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## **Demystifying Theoretical Sampling in Grounded Theory Research**

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### **Abstract**

Theoretical sampling is a central tenet of classic grounded theory and is essential to the development and refinement of a theory that is 'grounded' in data. While many authors appear to share concurrent definitions of theoretical sampling, the ways in which the process is actually executed remain largely elusive and inconsistent. As such, employing and describing the theoretical sampling process can present a particular challenge to novice researchers embarking upon their first grounded theory study. This article has been written in response to the challenges faced by the first author whilst writing a grounded theory proposal. It is intended to clarify theoretical sampling for new grounded theory researchers, offering some insight into the practicalities of selecting and employing a theoretical sampling strategy. It demonstrates that the credibility of a theory cannot be dissociated from the process by which it has been generated and seeks to encourage and challenge researchers to approach theoretical sampling in a way that is apposite to the core principles of the classic grounded theory methodology.

### **Introduction**

With the introduction of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged the prevailing hypothetico-deductive method of theory verification, questioning the gulf that existed between abstract theory and empirical research. They advocated that a theory developed in direct response to immediate problems under investigation would ultimately be more relevant to the studied area than any pre-existing theory. Thus proffered as a potential means of bridging the theory-practice divide, it is perhaps of little surprise that the grounded theory method has been embraced widely by the health professions. Grounded theory offers healthcare researchers a systematic and interpretive means of generating a theory from data that has the potential to explain, interpret and guide practice. However, a review of

healthcare literature would suggest that while many authors profess to using grounded theory, they may only appear to have 'borrowed' a particular aspect of the method, most commonly the constant comparative approach to data analysis (Draucker et al 2007). Furthermore, 'grounded theory' studies have been criticised for possessing a somewhat "mystical" (Melia 1997 p.33) quality whereby:

a sleight of hand produces a list of 'themes', and we are invited to take it on trust that theory somehow emerges from the data without being offered a step by step explanation of how theoretical insights have been built up (Barbour 2001 p.1116).

Ultimately, this inconsistent application of grounded theory and the ambiguous way in which grounded theory studies are often presented within healthcare literature can pose several challenges to novice researchers. Without being able to refer to useful exemplars of grounded theory studies it is difficult to understand and prepare for the practicalities of carrying out one's own grounded theory research. Similarly, when using grounded theory studies as evidence in practice or as part of a literature review it is difficult to ascertain the credibility of the research if the product cannot be linked explicitly with the process. This article has been written in response to the challenges faced by the first author whilst writing a classic grounded theory proposal, particularly in relation to theoretical sampling. As an active and ongoing process that controls and directs data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling is pivotal in 'building up theoretical insights'. However, while many authors appear to share concurrent definitions of theoretical sampling, the ways in which the process is actually executed remain largely elusive and inconsistent. The purpose of this article is thus to clarify theoretical sampling, explore the practicalities of this strategy, and offer insight into the appropriate selection, execution and write-up of theoretical sampling in order to ensure credible and trustworthy research.

### **Theoretical Sampling**

Classic grounded theory is a general methodology that seeks to develop, through a process of induction, a theory that is 'grounded' in the data from which it has been derived (Glaser 2002a). Sampling is thus *theoretically* oriented; it is directed

towards the generation and development of conceptual theory as opposed to creating a descriptive account. It is continually directed by the emerging theory, following up leads as they arise in the data and progressively focusing data collection to refine and integrate the theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Interestingly, despite the evolution of grounded theory since its inception, the original definition of theoretical sampling has remained largely undisputed:

the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p.45).

Indeed, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have described theoretical sampling as a means to "maximise opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (p.201). Furthermore, despite assuming a different epistemological stance, Charmaz (2006) has also similarly described theoretical sampling as a means of focusing data collection and increasing the analytic abstraction of theory by illuminating variation and identifying gaps that require elaboration. However, upon closer consideration, it would seem that while authors may at first glance appear to share a common definition of theoretical sampling, their apparent congruence with classic grounded theory is somewhat superficial.

The theoretical sampling process in classic grounded theory begins with initial data collection and analysis (Glaser 1978). Open coding of raw data generates initial codes, which in turn stimulate further data collection. In the initial stages of analysis, codes are elicited rapidly and it is through a joint process of theoretical sampling and memo-writing that codes can be corrected, trimmed, and continually fitted to the data (Glaser 1978). Memo-writing enables the researcher to conceptualise the boundaries and properties of each category and illuminate gaps in the emerging theory, thus highlighting where to sample next and for what theoretical purpose (Glaser 1978). Constant comparison of codes yields a provisional set of conceptual categories, from which point new categories emerge and new incidents are fitted and re-fitted into existing categories. The researcher samples both for theoretical similarity and difference in order to expound the properties of each category, attempting to

saturate all categories until the emergence of a core category (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Theoretical sampling is thereafter focused on data that is sufficiently and significantly relevant to the core category and its related properties. Data analysis and memo-writing become increasingly conceptual as the core category and its properties, through constant comparison of incident-category and category-category, become dense and theoretically integrated (Glaser 1978). When the core category is saturated – considered sufficiently dense and data collection no longer generates new leads – theoretical sampling will cease (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) have broken down the theoretical sampling process into stages of open sampling, relational and variational sampling, and discriminate sampling, which correspond directly with their stages of open, axial and selective coding. According to Glaser (1992), this fracturing of the sampling process offers the researcher little methodological help as all the stages “occur anyway” (p.102). Indeed, the above outline of theoretical sampling appears implicitly to parallel the open, selective and theoretical coding stages in classic grounded theory. Interestingly, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have received notably more popularity within healthcare as a very direct result of the ‘help’ offered by a clear set of procedural steps. Similarly, Coyne (1997) has noted that step by step guidance on theoretical sampling may be useful for novice researchers. However, the inherent risk within such a prescriptive approach to theory generation is that creativity is stifled, and without creativity there can only be limited conceptualisation (Glaser 2002b). While as a novice researcher it is unnerving to trust in the emergent nature of classic grounded theory, learning to be patient with the data and remaining open to multiple possibilities will ultimately generate a more relevant, and thus more useful, theory (Holton 2007). By adhering to strict procedures for collecting and analysing data, the researcher is at risk of manipulating the data rather than patiently allowing the theory to emerge inductively. Boychuk-Duchscher & Morgan (2004) have captured this concern aptly: “by focusing the researcher’s energies on the perfect approach to finding the data, the *true* nature of the data may be lost” (p.611). The theory should be grounded in the data, not in the procedure.

Regardless of the debate about the usefulness of sampling

‘rules’, the more concerning distinction between classic grounded theory and the method proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) is the extent to which data are processed deductively. While the open coding/sampling stages are notably similar within both approaches – both involve sampling and coding for all possibilities in the data – axial coding represents a significant divergence from classic grounded theory. Axial coding involves the application of a coding paradigm, otherwise known as the ‘6C’ coding family, to identify conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, intervening conditions and consequences (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Rather than allowing theoretical concepts to emerge inductively, emerging concepts are tested against and fitted deductively into this paradigm: “Strauss’ sampling is controlled by the evolving relevance of concepts, and relevance comes from testing out what is looked for, not what is emerging” (Glaser 1992 p.103). Indeed, there exist several possible coding families to explicate inter-relationships between categories (Glaser 1978), none of which can be identified as relevant in advance of the emerging theory. By pre-selecting the type of theory they wish to generate, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have effectively subverted the inductive nature of classic grounded theory. An inductive approach requires that the theory emerges after data collection begins, meaning that the researcher cannot predict in advance the relevance of any one particular type of data. As such, the constructivist revision of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) can be criticised for predetermining the lens through which data are processed before data collection has even begun. Glaser (1992) and Glaser and Holton (2004) have thus contended that, rather than being grounded theory, these authors have ‘remodelled’ the methodology as part of generic qualitative data analysis.

### **The Use and Abuse of Theoretical Sampling**

As a general methodology, classic grounded theory can use either qualitative or quantitative data (Glaser 1978). Since its inception, however, grounded theory has been embraced fervently by qualitative researchers, ultimately leading to the dilution of classic principles and erosion of the original methodology (Glaser & Holton 2004). This dilution has been further exacerbated in healthcare research, in which grounded theory ‘versions’ are frequently confused or researchers have extracted particular methods outwith the context of the original methodology.

Theoretical sampling in particular has become embroiled within the multiple interpretations of sampling in qualitative research, often being misconstrued as inter-changeable with purposeful sampling (Sandelowski 1995). In *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser 1978) sought to address this same concern, and thirty years later this remains to be a notable problem. Ultimately, faced with many ambiguous examples of the theoretical sampling process, it is imperative to clarify and ‘demystify’ the distinction between purposeful and theoretical sampling in order to prepare novice researchers to produce trustworthy and credible grounded theory research.

Hood (2007) has suggested that “all theoretical sampling is purposeful, but not all purposeful sampling is theoretical” (p.158). Purposeful sampling is defined as the selection of participants with shared knowledge or experience of the particular phenomena identified by the researcher as a potential area for exploration (Sandelowski 1995). Typically, to ensure selection of the most information rich participants, the researcher will establish a set of inclusion or exclusion criteria based upon research questions generated deductively from prior knowledge of the area and a preliminary review of related literature. The concern is with who or what to sample for the purpose of answering questions about a predetermined topic. In contrast, the selection of participants in theoretical sampling, and the reason underpinning that selection, will change in accordance with the theoretical needs of the study at any given time (Morse 2008). Researchers using “theoretical sampling cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead” (Glaser 1978 p.37). While a purposeful sample is selected at the outset of the study for a predetermined purpose, theoretical sampling progressively and systematically tailors data collection to serve the emergent theory. Theoretical sampling is thus always purpose-driven; the sample is selected for the *purpose* of explicating and refining the emerging theory.

### **The Practical Realities of Theoretical Sampling**

It has been clearly established that theoretical sampling is guided by the emerging theory, and is concerned with where to sample next and for what theoretical purpose. Yet for novice researchers newly embarking upon a grounded theory study, the most pressing practical concern is perhaps *where* to start. While Glaser (1978) has advocated beginning the study with a sense of

‘abstract wonderment’, this poses a significant challenge for researchers in the healthcare arena where detailed protocols are required as a means of securing financial and ethical backing. Furthermore, if the purpose of theoretical sampling is to seek data that will contribute to developing categories of the emerging theory, the researcher must surely first have the beginnings of a theory – some tentative ideas - upon which to build. Evidently there is an unavoidable need to begin somewhere. Dey (2007) has cautioned researchers not to confuse an “open mind with an empty head” (p.176). Initial ideas can benefit theoretical development by providing a point of departure and by raising important preliminary questions (Walker & Myrick 2006). Coyne (1997) has explained that “the researcher must have some idea of where to sample, not necessarily what to sample for, or where it will lead” (p.625). In this sense theoretical sampling may involve the purposeful selection of an initial starting point before moving into theoretical sampling when data analysis begins to yield theoretical concepts.

Beyond these initial decisions of where to start it is impossible to anticipate the direction in which sampling will proceed in advance of the emergence of a preliminary theoretical framework (Glaser & Holton 2004). It is pertinent to remember that the starting point is only that, and the researcher should avoid formulating a preconceived conclusion that these initially sampled characteristics will contribute to theoretical variation (Glaser 1978). For example, to sample only according to demographic characteristics is to deduce that they will be relevant to the emerging theory (Glaser 1978; Morse 1991). It is important to recognise that deductive logic does have a legitimate place in classic grounded theory; themes emerge inductively from the data but in following up these themes through further inquiry the researcher is essentially engaged in a process of ‘deducing’ who or what to sample in order to do so (Dey 2007). Glaser (1978) has referred to this deductive logic as ‘conceptual elaboration’ whereby theoretical possibilities and probabilities are deduced from the emerging theory. However, because points of departure such as demographic characteristics have not emerged from the theory, they must be considered merely another variable awaiting a verdict as to its relevance. Indeed, descriptive data may be elevated into abstract theory only by way of comparing theoretical categories and properties, not mere demographic opposites (Hood 2007). Pre-existing knowledge can guide the

researcher in identifying a starting point for data collection, but this knowledge should be awarded no relevance until validated or dismissed by the formulation of the emerging theory. In the same way as ideas must earn a way into the theory, the converse is also true; it is possible that initial ideas will earn a way out.

### Theoretical Saturation

For the novice grounded theorist, the initial concern about where to start is often accompanied by a similar concern regarding the decision to stop data collection. Given the inductive nature of theory generation, it is understood that theoretical sampling, including the point at which sampling will cease, is controlled throughout the study by the emerging theory. Sampling is discontinued once a point of saturation has been reached, whereby categories and their properties are considered sufficiently dense and data collection no longer generates new leads (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Glaser (1992) has described this as the point at which the researcher has reached the full extent of the data, and thus “sampling is over when the study is over” (p.107). While this definition carries a degree of simplicity, theoretical saturation can be a difficult concept to understand, particularly for first-time grounded theorists who are yet to actually experience reaching the saturation point within a study. Furthermore, much akin to ‘theoretical sampling’, the term ‘saturation’ has become somewhat ambiguous, ill-defined and frequently misconstrued within the blurry boundaries of qualitative research. It is imperative to understand, however, that ‘saturation’ within generic qualitative data analysis and ‘saturation’ within classic grounded theory are inherently different. While the qualitative researcher seeks descriptive saturation, the grounded theorist is concerned with saturation at a conceptual level.

Theoretical saturation is not mere descriptive redundancy. That Glaser and Strauss (1967) have stipulated that categories be *sufficiently* dense denotes an understanding that theoretical saturation need not signal a point of complete coverage whereby the researcher ‘knows everything’. Instead, theoretical sampling does not aim for full descriptive coverage, but systematically focuses and narrows data collection in the service of theoretical development. While a predetermined, purposefully selected sample might cause the researcher to worry if one has captured enough relevant information, the theoretical sampling approach

assures relevance by progressively and systematically tailoring data collection to serve the emergent theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). In so doing, the grounded theorist is able to transcend the descriptive level typical of qualitative research. By saturating categories that seem to have the most explanatory power and integrating these into and around a core variable, the grounded theorist is able to present the theoretical essence of a substantive area. Rather than presenting findings, debatably ‘accurate’ facts or descriptions, grounded theory seeks only to present plausible hypotheses that are grounded in the data (Glaser & Holton 2004). While the saturation point indicates theoretical stability whereby the core category accounts for as much variation in the data as possible, it is crucial to understand that these concepts and hypotheses are openly modifiable within the substantive area. Saturation in classic grounded theory is thus neither concerned with verifying hypotheses or exhausting the description of a particular situation at a particular point in time. Instead, the researcher should be concerned with generating a theory that can cope with changing situations (a particularly important consideration within the ever-changing healthcare arena) and less with in-the-moment accuracy that has little temporal transferability.

### Writing up Theoretical Sampling

Ultimately, it is difficult to clarify or ‘demystify’ theoretical sampling if researchers continue to misconstrue grounded theory as a qualitative method and not a general methodology. This article seeks to encourage novice researchers to be mindful that, as a general methodology, grounded theory should not necessarily be subject to generic ‘qualitative’ guidelines. For example, one element of ‘trustworthy’ qualitative research is that researchers provide a detailed description of participants (Curtin & Fossey 2007). For healthcare in particular, this is considered central to evidence based practice; a sample that is described sufficiently will enable the reader to transfer the research findings to a particular context, allowing comparison between the evidence presented in the research article and their own sphere of experience (Curtin & Fossey 2007). From a grounded theory perspective, however, there lies an inherent risk in the excessive description of potentially irrelevant detail. This is of particular concern in relation to the above discussion, whereby researchers should not automatically assume the relevance of participants

socio-demographic characteristics to the emerging theory. While demographic or social characteristics may provide a starting point for data collection, by presenting a thick, isolated description of participants at the start of a grounded theory research article the researcher is at risk of either belying an inappropriate approach to sampling, or obscuring the analytic flow and progression of theoretical insights thus compromising the credibility of an otherwise trustworthy study.

Morse (2008) has criticised the way in which theoretical samples are presented as static without detailing and justifying the selection and sequencing of the sampling process. Typically, researchers provide a one-off description of participants in the methods section of research articles, and ignore the impact of sampling decisions made during analysis (Barbour 2001). However, if the researcher does not capture the flow of the theoretical sampling process, the complexities involved in the development of the theory may be lost. Theoretical sampling is intertwined inextricably with the abstraction of description into theory, and is crucial to discovering and refining categories and their properties and suggesting relationships between concepts. Ultimately, the theoretical sampling 'flow' of moving back and forth between data collection and analysis poses a challenge to researchers writing up grounded theory studies; it is often difficult to convey the chaos of research within the structure of an article or thesis. However, sampling theoretically is "more difficult than simply collecting data from a preplanned set of groups, since choice requires continuous thought, action and search" (Glaser & Strauss 1967 p.52). Studies that produce an artificially neat and static account of the grounded theory process serve only to obscure this complexity (Barbour 2001). Novice grounded theorists should be careful to write-up a grounded theory study in a manner that best reflects the methodology. Grounded theory researchers should avoid isolated, one-off, static descriptions of participants but should instead be challenged to integrate within their write up the progression, justification and contribution of sampling decisions so as to mirror the complex and iterative process of theory development.

### **Evaluating Credibility**

Theoretical sampling is theoretically oriented, and will thus be different for every theory. There is no definitive checklist for ensuring credibility, and the reader should be careful when

applying conventional guidelines of trustworthiness in qualitative research to grounded theory studies. For example, the emphasis on thick description in qualitative research has been demonstrated to be potentially antithetical to the inductive nature of grounded theory; sampling should be theoretically directed as opposed to variable oriented and only those descriptive characteristics that have a proven contribution to theoretical variation within the theory should be included in the write up. The adequacy of a theoretical sample should be judged on the process of theory generation. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that an inadequate theoretical sample would be evident in a theory that is lacking integration and has too many remaining gaps. It would seem then that transparency is a universal concern, common to both grounded theory and qualitative research; the credibility of a theory, or any piece of research, cannot be dissociated from the process by which it is generated. The 'mysticism' arises in grounded theory research when the researcher fails to describe adequately the complex and messy process of analytic abstraction whereby theory is developed from empirical data. In this sense, to ensure that a grounded theory study has credibility there must be evidence that the final theoretical product is actually 'grounded'. This should be achieved by making the process through which theory has been developed explicit within the final write up, paying particular attention to capturing the flow of theoretical sampling which will demonstrate and explain the build up of theoretical insights into abstract theory.

### **Conclusion**

For the healthcare researcher, classic grounded theory offers an inductive methodology with a distinctly practical purpose: to provide a theory that has the potential to explain, interpret and guide practice. However, the full potential of grounded theory can only be realised through sound application of its distinct methodological principles, most notably theoretical sampling. Although grounded theory has evolved and diversified since its inception, the emphasis on theoretical sampling as being essential to the analytic abstraction of theory has remained largely undisputed. Despite this apparent agreement, however, it has been demonstrated that by pre-determining the type of data sought or looking for a specific paradigm in the data, other versions of 'grounded theory' seek only to subvert the inductive

nature of classic grounded theory. Furthermore, there is wide evidence of inappropriate use and documentation of theoretical sampling within healthcare literature, resulting from the misconceptions regarding the methodological nature of classic grounded theory. As a result, grounded theory studies have been accused of mysticism, whereby codes and categories appear as if out of nowhere. Novice and experienced grounded theory researchers alike are thus encouraged to 'demystify' their theoretical sampling processes, making explicit the steps taken to build up theoretical insights. Researchers should capture the complex flow of sampling for the purposes of theory development by integrating key sampling decisions and justifications within the write up of their studies. However, researchers should also be wary of overly thick description of the sample; descriptive characteristics may provide an adequate starting point however these must not be awarded any assumed relevance until validated or dismissed by the emerging theory. As a general methodology, novice researchers should beware appraising grounded theory on the basis of generic qualitative guidelines. Novice researchers are encouraged to develop a sound understanding of the theoretical sampling process in order to ensure the credibility of one's own studies, and to appraise that of others'.

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