his confidence and autonomy confirming to supervisors that he has the right to his GT perspective, and he has the right to use GT like so many others have.

The following quote is a typical flattering approach to getting help from some senior mentor (me) unknown to the novice. "Hope this email finds you in good health and spirits. Please allow me to introduce myself first. My name is P and I am a PhD candidate at the University of B in the UK. I admire your work and contribution to the development and contribution of GT to our scientific community. Your work has had tremendous impact on my study and has helped me significantly in my research endeavor." Then comes the cry for help. "However, I am struggling with identifying data to prove the external and internal validity of my concepts. I am aware of the quality and rigor criteria explained in your book, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, but my supervisor disagrees with it and states that I have to use criteria more suitable to the concepts. This disagreement between me and my committee views creates unnecessary tension and confusion in my research journey. Please help."

The issue to explain to the candidate, that is simple enough, is that conflict with committee is very fateful for a PhD candidate and requires help. His autonomy can only go so far with a PhD degree at stake. A super polite request for help is warranted by novices in this conflict with committees and there are many such novices. A little help can go a long way and often saves the academic life and the PhD degree of the novice and preserves his feeling of autonomy.

The novice continues with his cry, "I realize that you are a very busy person but it will help me significantly if you could shed more light on this issue and help me justify my decision to use GT not only with my supervisor, but my committee as well. Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you." In short, this novice does not doubt the help will come since the need is so great and crucial. I, and my colleagues, have seen this kind of help in the PhD dissertation defense needed and given many times. And in the bargain, the novices' autonomy is rescued.

Senior mentors can get great satisfaction in continually mentoring a novice PhD candidate who has a good grasp of GT methodology and is on the verge of generating a significant theory contribution to a field. This often happens in the fields of medicine and

management. Mentor satisfaction is to the maximum. These mentors will argue for and stand firm with pride for the novice against a committee and supervisor who challenge a GT with their own QDA perspective or GT version. The committee has the social structural power to demand extensive revisions. Irrespective of outcome, the novice needs continuous mentoring help in this situation. The mentor may easily feel attacked also with his GT perspective at stake. The novice is fortunate to find a mentor who will stick by him during such conflict.

The novice's cry for help does not stop with the awarding of the PhD.... Here suffice to say that the new PhD wanting to continue with GT will need recommendations for jobs, seminar and workshop appearances, and support and help with publications. His autonomy will be lonely without his mentor. His satisfied mentor is the best source of support for these immediate career needs. He may be asked to join a department as a resident GT teacher, which is in deep conflict with departmental perspective. In this case, to tolerate this, his autonomy will be in dire need of support and legitimation from his past PhD mentor who may be at another school.