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Book Review: Glaser, B.G. (2007). Doing Formal Grounded Theory: A Proposal

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Forty years after developing the classic grounded theory method with Anselm Strauss, Barney Glaser has published the long-anticipated follow-up monograph that details the method for generating formal grounded theory. Through the years, Glaser continued writing about substantive grounded theory, but formal grounded theory remained in the background, lacking a clear definition and distinctive method. Although his previous monographs offer hints about formal grounded theory, this is the first definitive guide for researcher-theorists. It is Glaser's aim that this monograph will provide the inspiration and direction needed by researcher-theorists who will then generate formal grounded theory. The intended audience for this book is grounded theorists who have previous experience developing substantive grounded theories.

In 1971, Glaser and Strauss wrote *Status Passage*. This was the first formal theory. Through the years, both Glaser and Strauss wrote tidbits about formal grounded theory, but they never clearly explicated the method. As a result, few formal grounded theories exist. Describing and delineating formal grounded theory in a variety of ways, scholars in many disciplines attempted to fill in the gaps left by Glaser and Strauss. In this book, Glaser systematically, thoroughly, and meticulously answers those scholars, refuting some and validating others. Yet, he recognizes that since there are few published formal grounded theories, the method cannot be totally explicated. Nevertheless, enough formal grounded theories do exist for this first attempt at method clarification and procedure formulation.

Glaser points to common impediments that derail many researcher-theorists. These impediments include lack of support from PhD committees, regression into conceptually barren qualitative research, logical-deductive speculation (rather than grounding), and "super think" divorced from reality. He clearly identifies these derailments as he lays out

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procedures for generating formal theory. Glaser explains that the generation of formal grounded theory pursues the general implications of a core variable. Using constant comparison, the researcher expands the general implications by generating grounded conceptual categories about it from many different areas and by expanding abstract conceptual generalizations. The researcher uses constant comparison to generate further concepts related to the core category. Grounded formal theory is not an explication of descriptive differences and similarities in a substantive area. Rather it is conceptualizations about the core category, abstracted from the particulars of time, place, and persons. Because it is empirically rooted, conceptualized, generalized, and free of particulars, it potentially applies to many substantive areas.

Except for theoretical sampling, the procedures for formal grounded theory are the same as those for generating substantive grounded theory. Glaser suggests that the researcher samples widely in other substantive areas and populations. Data comes from “wherever” and may include newly generated empirical data from other substantive areas, extant literature focusing on the core category or its general implications, or data generated from previous qualitative descriptions. Glaser writes, “theoretical sampling swings wide.” Much like with substantive grounded theory, the researcher-theorist constantly codes the data for categories and their properties, analyzes each day by constant conceptual comparisons and successive delimiting based on the general implications of the core category. Glaser is careful to point out that newly identified categories do not change meanings of the theory. They merely extend and modify the core category and give it broader generalization. The researcher writes conceptual memos and seeks saturation of new indicators that vary the original categories and their properties. Glaser suggests that as saturation occurs and contexts change, the researcher can more clearly see the abstract application to many new areas.

Glaser identifies many uses of formal grounded theory. Academic uses include lectures, readings, consultations, correcting extant theory by modification, giving deeper but transcending understandings, extending the general

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implications of theory, and the cumulative building up of theory. Formal grounded theory may be used to guide other research since it gives clear theoretical direction to the research by its grounding. And because it is abstract of people, place and time, it is easy to apply to many substantive areas.

Along with many experienced grounded theorists around the globe, I have thought much about developing a formal grounded theory. But, I did not know exactly how to begin. Thus, I've eagerly awaited this monograph. It was not a disappointment. This book gives clear direction to experienced grounded theorists who wish to develop formal theory. However, like formal theory itself, the writing is very dense. It is not an easy-to-read book for beginners. In order to appreciate fully its nuances, the researcher-theorist must be experienced in classic grounded theory and must have previously read widely from Glaser's previous books and monographs. If a reader has read Glaser's previous work, though, he or she might be distracted by the many references to the classic grounded theory versus qualitative data analysis controversy. Although this controversy is an important one, worthy of discussion, it is almost immaterial to those of us who are dedicated to the classic method. Even so, this book is a treat because the substance is there—waiting to be discovered.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book to experienced grounded theorists who are interested in developing a formal grounded theory. Since Glaser was co-originator of classic grounded theory, this is the definitive resource. The book answers critics, corrects misunderstandings, and clears up confusion. It clearly defines formal grounded theory and offers a step-by-step approach. Along with Glaser, I hope that that this monograph will provide the inspiration, direction, and method needed for future formal grounded theory research.

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