



GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

An international journal

The Grounded Theory Bookshelf

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June 2005

Grounded Theory Review, Vol 4 (Issue #3), 103-105

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 Bookshelf

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The Bookshelf provides critical reviews and perspectives on books on theory and methodology of interest to grounded theory. In this issue, Dr. Alvita Nathaniel offers a review of Barney Glaser's new book.

The Grounded Theory Perspective III: Theoretical Coding, Barney G. Glaser (Sociology Press, 2005). Soft Cover, 160 pages. \$ 32.00.

Not intended for a beginner, this book further defines, describes, and explicates the classic grounded theory (GT) method. *Perspective III* lays out various facets of theoretical coding as Glaser meticulously distinguishes classic GT from other subsequent methods. Developed many years after Glaser's classic GT, these methods, particularly as described by Strauss and Corbin, adopt the grounded theory name and engender ongoing confusion about the very premises of grounded theory. Glaser distinguishes between classic GT and the adscititious methods in his writings, referring to remodeled grounded theory and its offshoots as Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) models.

The GT/QDA debate is reminiscent of the schism that developed between the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and his benefactor, William James at the beginning of the last century. Peirce was a brilliant philosopher and scientist. America's most prolific philosopher, Peirce originated the doctrine of pragmatism. Because Peirce's writings were a very high level of abstraction and difficult to understand, James attempted to make them accessible to the popular academic community through his own, more concrete writings. However, James never got it quite right. Unhappy with James, failing to clarify his ideas about pragmatism, and desiring to distinguish his original ideas from those proffered by the more popular James, Peirce eventually changed the name of his own theory to *pragmaticism*. Unfortunately, the new name never caught on and the theory of pragmatism continues to be popularly attributed to William James.

Like Peirce and his theory of pragmatism, Glaser remains faithful to the original premises of classic GT. He continues the battle to distinguish classic GT from QDA, viewing QDA as a rigid method with a low level of abstraction and tendency toward preconception. He outlines in *Perspective III* many ways that QDA violates the foundational ideas

of GT.

In particular, Glaser emphasizes that an understanding of “what is going on” in an area of concern requires openness on the part of the analyst/researcher to the natural emergence of the theoretical code. The theoretical code emerges late in the GT process as the analyst painstakingly hand sorts conceptual memos. This process requires several elements such as the analyst’s proper use of conceptual memos, openness to emergence, perspicacity, and patience. The process is hindered or derailed entirely if the theoretical code is forced through the use of a preconceived theoretical framework, a conditional matrix, discipline specific codes, or “pet” codes.

Glaser effectively clarifies his points through critique of various writers and grounded theorists. He sorts through point by point the writings of grounded theory “experts” from a number of disciplines and comments on their level of understanding of the classic GT method. This discussion will be particularly helpful to Ph.D. students who are trying to learn both the fundamentals and the finer points of the classic grounded theory method. It will also be helpful as background for the Ph.D. student to use in discussions with dissertation/thesis examiners.

Many quotes from what Glaser deems to be good examples of GT are also helpful for clarification purposes. Glaser comments on elements of theories developed within a number of disciplines around the world. The words of the original writers offers helpful examples to illustrate the complex concepts underlying good classic grounded theory. In addition, Glaser offers a few new theoretical codes, which have emerged in grounded theory studies in the last few years.

Perspective III ends with a chapter on the impact of symbolic interaction on grounded theory. This chapter will be welcomed by grounded theory scholars. As anyone who reads grounded theory studies knows, most grounded theory papers include a reference to symbolic interactionism in the discussion of method. In most cases, the analyst never again mentions symbolic interactionism. Glaser views the symbolic interactionism claim to grounded theory as a quest for an ontology and epistemology to justify GT—a quest that is unnecessary. Classic grounded theory, is a “general inductive method, possessed by no discipline, or theoretical perspective, or data type” (p. 145). Glaser voices regret that grounded theory has been taken over by symbolic interactionism, which serves to further remodel

the method. He welcomes symbolic interactionism as one data type among many—all of which are suitable for GT analysis.

In conclusion, *The Grounded Theory Perspective III: Theoretical Coding* is a welcome addition to Barney Glaser's collection of writings about classic grounded theory. As an adjunct to his previous books, especially *Theoretical Sensitivity* and *Doing Grounded Theory*, this book will help both novice and experienced grounded theorists. It serves to clarify areas of confusion about theoretical coding, distinguish classic GT from remodeled GT methods, and answer the symbolic interactionist question. It is a must-have addition to the classic grounded theorist's library.