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I'm Developing a Theory, but I Have No Idea What it is:

Confusion in Classic Grounded Theory

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Abstract

There are numerous academic and personal reasons to explain why some novice researchers may be anxious and thus confused when conducting a study using a classic grounded theory research design. When using this specific design, though, confusion must be tolerated and even welcomed because only through confusion can a well-developed theory be developed. In this article, the author presented four specific areas of potential confusion, explained why there might be bewilderment, and how a less-experienced scholar might overcome those perplexing moments. Specifically, the author will discuss (a) grand tour questions, (b) writing codes and memoing, (c) constant comparison, and (d) selective coding as he demonstrates why confusion is valuable in this particular research design.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, confusion, grand tour question, theory development, memoing, constant comparison, coding

Congratulations on gaining IRB approval to start collecting data for your research study. If you are like many novice researchers using classic grounded theory, you are concerned about the data analysis process because the rules are different with this research design compared to a different qualitative research design such as case study. In a qualitative

case study, for example, you will have clearly defined parameters within which you will work. There are specific research questions you have already setup. Additionally, there are questions in your instrument protocol(s) that have been developed and adequately validated. You, as a case study researcher, know the direction in which you will go even if you do not yet know the final answers. However, in classic grounded theory, such a road map is not presented and spelled out for you; there are no predetermined research questions or instrument questions to guide you. You will be confused (Glaser, 2001, 2008, 2010, 2013a) for a great part of your research study, and that behavior is perfectly normal, accepted, and acceptable. As Dr. Lee Yarwood-Ross stated, a researcher must "be ready to . . . tolerate confusion" (Personal communication, April 26, 2024). Dr. Yarwood-Ross went on to explain that if a researcher "cannot tolerate not knowing in advance, [then he or she should] choose a different methodology. There are plenty of others at your disposal" (Personal communication, April, 26, 2024). Presuming you are ready and willing to be confused, then continue reading for in this methodological paper, the author will discuss four specific elements of classic grounded theory in light of confusion: (a) the grand tour question, (b) writing codes and memoing, (c) constant comparison and open coding, and (d) selective coding. However, before these elements can be addressed, there is great value in understanding in a more nuanced manner why there is confusion when conducting a research study using classic grounded theory.

Confusion in Classic Grounded Theory

In classic grounded theory, an important dictum is there must not be preconception (Pergert, 2014). As scholars, researchers, and human beings, we have experiences and knowledge in many different areas. Such experience and knowledge help us and others as we

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go about our lives and work. Additionally, we use such experience and knowledge to conduct research (academic or otherwise) and help people who may be less experienced than we are.

While researchers conduct a classic grounded theory study, a *tabula rasa*—to an achievable degree—must be maintained. The important idea here is "to an achievable possible" for, as we all know, it is difficult to set aside all preconceived thoughts. Yet, all predetermined ideas that are explicitly external to the given research environment must be suspended (Glaser, 2013b) and set aside so the researcher can truly listen to what the participants are saying. If a researcher adds any external influences like predetermined knowledge or paraphrasing or re-explaining a given point (Chametzky, 2024), the data will be manipulated and forced. Anytime the researcher "knows" what the participant means, interprets a comment, or makes a connection to something else in his or her head, preconception has taken place. If a researcher introduces preconception in the data collection process, then the data are bastardized (Chametzky, 2022), impure, and destroyed. When a participant states something, that idea must be accepted without change because, according to Glaser in 1996, we researchers must follow Max Weber's idea of "'*verstehen*, whereby the investigator understands a group's behavior by viewing their action through their eyes' (p. 47)" (Chametzky, 2024, n.p.). If a researcher adds a paraphrased idea or a re-explanation, then *verstehen* is not achieved.

It is exactly this practice of data bastardization that must be suspended when doing a classic grounded theory study (Chametzky, 2022). But data manipulation is not the only area of preconception that may be present in a research study. If a researcher had predetermined ideas about what the problem of the study might be and believes that he or she is "supposed to study [a specific] problem and . . . cannot find it" (Glaser, 2013b, p. 13) in the data, then

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how can the researcher study the information to know what is important to the participant? As Glaser (2013b) explained, the correct answer is "to see what you are finding" (p. 13) and not look for what you think you might need to see. From this short discussion, then, it should be clear that, broadly speaking, preconception can take place either because a researcher is using previous knowledge or is trying to look for an incorrect problem. With this basic information in mind, our attention is now turned to the grand tour question.

Grand tour question

Remember, as classic grounded theory researchers, we cannot and do not know initially what is important to our participants; that idea is exactly what we want to discover—the main concerns of the respondents and how they address them in a given environment. To determine their main concerns without presuming previous knowledge and without preconceiving, we need a broad enough question so each participant individually can determine what is important. This type of inquiry is called a grand tour question (Spradley, 1979) and comes from the field of ethnography.

There are different types of grand tour questions in ethnographic research (Spradley, 1979), but the purpose of the question is the same: to "encourage informants to ramble on and on" (Spradley, 1979, p. 87) or, in classic grounded theory terminology, to "instill a spill" (Glaser, 2009, p. 22). Regardless of which phrase is chosen, the objective is the same: to get the participant to talk about whatever is important to him or her.

A novice researcher might justifiably ask how such a question might be developed and what might it look like. Holton and Walsh (2017) offered an excellent suggestion:

> For example, if you were interested in exploring the impending status passage (Glaser & Strauss, 1971) of university students in their final year of study, you might open the

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> discussion by saying, "I am supposed to be studying how students in their final year of study prepare for what's next, but I don't know what to ask you. What do you think we should talk about? (p. 60).

What an amazing grand tour question because it is intentionally vague to allow the participant to determine what is important. Simmons (2022) offered other types of grand tour questions:

> Please tell me about a typical day in your life.
>
> Tell me about your family, growing up.
>
> What was life like when you were a child?
>
> What do you think the future holds for you?
>
> Tell me about your relationship. (p. 259).

It should be clear from these examples that if you were a participant who had to answer any of these questions, your answers would be different from someone else. And that is exactly the beauty in data obtained via a classic grounded theory study; with such a broad question, each participant can respond however he or she feels most appropriate.

Such questions have another, more practical use. Given the seemingly complex nature of classic grounded theory—at least from the perspective of novice researchers, there may be value in understanding that "the beauty of classic grounded theory is that it is all around us. We just need to be open to seeing and experiencing it" (Chametzky, 2022, p. 44). If novice researchers could practice it on a daily basis, they would discover that classic grounded theory is not as complex as they might have initially thought. To that end, I propose that they adopt the practice that I describe in the following paragraphs to help alleviate some confusion and give them an opportunity to experience classic grounded theory.

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As an online professor, I meet virtually with many students for 1-on-1 sessions concerning various issues. But sometimes, they do not tell me what they want to discuss until we are already online together. So, I have taken a cue from Simmons (2022) and ask an excellent grand tour questions to my learners: To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting? What might be important to one person is not an issue for another, and I do not yet know what is important. Hence, my grand tour question will help the student talk about whatever topic is important and give me the desired information so I can help the learner.

In a myopic sense, when I initially connect with a student, I am confused because I do not know what we will be discussing or why. In classic grounded theory terms, I do not know what the main concern is, and I do not yet know the behaviors in which they engage to address that concern. As in classic grounded theory, I need to accept and tolerate the confusion until later in the conversation, when I will be enlightened. Such an opportunity then affords me the opportunity to allow myself to be confused and experience that behavior so that when I encounter it in research, I am not shying away but rather embracing it.

Based on the brief aforementioned discussion, a grand tour question has two different but equally important and connected goals. The first goal is to allow the participant to speak about whatever issue is important. The second goal is for the researcher to "tolerate some confusion" (Glaser, 1999, p. 838) at least until later in the analysis. But, from another perspective, the participant may be confused as well because when you start the data collection process, an explanation of the study is not to be offered to the participants (Glaser, 2001), for such an explanation would force the topic and result in preconceived information. So, when participants are not led and directed into a given topic area "and just allowed to vent, [they] will gravitate to talking about what is on their mind" (Glaser, 2001, p. 105), they are, to some

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degree, confused as well. Through all the confusion, though, a theory will eventually develop. Once the interview has ended, the next area of confusion to be experienced is coding and memoing, which will be discussed in the next section.

Writing Codes and Memoing

After your first interview (and subsequent ones until a core variable [or category] has been determined), you will code all your data; such a process is called open coding. As you are coding, you are advised to keep these three important questions in mind: "What is the main concern of the participant? What is this data a study of [and] What is actually happening in the data" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57)? With these questions, you will be able to stay more focused on the data rather than any potential interpretations and explanations you might bring to the research process. Additionally, with these questions, you will (or should) be able to determine behaviors. Remember that as a classic grounded theorist, you are looking for behaviors that participants exhibit to address their main concern.

At this point in your analysis, however, you will have a list of code words or short phrases that ultimately will be valuable to you but may currently seem vague, with minimal value, and imprecise because the required connections are not yet present. Here is another element of confusion in classic grounded theory. But, have no fear, for tolerating confusion is perfectly normal and expected (Glaser, 1999).

Now, you will start the memo process. Often, novice researchers—especially those working on a thesis or dissertation—are confused with memos because their format is not prescribed (Chametzky, 2023). These researchers need to trust the process and procedures of classic grounded theory (Glaser, 2012) in spite of their confusion and any potential imprecision they might feel is needed. When there is trust in the process (Chametzky, 2023; Glaser,

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2012), memos will be fashioned in a correct manner. "The minute the researcher cannot tolerate not being in control of the data and fears the unknown, for whatever reason(s), is when memoing will falter and the important tenets of classic grounded theory will not be addressed" (Chametzky, 2023, p. 43). What is important in memoing is the preconscious thoughts and connections you are making and presenting. How these connections are made will be discussed further in the next section on the constant comparison method.

Constant Comparison Method

For inexperienced researchers, arguably the hardest part of a dissertation or thesis is data analysis because here is where sense is made from the obtained information. In grounded theory though, the process of sense-making takes time, and the researcher must accept and tolerate frequent and repeated confusion and uncertainty (Chametzky, 2024) until much later in the analysis process when things will become clearer.

At this point, though, the researcher needs to compare one memo with another to find and uncover previously hidden connections between the memos. Such comparisons, called the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965) and is the core tool in classic grounded theory that will help a researcher uncover and discover the theory to explain participants' behaviors as they address their main concerns.

As a novice researcher, during the constant comparison process, you undoubtedly will have many questions and more than a few moments of confusion. I will proactively address a few potential concerns and areas of confusion.

First, as you compare two codes to see their connection, you might feel that you are perhaps making things up or that there is no obvious connection between the two terms. To the first part, I would say that you are not making things up. What you are and will be

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demonstrating are the "conscious and preconscious realizations" (Glaser, 2014, p. 3) that are being established. To the second part of the concern regarding no obvious connection between codes, I would offer that you might need to reflect—perhaps in some stream-of-consciousness writing—to see what preconscious connections might be presented consciously. If there are no evident and obvious connections, that is acceptable, as that code might be connected to a different code. Set it aside for the time being. What is important as you compare each coded memo with another is that you do not rush the process. The constant comparison method takes time. According to Dr. Lee Yarwood-Ross, a classic grounded theory scholar,

> Original contribution to knowledge is not achieved in a rushed fashion. If one takes their time to tolerate the confusion and trust in the method . . . it will work! Rush it and your work will lack depth and you will not be truly proud what you have discovered. (Personal communication, April 26, 2024)

Very quickly, your memo bank (from the codes and constant comparisons) will be rather large; do not be concerned for that is acceptable, even though you might feel rather overwhelmed and confused by the entire process. And after the second and third interviews (and more) you will still be confused. Imagine being told that you are to do a 10,000-piece puzzle without a starting picture. The best you can do is find the border pieces and work from there. The same is true in a classic grounded theory study to a degree. Your memos and your comparisons of each memo form not only the border and parameters of the puzzle (that is, the theory you are developing) but also the inner pieces. Said differently, you are developing your theory now with your first memo. And you do not know what that developing theory is, and that is scary and confusing. Glaser stated that researchers need to have confidence in the

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process and believe that emergence will happen (Glaser, 1978, 2012); it does work. That advice, though difficult to accept, is what I would offer to novice classic grounded theory researchers.

As you develop your memos and find heretofore connections and start putting pieces together, you will begin to feel a slight sense of understanding. Keep in mind that though you might have been able to connect a few small pieces (that is, codes) together, and you might even have an idea of a central theme (that is, core variable or category), most likely you will not be where you think you are because not all or many connections will have yet been established. Again, the researcher is reminded of the comments from Glaser (1999) that the researcher must have "[the] ability to . . . tolerate some confusion, and . . . tolerate confusion's attendant regression" (p. 838). You will be rearranging your codes and comparing the new connections many times; the process will take as long as it takes (Glaser, 2001). Do not rush through this process, though you might want to do so. Do not believe "You've got it" until you are absolutely certain. And if the core variable or category does not emerge, you will need to get additional data, code the new data, write additional memos, and constantly compare the codes more (Glaser, 2001). Once you believe you have a core variable, you will enter the selective coding stage where further confusion may exist.

Selective Coding

At this point in your analysis, through all your memoing and constant comparing of memos, you have discovered the core variable (or category) that explains most (if not all) of your data. Congratulations, but you are not finished. At this point, you need to code your data more selectively to determine and enrich the subcategories and properties of each category in the core variable (or category). While you are now more experienced in coding and constant-

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ly comparing, there is still some confusion that may exist because you don't yet fully know about any subcategories or properties of each category in your theory. But, as you code, write, and compare memos further, such elements will become obvious just as you had done in the open coding process. Once again, being tolerant and accepting of confusion (Chametzky, 2024) is required. As you may have noticed, the level of confusion now is considerably less than when you started coding and memoing your first interview.

While you might have had a difficult time trusting my words and accepting confusion, you can see now the payoff. You can now see how confusion was and is a good thing because, without it, you would not have reached this point in your study. Doing a classic grounded theory study is highly experiential. A more experienced scholar can explain all the points in classic grounded theory clearly but if you have never done them, they are purely theoretical to you. Once you have experienced what a classic grounded theory study is like, you have a more enriched, nuanced understanding of the research design. Everyone's first time is hyper-myopic and anxiety-laden. Think of driving a car the first time you did it. For me, I was not able to listen to the radio at all because it was a distraction while I was focusing on the speed of the car, the lanes, other traffic, the lights, and the road. Now, I am able to talk, drive, and pay attention to the road all at the same time. The same is true with a classic grounded theory study. The next study you do will be so much easier.

Conclusion

Classic grounded theory, as is common with other research designs, has certain tenets to which researchers must adhere. Where classic grounded theory differs from other designs is in data collection and analysis. Novice scholars often have greater experience in other qualitative designs due to their formational training. And confusion stems from the need to

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escape the (potential) comfort of other designs and experience all that classic grounded theory has to offer (Glaser, 2008). If a researcher focuses on (a) what is occurring in the data, (b) what the main concern is for the participant is, and (c) how he or she attempts to address that main concern (Glaser, 1978), the scholar will be in a good place. Additionally, Glaser (2008) commented that the remedy for confusion in classic grounded theory is to experience and believe that the process will work—because it will—and to jump in and experience all the research design can offer; simply stated, the novice researcher should "just do it" (p. 90).

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