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From the Editor's Desk: Classic Grounded Theory:  
What it Is and What it Is Not

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## **From the Editor's Desk**

### **Classic Grounded Theory: What it Is and What it Is Not**

Grounded theory is arguably the most frequently published qualitative research method. Yet it is often misunderstood. Many years ago, I gave a talk on the general tenets of classic grounded theory at a large regional research conference. After the presentation, a professor who taught PhD-level qualitative research at a large research university approached me asking: "Grounded theory doesn't really need to result in a theory, does it? Can't it consist of a list of themes?" In the same way that a pile of threads is not a shirt, a list of themes is not a theory. The purpose of this editorial is to clarify what grounded theory is and what it is not.

### **Grounded Theory: What It Is Not**

Classic grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further by Glaser (1978, 1998), differs from all other research methods. The purpose of classic grounded theory, the language, procedures, analysis, and the final product are unique to the method. It has been used, misused, misunderstood, and modified. Following are corrections to some commonly held fallacies about grounded theory.

Grounded theory is not quick and easy. As any experienced grounded theorists will affirm, the method rigorously follows a set of procedures that require humility, scholarship, attentiveness, openness, and skill. Grounded theorists cannot rely upon previously developed instruments nor do they have the luxury of writing up narratives based upon computer generated data analysis. The data gathering and analysis in grounded theory depends solely upon the perceptiveness, skill, and cognitive abilities of the researcher. Stirbys's study in this issue, *Potentiating Wellness in Order to Overcome Generational Trauma* reflects the rigorous nature of classic grounded theory and gives a glimpse of the procedures that assure rigor.

A grounded theory is not a list of themes. By its very definition, theory presupposes relationships between and among elements. Themes may constitute a basket of disparate findings. A grounded theory, on the other hand, provides a focused, parsimonious explanation based upon interrelated concepts, which are developed to higher order of abstraction than raw data or themes.

A classic grounded theory is not a story, nor does it represent any specific participant's story. A grounded theory is a conceptual explanation of human process that a sample of people have in common. It is not intended to present accurate facts. Rather, a grounded theory is derived from participant data that is fractured, compared, and raised from the level of raw data to that of more abstract concepts.

The classic grounded theory method is not based upon symbolic interactionism. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and subsequently Glaser (1978, 1998) were silent about grounded theory's roots. So, through the years various authors have proposed piecemeal explanations of the method's ontological, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings, thus promoting erosion and remodeling of the grounded theory method and creating a variety of notions about the method's philosophical foundation. Novice researchers most often make the mistaken claim that symbolic interactionism is the basis of the method.

Grounded theory is not a preliminary research step in preparation for quantitative research. Although researchers may occasionally attempt to operationalize and quantify concepts discovered in a particular grounded theory, many grounded theories explain processes that are unique, personal, and not amenable to quantitative description or analysis. Many grounded theory concepts cannot reasonably be transmogrified into quantifiable operational definitions. In most cases, grounded theories provide the best explanation of the discovered processes.

Grounded theory is not derived from the positivist paradigm. In fact, grounded theory includes few of the basic characteristics of positivism. Research paradigms represent a philosophical way of thinking and reflect the worldview of researchers. Research paradigms are human constructs that mirror the zeitgeist of a particular time in history with its scientific, political, and philosophical schools of thought. Each paradigm—positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, pragmatism, post-modernism, neo-modernism, critical theory, and so forth—includes a list of essential and immutable characteristics. Those who are critical of grounded theory hurl the accusation that the method is positivistic. It is not. Among others, **classic grounded theory rejects the following positivist assumptions:** 1) theory is universal, allowing law-like generalizations to be made across contexts; 2) context is not important; 3) reality is fixed and measurable; 4) research pursues an objective search for facts, 5) knowledge is objective and quantifiable; and 6) research rests upon testing of hypotheses. One can read any paper published in the Grounded Theory Review to see a clear abnegation of these assumptions. For example, Kellogg and Vander Linden's paper, *Building Up*, in this issue, demonstrates the rejection of these assumptions in their explicit statement of the relativeness of the individual, environment, cultural context, beliefs, and experiences. Modifiability, a basic tenet of classic grounded theory, further debunks positivism claims. So, if grounded theory is neither quick and easy, a list of themes, a story, preparation for quantitative research, nor positivistic, what is it?

### **Grounded Theory: What It Is**

Classic grounded theory is a rigorous method of discovery that enables prediction and explanation of behavioral processes. Although the method was originally developed in the field of sociology, it offers all disciplines readily understandable, relevant, and useful perspectives on behavior (Glaser, 1992). The classic grounded theory process includes several immutable elements—emergence/discovery, conceptualization, participant perspective, theorizing, parsimony, and theory development.

A classic grounded theory is emergent. The concepts and subsequent theory emerge from inductively analyzed data. It is the researcher's job to discover the emergent theory. The relationship is reciprocal: In order to discover, the researcher must be open to whatever emerges. Rather than fiercely focused on examining an already identified problem or process, the grounded theorist willingly suspends preconceptions and looks at the data with wonder and curiosity, accepting the possibility that a previously unidentified process will become evident. Gathering and comparing data, the researcher searches for similarities and patterns. For example, in the paper in this issue entitled *Exerting Capacity: Mindsets of Bedside Nurses in Keeping Patients Safe*, Leger and Phillips discovered that nurses' ability to *exert capacity* comes from one of two mindsets: *me-centric* or *patient-centric*, which drive how the nurses meet the demands of keeping their patients safe. In another nursing study in this issue, *Resigning: How Nurses Work Within Restraints*, O'Donnell and Andrews introduce a newly emerged process of *resigning*. Resigning occurs when nurses acknowledge restraints and reluctantly accept compromise to the quality of the care they deliver in the interests of patient safety and maintaining a basic level of care. Leger and Phillips's *me-centric* vs *patient-centric* mindsets and O'Donnell and Andrews's *resigning* are concepts that emerged from those studies.

Grounded theory is conceptual. Concepts emerge through comparison of data, most often derived from participant interviews. Each piece of data is compared with others and patterns quickly emerge. The data bits and behavioral patterns indicate concepts, which become the building blocks of a grounded theory. The data provides indicators of the concepts—indicators that are interchangeable and may later be used to illustrate concepts. For example, in Cashwell's paper in this issue entitled *Coming Home*, the author identifies the concept of the *past self*. This concept emerged from the data of many interviews, but the author illustrates it with one participant's experience as follows: "His physical experience and feelings in the moment did not accurately reflect his environment but,

instead, reflected his painful history.” The incongruous feelings of this participant indicated the past self, but another participant would likely have different types of experiences that indicated the concept. Thus, grounded theory fractures the data and transcends the stories to create conceptual theory. It neither consists of facts nor stories, but concepts.

Grounded theory is perspective oriented. The goal of a grounded theorist is to find out what is going on in a substantive area (Glaser, 1978). This cannot occur if the researcher goes into the field with preconceptions. Thus, as you will read in the Glaser’s paper, *Getting Started*, the researcher should go into the field without an identified problem or specific research question. Rather, the research problem emerges from the data, which is always grounded in the participants’ perspectives. If concepts are the building blocks of a grounded theory, the processes that participants describe provides the structure. Rather than searching for focused evidence of a particular phenomenon, as may be the case in other types of research, the grounded theorist approaches data gathering with a curiosity and openness seeking the answer to two questions: 1) What is the main concern of these people? 2) How do they continually resolve or process this concern? The answer to the latter is conceptualized, named, and identified as the core category. A parsimonious theory is then delimited to those concepts that relate to core category.

A grounded theory is bona fide theory. It provides a substantiated explanation of some facet of the social world depicted through connected concepts that create tentative hypotheses, which further interweave to form the theory. If concepts are the building blocks of a grounded theory and the discovered processes provide the structure, theorizing provides the mortar that holds the structure together. The process of theorizing establishes theoretical codes, which depict the connections between and among concepts, thus creating the hypotheses. In *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Glaser identifies 18 theoretical coding families that put forward possible theoretical relationships between concepts. Some examples of Glaser’s theoretical codes include causes, conditions, stages, phases,

progressions, range, dimensions, strategies, effects, critical junctures, boundaries, typologies, and so forth. For example, in *Transforming Loyalty: A Classic Grounded Theory on Growth of Self-acceptance Through Active Parenting*, Rolle-Whatley and Vander Linden explain the stages through which parents move as they make progress toward “a relational connection with others based upon an evolved outlook of selflessness.” This is the relationship: one concept occurs before the other in a temporal sphere. Though the main theoretical code in this theory is stages, the paper offers examples of different theoretical codes that connect the concepts.

Grounded theory is modifiable. Because it is generated through inductive logic, a grounded theory is naturally modifiable. Using induction, the grounded theorist generalizes from a number of cases in which something is true and may infer that the same thing is true of a whole class, especially if the context is similar. The grounded theory method corrects for error or bias through constant comparison and abstraction, which further clarifies the underlying latent patterns (Glaser, 2002, rev. 2007). Over time, new evidence may become available. Modifiability, a basic strategy to ensure rigor, allows openness to correction and change as new evidence emerges, ensuring the theory does not become static or irrelevant (Nathaniel & Andrews, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this editorial is to begin a conversation clarifying what classic grounded theory is and what it is not. To avoid ending up with piles of threads, those who conduct grounded theory research must have a clear understanding of the method. For those who are interested in learning more, Glaser’s books are available for purchase through the Sociology Press website at [www.sociologypress.com](http://www.sociologypress.com).

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