



GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

An international journal

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November 2009

Grounded Theory Review, Vol 8 (Issue #3), 37-49

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/>

Qualitative Tussles in Undertaking a Grounded Theory Study¹

Judith A. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

Those who've been trained to regard grounded theory as a qualitative research method frequently struggle to 'unlearn' qualitative data analysis dicta when undertaking a classic grounded theory study. A plethora of research methods texts that support this notion of grounded theory as a qualitative method are primarily responsible for the ensuing confusion. Further supporting this popular misconception are many papers published in leading academic journals and all too often the pressuring advice of thesis supervisors. This paper addresses specifically two issues that can create frustrating tussles for novice grounded theorists, especially in challenging such 'authoritative' perspectives: avoiding preconception and transcending descriptive detail. In addressing these persistent tussles, the reader is reminded of the fundamental distinction of grounded theory as a methodology for the emergent discovery of conceptually abstract theory from empirical data.

Preconception

To remain truly open to the emergence of theory is among the most challenging issues confronting those new to grounded theory. As a generative and emergent methodology, grounded theory requires the researcher to enter the research field with no preconceived problem statement, interview protocols, or extensive review of literature. Instead, the researcher remains open to exploring a substantive area and allowing the concerns of those actively engaged therein to guide the emergence of a core issue. The conceptualization of this main concern and the multivariate responses to its continual resolution emerge as a latent pattern of social behaviour that forms the basis for the articulation of a

¹ Much of this paper is extracted from Holton, J. A. (2007). The coding process and its challenges. In A. Bryant, & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. (pp. 265-289). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

grounded theory. Remaining open to discovering what is really going on in the field of inquiry is often blocked, however, by what Glaser (1998) refers to as the forcing of preconceived notions resident within the researcher's worldview, an initial professional problem or an extant theory and framework; all of which preempt the researcher's ability to suspend preconception and allow for what will emerge conceptually by constant comparative analysis.

One of the dominant preconceptions regarding grounded theory is the frequent attribution of its 'roots' to symbolic interactionism (Clarke, 2005; Goulding, 2002; Locke, 2001). Glaser (2005) has written at length on the impact of this 'takeover' (p. 141). While not discounting the influence of symbolic interactionism in the contribution of Anselm Strauss as co-originator of the methodology, to attribute grounded theory's origins thereto ignores the fundamental influence of Barney Glaser's training in quantitative methodology at Columbia University. As Martin (2006) suggests, 'It is really the analytic techniques out of Columbia, through Glaser, that gave qualitative researchers tools for systematic analysis' (p. 122). Pre-framing grounded theory through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism precludes other perspectives, pre-determines what data are used and how these should be collected, and limits the analyst's creativity in the analysis and conceptual abstraction of the data under study. This is not to suggest that classic grounded theory is free of any theoretical lens but rather that it should not be confined to any one lens; that as a general methodology, classic grounded theory can adopt any epistemological perspective appropriate to the data and the ontological stance of the researcher (Holton, 2008).

Concerns that arise through the researcher's professional training and experience often stimulate the initial research interest and can provide the motivation for pursuing a study. However, when the practitioner turns researcher, she carries into the field her own espoused values and accumulated experience and with this often comes the need to know in advance, to prescribe at the outset how the research should be framed, who should be engaged, and what outcomes should be anticipated. This instinctual practitioner perspective is, as well, frequently augmented by the structuring dictates of predominant research paradigms which call for the articulation of explicit theoretical

frameworks in advance of fieldwork or analysis (Partington, 2002, pp.138-142).

Clarke's (1997, 2005) privileging of context as an essential consideration in the framing and analysis of a grounded theory study is another forceful example of preconception. Presuming the significance, indeed the centrality, of context as she does is merely forcing a preferred theoretical framework (what Glaser, 2005, calls a 'pet theoretical code') on a study from the outset. While accepting Madill, Jordan, and Shirley's (2000) contention that grounded theory may be applied within a contextualist epistemology (p. 10), for a classic grounded theorist context is merely another variable; thus, contextualizing meaning may or may not be relevant for a theory's explanation of how a main concern is continually resolved (Glaser, 2004). If it is relevant, it will emerge through the coding and constant comparison of conceptual indicators in the data. The relevance of context, like any other variable, must be earned in the emergent theory; it is not determined in advance by the analyst calling upon extant theoretical frameworks.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) offer 'analyst-constructed typologies', 'logical reasoning', and 'matrix-format cross-classifications' as strategies for data analysis (pp. 154-155). They do at least note Patton's (2002, pp.469-470) caution to be wary of the potential for such devices to manipulate the data through its forcing into artificial structures. A classic grounded theorist would echo this same caution. Marshall, however, appears not to have heeded this caution in her use of preconceived 'conceptual levers' (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp.148-149) in the data management for her own dissertation. Here she describes her use of role strain theory (Goode, 1960), sourced through her literature review, as a framework for analysing her data. While stating that she has employed 'constant comparative data analysis' (p. 149) to develop a grounded theory of women's socialization in male sex-typed careers, the classic grounded theorist is left wondering what the real concern of the women under study might have been and how they handled this concern. It is quite conceivable that the real concern of the women in Marshall's study may have had nothing to do with 'feminine identity and sexuality crises prompted by the demands of working in a male-normed profession' (p. 149). Their main concern may have been finding flexible child care services to accommodate unpredictable work

schedules, finding time and opportunities to network, or structuring continuing professional development opportunities into an already over-subscribed life. Of course, it is impossible for us to know what their main concern may have been as Marshall's preconceived professional concern constrained the potential for the participants' main concern to emerge. Glaser (1978) offered the example of a sociologist's preconceiving a study of prostitution as a study of deviance when, from the perspective of the prostitutes under study, the main concern could be effective client servicing, a concern that would align them more appropriately with other service sectors: barbers, hair salons, auto repair, etc. Deviance as a dimension of prostitution would therefore have to earn its way into the emergent theory rather than being presumed from the outset (pp. 104-105).

The preconceiving practices of traditional training in qualitative research methodology that condition the researcher to know in advance, can unwittingly condition the researcher to seeing new data through received concepts. In Konecki (1997), we see the impact of another preconceived theoretical framework: the conditional matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Konecki's interest in exploring the conditions for effective work by professional recruiters ('head hunters') has produced a solid piece of qualitative research; however, despite references to having produced a grounded theory, the study falls short of that goal. There is, of course, some possibility that the main concern of the recruiters may have focused on the effectiveness of their work and the time to find appropriate candidates, as Konecki's study suggests, but it is also quite possible that the core category of an emergent grounded theory may have been entirely unanticipated by his preconceived, discipline-bound perspective. It is this capacity for the emergence of tacit yet previously unarticulated explanations of social behaviour that delights the classic grounded theorist and motivates the effort to work at setting aside derailing preconceptions in undertaking a study.

Partington (2002) offers us another example of a preconceived theoretical framework imposed on an effort at grounded theory. His theoretical code of choice is Strauss and Corbin's (1990) 'paradigm model' which he simplifies to a mechanistic 'stimulus → organism → response → framework' and suggests its general utility for management research. In another guide to grounded theory for management, business, and

marketing research, Goulding (2002) suggests Schatzman's (1991) dimensional analysis as an alternative approach to theorizing (pp. 79-83). What she really offers, however, is yet another preconceived theoretical framework to be forced upon the data. Later in her guide, Goulding cautions the reader that using grounded theory can be 'risky!' but advises that '[t]hese risks are of lesser concern for researchers who define their boundaries to begin with, explore the literature fully, identify key research questions, and collect data to answer them' (p. 156). These suggestions would most certainly reduce the risk of undertaking a grounded theory study. They would, in fact, remove all risk as no grounded theory would be involved. The process would be pure qualitative data analysis: a legitimate goal to be sure but not grounded theory.

These are but a very few of the examples of preconceived theoretical frameworks being forced upon what is intended as grounded theory. There are many others to be found in the numerous studies that masquerade under the guise of grounded theories while employing only selected aspects of the methodology. Glaser (2003) has written extensively on this propensity for remodelling.

Extensive review of extant literature before the emergence of a core category in a grounded theory study is another dimension of preconception that violates the basic premise of the classic methodology; that being, the theory emerges from the data not from extant theory. Extensive engagement prior to data collection and analysis also runs the risk of thwarting theoretical sensitivity by clouding the researcher's ability to remain open to the emergence of a completely new core category that may not have figured prominently in the literature to date. Practically speaking, preconception may well result in the researcher spending valuable time on an area of literature that proves to be of little significance to the resultant grounded theory. By contrast, in classic grounded theory methodology, the literature is just more data to be coded and integrated into the study through constant comparative analysis but its analysis and integration happens only after the core category, its properties and related categories have emerged, and the basic conceptual development is well underway, not in advance as is common to qualitative research methods. Unless pre-empted by preconception, emergence is natural with the resultant grounded theory often

charting new theoretical territory.

From Description to Conceptualization

To understand the nature of classic grounded theory, one must understand the distinction between conceptualization and description. Grounded theory is not about the accuracy of descriptive units, nor is it an act of interpreting meaning as ascribed by the participants in a study; rather, it is an act of conceptual abstraction. While tied to experience, conceptual abstraction directs attention to and isolates a part or aspect of an entity or phenomenon for the purposes of contemplation (Whitehead, 1925, p.147). While the descriptive findings of a qualitative research study are most certainly valuable, they do not provide a conceptual abstraction. A grounded theory must offer a conceptually abstract explanation for a latent pattern of behaviour (an issue or concern) in the social setting under study. It must explain, not merely describe, what is happening in a social setting.

It is this ability to abstract from empirical indicators (incidents in the data under analysis) the conceptual idea without the burden of descriptive detail that distinguishes the coding process in classic grounded theory methodology. This abstraction to a conceptual level theoretically explains rather than describes behaviour that occurs conceptually and generally in many diverse groups with a common concern (Glaser, 2003). While a researcher's initial attempts at coding new data may very well be more descriptive than conceptual, a classic grounded theorist will endeavour to raise the conceptual level early on in the analysis process through the constant comparison of conceptual indicators in the data under study. Those trained in the requirements of qualitative research may, however, settle more readily into descriptive coding with its capacity to portray rich detail, multiple perspectives, and the voices of lived experience. For instance, where a qualitative researcher might record in vivo codes such as *boosting self confidence*, *growing as a person*, *learning to trust*, a classic grounded theorist, in asking 'what concept does this indicate', might code for *empowerment*, with the three descriptive codes serving as indicators.

For a classic grounded theorist, what matter are the concepts. The conceptual abstraction of classic grounded theory frees the researcher from the qualitative paradigm's emphasis on

detailed description and elucidation of multiple perspectives. The skill of the grounded theorist is to abstract concepts by leaving the detail of the data behind, lifting the concepts above the data and integrating them into a theory that explains the latent social pattern underlying the behaviour in a substantive area (Locke, 2001). The result of a grounded theory study is not the reporting of facts but the generation of probability statements about the relationships between concepts; a set of conceptual hypotheses developed from empirical data (Glaser, 1998, pp. 3, 22).

Morse (2004) recognizes the importance of raising qualitative research above the descriptive level of analysis. Unfortunately, her prescriptive procedures for developing qualitative concepts leave little scope for exercising the creativity and intuitive autonomy that are the hallmarks of classic grounded theory: the ability to fracture and interrogate the data for its conceptual essence, to constantly compare indicators for interchangeability, and the achievement of theoretical saturation. Her approach provides little allowance for the preconscious processing that enables the emergence of conceptual ideation and theoretical integration. Her structure may work well in qualitative analysis but would inhibit what Glaser (1998) describes as the 'subsequent, sequential, simultaneous, serendipitous, and scheduled' (p. 15) nature of grounded theory.

Various scholars within the qualitative paradigm have put forth strategies and guidelines for the coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Goulding, 2002; Partington, 2002; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). By comparison, the procedures espoused by classic grounded theorists may initially appear loose and perhaps even messy or confusing. These procedures as originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and extensively elaborated in Glaser's subsequent work (1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Glaser & Holton, 2004) do require the researcher to grapple with both chaos and control. The chaos is in tolerating the uncertainty and subsequent regression of not knowing in advance and of remaining open to what emerges through the diligent, controlled, often tedious application of the method's synchronous and iterative processes of line-by-line coding, constant comparison for interchangeability of indicators, and theoretical sampling for core emergence and theoretical saturation. This discipline is simultaneously complemented by requiring the theorist to remain open to the innate creativity in

preconscious processing of conceptual ideation and theoretical integration; a creativity characterized by the exhilaration of eureka sparks of discovery; what Glaser (1978, 1998) calls the drugless trip.

This excitement in generating concepts from data, however, derails some researchers. Captured by the imagery, or 'grab' (Glaser, 2001, pp.19-21), of the emerging concepts, they switch their attention from abstraction to description. By neglecting to stay with the full method of classic grounded theory, they are unable to tap its full potential in developing a conceptually integrated theory. 'To skip a step, particularly the middle ones associated with memoing and sorting, is to produce a theory with less conceptual density, less integration, less conceptual qualification, too much descriptive and conceptual flatness in places, and missed connections obvious to the astute reader' (Glaser, 1978: 16).

Baszanger's (1997) paper, 'Deciphering Chronic Pain', is an example of the kind of conceptual description that is frequently presented as grounded theory. While tempting us with the imageric grab of what Glaser would call a 'juicy concept' (Grounded Theory Seminar, New York, October 2003), and acknowledging that she has employed grounded theory techniques of 'constant comparative method of analysis and its coding procedures' (p. 5), Baszanger has not employed the full package of classic grounded theory methodology. Consequently, what we have is an ethnographic account of the way in which physicians at two different clinics manage the issue of deciphering chronic pain. She does not follow through in taking her conceptual description to a fully integrated theory that would offer us a conceptual explanation for the phenomenon under study. While we have a rich account of particularistic experiences, we are deprived of the full power of grounded theory to offer us an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses that would explain what is really going on in the process of deciphering chronic pain. Baszanger's account, however, offers excellent data for conceptual abstraction and the possible emergence of a grounded theory.

Skill Development in Grounded Theory

Morse (1997) suggests that qualitative researchers are theoretically timid and may be inhibited by what she sees as the

hard work of conceptualization necessary to produce theory. While acknowledging the possibility of timidity, Glaser (2002a) refutes her assertion of the hard work of conceptualization, instead maintaining that many researchers simply lack knowledge and competence in conceptualization and, as such, they embrace with enthusiasm but without understanding. To truly understand classic grounded theory requires extensive study of the methodology in tandem with experiencing the method first-hand. While some like Dey (1999) would appear to dismiss the importance of first-hand experience in favour of adopting a sceptical stance from the sidelines, the resultant 'rhetorical wrestle' (Glaser, 1998) is ironically at odds with the fundamental premise of ensuring empirically grounding of one's theoretical (and methodological) contributions to knowledge. Yet, staying the course to develop that understanding is easily circumvented by straying into the mixed methods approaches prevalent in qualitative research and the diverse perspectives of the methodology that Glaser (2003) refers to as remodelled versions.

The decision to use classic grounded theory methodology is a 'full package' decision. It requires the adoption of a systematic set of precise procedures for collection, analysis and articulation of conceptually abstract theory. On the menu of research methodology, classic grounded theory is 'table d'hôte', not 'à la carte'. Generating grounded theory takes time. It is above all a delayed action phenomenon (Glaser, 1998, p.220). Little increments of collecting and coding allow theoretical ideas to develop into conceptual memos. Significant theoretical realizations come with growth and maturity in the data, and much of this is outside the researcher's conscious awareness until unconscious processing facilitates its conscious emergence (Glaser, 1998, p.50). Thus, the researcher must pace herself, exercising patience and accepting nothing until this inevitable emergence has transpired. Surviving the apparent confusion is important, requiring the researcher to take whatever time is necessary for the discovery process and to take this time in a manner consistent with her own temporal nature as a researcher: what Glaser (1998) refers to as personal pacing (p. 49). Rushing or forcing the process shuts down creativity and conceptual ability, exhausting energy and leaving the theory thin and incomplete.

As an experiential learning methodology, it is important that the grounded theorist stay actively engaged in continuing skill development by cycling through various projects and always having at least one project active (Glaser, 1978, pp.25-26). Reading and re-reading Glaser's work, while memoing about the methodology, also keeps cognitive processing alive. Critically reading substantive grounded theory papers and memoing conceptual thoughts is another way to gain insights into the methodology and to be able to distinguish a quality grounded theory or to see how or where another researcher may have come close but missed the full power of the methodology. Without active engagement through continuing field research and analysis as well as methodological reading, it is easy for many to leave behind their grounded theory skill development: especially those who have been trained in the dominant paradigm of qualitative research. The inevitable consequence is that they will begin, often unconsciously, to remodel the methodology to suit the dominant genre in their field or to compensate for inadequate or lost skill development.

Skill development seems to be particularly difficult for novice researchers who encounter resistance from thesis supervisors or peer reviewers who are trained in qualitative or quantitative methodologies and who express doubt or reservation about the full package approach of classic grounded theory. Without the confidence of experience gained through skill development or the power to challenge discipline or departmental authority, the novice researcher may feel pressured to abandon or compromise the proper procedures. The outcome diminishes the researcher's autonomy and confidence to engage with the methodology as intended. Glaser refers to this resistance propensity as the 'trained incapacity of novice researchers held to binding interpretations by the higher authorities of other research methodologies' (personal communication, July 10, 2004).

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