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Doing Formal Grounded Theory: A review

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## **Doing Formal Grounded Theory: A review**

*Tom Andrews PhD*

This is the latest in a family of Grounded Theory books by Glaser that continue to build on previous work and make the methodology much more explicit. Its purpose is quite simply to provide Grounded Theory researchers with a set of procedures that can be followed to generate a Formal Grounded Theory (FGT). Despite several chapters in previous books that deal with generating formal grounded theory it has been given scant attention by researchers and this book aims to reverse this. It brings together and synthesises these previous writings in one book and seeks to specify much more clearly what is meant by a formal grounded theory. As with other more recent books by Glaser, this one is based on data in that the procedures outlined are come from previously generated formal grounded theories. However, Glaser cautions that this is based on limited data since not many FGTs exist yet and as more are generated, the method will become more explicit. The book has been eagerly anticipated by grounded theorists and it does not disappoint.

From the beginning, Glaser emphasises that such theory is not “grand theory” about a theoretical code but a conceptual extension of a substantive grounded theory core category using GT generating procedures. There is a natural tendency to see the applicability of core categories everywhere, beyond the data that generated them. There is a very useful and thought provoking differentiation between descriptive and conceptual generalisation that anyone interested in trying to understand the difference between qualitative methodology and GT would benefit from reading. The discussion of the struggle of qualitative research in dealing with issues of generalisability and transferability is based on extensive reading of the qualitative methodological literature. This struggle is essentially about the near impossibility of making generalisations based on descriptive, unit based findings. There is clear differentiation made between the conceptual nature of GT and routine qualitative data analysis (QDA).

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However despite this when it comes to generalisation, there is a tendency in QDA writings to reduce GT to another descriptive methodology with near total miss of its conceptual nature. This is another example of default remodelling which serves to block GT at every turn and is dealt with extensively by Glaser in other writings (see Glaser, 2003). Ultimately the discussion furthers the argument that the end product of a GT study is very different compared to that of a qualitative study-conceptualisation as opposed to description.

In discussing the general implications of the core category, this book will be invaluable to PhD students since most theses are expected to discuss this issue. It will guide and encourage them to think and write about the conceptual generalisation of a core category and would have been invaluable to me when asked about the general implications of my core category at my PhD Viva Voce. It encourages researchers to think carefully about the issue but not to engage in speculation. Also, students are often expected to make an appeal to or suggest future research. This book will enable them to do this in ways that are consistent with GT. For example, they could suggest how their core category could be developed further from a SGT to a FGT.

Glaser emphasises that there are many substantive grounded theories just waiting to be extended to a FGT and the encouragement for experienced Grounded Theorists is that a little data goes a long way in generating one. The procedures used are the same as for generating a SGT but theoretical sampling is different since the core category has already been generated, but this is the only difference. The core category does not change. While this may be stating the obvious, nonetheless one of the pitfalls that Glaser warns about is losing sight of the core category by dropping into description rather than conceptual comparisons and reverting to generating a more complete SGT. This is essentially about using the literature from any field as more data, comparing it conceptually to the core category. It is the key to generating a FGT and is quite simple yet challenging: loose description and conceptualise. Theoretical sampling according to the core category will guide the literature review. However data can be used from whatever source. However it is seldom necessary

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to go into the field to collect further data for comparison, since there are many data sources to turn to for this. This means that FGT research costs very little money to do, can be done as part of everyday academic reading and without the time constraints associated with generating a SGT for a thesis, very encouraging for and appealing to GT researchers.

Generating a FGT cannot be based on revisiting a SGT in order to make it more comprehensive. Nor can it be done by rewriting a SGT by leaving out substantive words. This is raising the conceptual level mechanically. A FGT must be based on data whatever their source. As in all GT, there are no shortcuts: the method must be followed and a FGT generated by using research to broaden the scope of the theory by conceptual comparative analysis of different substantive areas. The book ends with a very useful and convincing chapter on the uses of FGT which could act as convincing evidence when applying for research grants.

To summarise, this book is a very welcome addition to Grounded Theory methodology by clearly outlining how to generate a Formal Grounded Theory. It is both challenging and thought provoking. The challenge is to generate FGT using any data source by conceptual comparison. Again we are challenged to think conceptually in terms of the literature rather than simply doing a traditional literature comparison. Nonetheless it should encourage experienced GT researchers to now have the confidence to generate FGT. However while this is the explicit aim of the book, there is something here for everyone given that GT is an advanced methodology. For example, PhD students will find the chapters dealing with “Conceptual Generalisation” and “Generalizing: the Descriptive Struggle” particularly useful. We now have a beginning text on how to generate a FGT. The invitation to all of us who have developed a SGT now is to do so.

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