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From the Editor's Desk: How to Read Classic

Grounded Theory

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## From the Editor's Desk

### How to Read Classic Grounded Theory

Have you wondered how to best read and evaluate grounded theory studies? Contrary to what some people believe, grounded theories are neither stories, lists of themes, nor descriptions, rather they consist of parsimonious rigorously extracted concepts bound by inductively derived theoretical relationships. The network of concepts and theoretical relationships may be invisible to one who is unfamiliar with the method. The purpose of this editorial is to discuss some of the clues a reader might use to determine the quality of a classic grounded theory study. Grounded theory is a general method that can use either quantitative or qualitative data, however qualitative data are most often used, so this paper will focus on qualitative research.

The Grounded Theory Review focuses solely on *classic* grounded theories and methodological papers. Novice or lay readers may be unaware of the subtle elements that indicate a good classic theory. Peer reviewers, on the other hand, are experienced classic grounded theorists, who learned from Barney Glaser, co-originator of the method. The reviewers know what to expect in a classic grounded theory study and what red flags indicate a study might not have adhered to the classic grounded theory method. Here, I describe some elements to help readers know what to expect when reading each section of a classic grounded theory paper and some red flags that indicate the method was not closely followed.

#### Background Section

When reading a published classic grounded theory, you may notice that the background, research problem, literature review, and research question are very general in nature. Although familiar with the substantive area, a classic grounded theorist should not enter a study with preconceptions, biases, and prior hypotheses. Inasmuch as it is possible in an academic system, the grounded theorist should avoid in-depth previous research and conceptual/theoretical literature on the phenomenon of interest. An investigator wants to enter the study as nearly *tabula rasa* as possible. In fact, the investigator will enter the study not even knowing what phenomenon might emerge—thus a pre-investigation pertinent and focused literature review is not possible. Because classic grounded theory is a method of discovery, studies begin when an investigator becomes curious about a given aspect of a substantive area—asking simply, “What is going on” with *this* group of people in *this* situation. So, the background section of a grounded theory paper should be focused on a general discussion of the substantive area, rather than an in-depth discussion of a specific phenomenon. The in-depth literature review occurs only after the theory is discovered. The introductory section of a grounded theory paper should identify the substantive area along with what the general issue of interest.

- What to expect
  - An indication of the author's familiarity with a substantive area and unbiased curiosity about something that is not known.
- Red flags

- Explicit or implicit statements are present that indicate the author began the study with preconceived notions, received professional issues, a very specific research question, hypotheses, or other indications of bias.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Dissertation and thesis criteria, journals' author guidelines, ethics protocols, and grant applications often require a discussion of the theoretical perspective or conceptual framework that guide research studies. These elements can present a problem for grounded theorists. As an originator of the method, Glaser stated that classic grounded theory was not developed with a specific theoretical perspective. With this idea in mind, there are three potential paths an investigator might choose when required to address the theoretical perspective of a study. Holton and Walsh (2017) implied that a grounded theorist might identify his or her own philosophical perspective, such as critical realism, as the foundation of the specific grounded theory study. The theorist would further describe that perspective guided the data gathering and analysis. Another possibility to satisfy the academic requirement for a theoretical perspective, might be to propose that a theory of the scientific method, such as that of Charles Sanders Peirce, was the foundation of a study (Nathaniel, 2011). Another alternative is to identify symbolic interactionism. Glaser acknowledged that symbolic interactionism, while not the foundation of the method itself, can be claimed to be a sensitizing element of a study. Whichever choice is made, the author should provide evidence that the choice was used to inform the data gathering and analysis.

Another issue relates to extant theories. The tenets of classic grounded theory prohibit superimposition of an extant theory on the emerging one. All concepts must earn their way into a grounded theory through a process of emergence. For example, a classic grounded theory of what's going on in the lives of people during the Covid 19 pandemic cannot be based upon the concepts of theoretical relationships of the Health Belief Model—although a comparison can appropriately be made in the discussion section after the grounded theory has emerged.

- What to expect: either
  - no discussion of the theoretical perspective of the method,
  - a general discussion of the philosophical stance of the authors,
  - a discussion of scientific method as a philosophical foundation, or
  - indication that symbolic interactionism was a sensitizing element for investigation and analysis
- Red flags would be
  - empty claims to satisfy institutional requirements that a theoretical perspective, often symbolic interactionism, was used with no evidence that that perspective was actually employed in data gathering and analysis, or
  - statements that an extant theory served as the foundation of the study.

### **Description of the Method**

The author of a grounded theory publication should clearly identify the precise method used for the research. Grounded theory was the prototype method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further described by Glaser in many publications (1965, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

Over the years, a number of remodeled grounded theory methods, such as those by Strauss and Corbin (1990), Charmaz (2000, 2006), and others have emerged. To differentiate from other iterations, the original method is now referred to as *classic* grounded theory. Remodeled versions of grounded theory adopt much of the language of classic grounded theory, but also include language, theoretical perspective, and procedures specific to each. The various methods are far different and therefore incompatible, so they should never be combined in one study.

- What to expect
  - a clear statement that classic grounded theory was employed,
  - use of language and procedures specific to classic grounded theory, and
  - reference to seminal publications by Glaser and Strauss or by Glaser
- Here are some red flags:
  - citation of sources of remodeled grounded theory such as Strauss and Corbin or Charmaz in the method and/or analysis sections
  - heavy reliance on secondary sources in the method and analysis sections
  - language or procedures specific to remodeled versions such as axial coding, conditional/consequential matrix, and constructivism
  - terms more appropriate to other qualitative or quantitative methods such as *thick description*, the *structure of meaning*, the *lived experience*, *emic/etic*, *reliability*, *validity*, and so forth.

### **Participant Selection**

Glaser (1998) referred to classic grounded theory as a perspective-based methodology because each grounded theory revolves around the participants' perspectives of their main concern and how the concern is continually resolved. Therefore, the selection and recruitment of participants should center on those whose experience is the focus of interest. For instance, the experience of parenting a child with a congenital anomaly can only be described by parents in this situation. Although other data may also be collected, it is from this sample group that the theory will emerge.

- What to expect
  - data can take many forms, either qualitative and quantitative, but must be collected from sources that can lead to a perspective-based understanding of a main concern and how that concern is continually resolved.
- Red flags
  - no description of sample characteristics or size
  - a very small sample size
  - an altogether inappropriate sample

### **Data Collection**

Glaser has written about the nature of data and procedures for data collection. I will list only three here. First, the data should be collected in a way that assures it is grounded. Second, the best qualitative interview data is elicited through open-ended questions that allow participants to freely voice their own perceptions. For qualitative studies, this usually means interviews occur in a comfortable location and begin with one or two "spill questions," rather than an established interview guide with a number of pre-determined

questions. In addition, theoretical sampling, a hallmark of classic grounded theory, means that the nature of questions the interviewer asks will evolve over time as the theory begins to emerge. Third, Glaser encouraged writing field notes immediately after an interview rather than taping and transcribing. Field notes are superior because grounded theory interviews often elicit sensitive, sometimes dangerous information that might not emerge if participants are focused on a recording device. In addition, the interviewer begins the process of conceptualizing as he or she writes field notes—speeding up the analysis. Peer reviewers and other experienced grounded theorists, however, live in the real world and understand that thesis and dissertation guidelines sometimes require taping and transcribing.

- What to expect
  - a very open and general grand tour or “spill” question,
  - acknowledgement that the “raw data” consisted of field notes, rather than verbatim transcription, and
  - indication that theoretical sampling led to revised or additional interview questions as the theory began to emerge
- A red flag would be
  - an indication that data analysis relied upon responses to a survey or pre-determined interview guide with a long list of questions.

### **Analysis**

In classic grounded theory, analysis is an iterative process that begins with preconscious processing and includes writing field notes, coding the raw data word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence, fracturing the data through constant comparison, identifying incidents that indicate a concept, writing memos focusing on concepts and their indicators, identifying the relationships between concepts, theoretical sampling, and sorting memos to complete a theory. Classic grounded theory requires openness, pattern recognition, and the ability to conceptualize. These requirements cannot be accomplished by a computer program.

- What to expect
  - reference to each of the aforementioned steps
  - a short discussion of how each step was operationalized in the specific study
- Red flags
  - inadequate discussion of grounded theory procedures,
  - no detail about how the procedures were operationalized for the study,
  - use of procedures borrowed from other methods—most often axial coding, and
  - reliance on electronic programs for data analysis.

### **The Theory**

A grounded theory culminates in a *theory*, rather than *findings*. As mentioned in the introduction, grounded theories are neither stories, lists of themes, nor descriptions. They depict conceptualized patterns that emerged from constant comparison of the data. A reader should be able to identify the concepts and picture how they are linked together. Usually, a grounded theory paper will include sections dedicated to major concepts, often

referred to as categories, and paragraphs focusing on other, lower level concepts such as properties or dimensions of the major concepts. There are many ways concepts can be linked. For instance, one concept may be linked to another in time, such as one stage comes after another, or one action causes another. Glaser (1978) wrote in depth about this in his book *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Concepts and their theoretical relationships create tentative hypotheses, which interweave to form the theory. Thus, neither a story, list of themes, nor thick description can comprise a grounded theory.

An experienced reader should be able to recognize the working parts of a theory. Generally, a theory is laid out in a few sentences in or after the introduction of a paper. These sentences will include the major concepts and their theoretical relationships. The body of the paper will have sections dedicated to the major concepts with paragraphs discussing minor concepts and their relationships with each other and with the major concept. For example, a minor concept may be a property of a major concept. Classic grounded theories are not highly complex and dense. They should be easy to read, interesting, parsimonious, and delimited to only those concepts that relate to the core category. As Glaser stated, they have “grab.” Readers will also notice that unlike qualitative methods such as phenomenology, paragraphs of direct quotes are seldom used in grounded theory. Because grounded theory rises to the conceptual rather than descriptive level, only short, one or two sentence, direct quotes are offered and then only to illustrate concepts.

- What to expect
  - an interesting, parsimonious theory laid out early in a paper, and
  - concepts and theoretical relationships further explained and illustrated with short bits of data.
- Red flags
  - a list of themes,
  - no explicit theory with concepts interwoven by theoretical relationships, and
  - long direct quotes

### **Conclusion**

When I was a graduate student, a faculty member referred to an excellent qualitative thesis as “gobbly gook.” This professor proved that even seasoned researchers can fail to understand and appreciate qualitative studies. Classic grounded theory is, in fact, a rigorous method that requires a special set of cognitive abilities. While a grounded theory may be interesting to a novice, only a reader who understands the method can truly comprehend a written grounded theory. I challenge readers of the Grounded Theory Review to read the papers in this issue critically and identify the theories, their core categories, concepts, and theoretical relationships—a good evening’s socially distant work. Make special note of the reprinted chapter on theoretical writing by Glaser, which addresses many of the points above from the perspective of writing, rather than reading. We wish you a very happy new year.

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Editor

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