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The Future of Grounded Theory

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## **The Future of Grounded Theory**

**Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D., Hon. Ph.D.**

Editor's Note: As we celebrate this great man's life, we re-publish<sup>1</sup> this gently edited paper about what the future of grounded theory is likely to be. Glaser discussed in whose hands the future of grounded theory appears to be as well as what accounts for its spread, its use, and its misuse. Glaser first wrote this paper in 1998 and updated it for publication in *The Grounded Theory Review* in 2010. Much of Glaser's predictions have proven accurate.

I would like examine what I consider the future of grounded theory. I will discuss in whose hands the future of grounded theory appears to be and what accounts for its spread, its use and misuse, and where the majority of grounded theory studies are occurring. I will then briefly review poor grounded theory, qualitative grounded theory, social fictions, and theory bits. Finally, I will touch on the future structures in which grounded theory will be taught and centered.

First, a few guidelines are necessary. Grounded theory refers to a specific methodology on how to get from systematically collecting data to producing a multivariate conceptual theory. It is a total methodological package. It provides a series of systematic, exact methods that start with collecting data and take the researcher to a theoretical piece that is publishable.

Now, all research is grounded in data in some way. It is implicit in the definition of research. Thus, research is grounded by definition, but research grounded in data is not grounded theory, although many jargonizers would have their work designated that way. It is grounded theory only when it follows the grounded theory methodological package. Second, grounded theory is just a small piece of the action in social psychological research. Research methods go in many directions, using many methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative and mixes thereof.

Grounded theory is a specific general methodology. It is no better or worse than other methods. It is just another option for researchers. Grounded theory is used in part or in whole by researchers. When used in part, it is "adopt and adapt," with other research methods woven in, based on the training and judgment of the researcher involved. The multi version view of GT is based on jargonizing with the GT vocabulary, not on the GT procedures (Glaser, 2009). I will speak here on the pure or orthodox view, knowing as I

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted and lightly edited from Glaser (2010) The future of grounded theory. *The Grounded Theory Review*, 9(2). pp. 2-9.

said in my reader, *Grounded Theory, 1984-1994* (Glaser, 1995), that most researchers mix methods by jargonizing.

Third, when Anselm Strauss and I wrote *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Anselm would say to me, "Barney, we are 15 to 20 years ahead of our time." He was right in my view, so I thought, "Good, I can do other things and bide my time." Well, to my surprise, 15 to 20 years later, grounded theory has gone global, seriously global among the disciplines of nursing, business, and education and less so among other social-psychological-oriented disciplines such as social welfare, psychology, sociology, and art. Sociology Press sells books to Russia, Iran, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, China, Poland, Netherlands, Australia as well as Northern Europe.

Everywhere I travel, people come to my workshops at some expense and from some distance to hear me and to ask questions. People compete for my attention and to be my host. I embody what they embrace—grounded theory.

Since I wrote *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Glaser, 1992), I have been traveling in Europe, Down Under, Canada, and the United States. What follows is not a "wish list"; it is not an ideology. Rather, it is a grounded analysis of data from my travels and book sales that indicates what the future of grounded theory is likely to be.

### **The People Who Use Grounded Theory**

Unformed or novice researchers embrace grounded theory for dissertation or master's theses when, in their view, the more preconceived methods do not give relevant answers. Unformed researchers who can choose their own methods do so at the discretion of their advisers. The principal users today, mostly students who are doing M.A. or Ph.D. theses or dissertations, are well into their academic careers and looking for methodologies that will result in data and theories relevant to what is going on in their research areas of interest. This makes grounded theory very appealing on that one point alone—relevance.

They realize that grounded theory is a methodology that provides a total package, which takes one from data collection through several stages to a theory and in a scheduled amount of time. This ensures a finished product that can comply with a deadline. Again, this is very appealing at the M.A. or Ph.D. stage of an academic career when personal resources are limited. It ensures graduation and getting on to the first step of the professorial career. It ensures promotions based on achieving an advanced degree. It helps in getting published.

Whether or not the users continue to do grounded theory varies. Their training directs its use in future research, but with more autonomy. They take it their own way and use other methodology strategies with it. They adopted it for their dissertations, and now they adapt it in many ways for a multitude of reasons. The continued users take it in ways that seem "suitable" in their current careers and contexts. They then wrap their grounded theory identities around the adaptations, and it becomes the grounded theory they teach and do, however recognizable as grounded theory. The multi-version view of GT, based on jargonizing, is unstoppable.

As careers mature, their research identities wrap around these adjustments, and this becomes their grounded theory. The purist view gets mixed with other research strategies and sometimes gets totally contaminated by them. Grounded theory use spreads in this way, sometimes only by name; that is, by jargonizing. At the same time, other colleagues with identities involved in different methodologies might disappear through retirement and attrition, and grounded theory à la adaptation takes a place in departments and research institutes. Its suitability becomes grounded in context, and more Ph.D. students try it and like it.

### **Types of Grounded Theory Researchers**

Now it can be seen that in the beginning, the motivations run high to use grounded theory in the thesis stage of one's career. It is linked with research age, career development, and (least likely) chronological age. It also is firmly linked with a certain type of researcher, whose profile does not fit everybody. One type of researcher is no better than another, although any one researcher might need to think so. Evaluation of these differences is a waste; people vary.

The grounded theory researcher must have three important characteristics: an ability to conceptualize data, an ability to tolerate some confusion, and an ability to tolerate confusion's attendant regression. These attributes are necessary because they enable the researcher to wait for the conceptual sense making to emerge from the data. This is just a fact.

Not everyone has these attributes, but some have them naturally. These latter researchers can do grounded theory almost automatically. Most often, they have self-selected grounded theory because its conceptualization and openness to relevance have grabbed them. They become formed in grounded theory methodology, and these are the researchers who will take it properly into the future.

Students who attempt grounded theory but cannot tolerate confusion and regression, and who need to continually feel in cognitive control, fall by the wayside. They get fed up. They might even decompensate if they do not give up. It is terrible to watch such a colleague break down while trying to do a grounded theory dissertation.

Those who can tolerate confusion and regression love the openness of grounded theory and the chance to really generate concepts that make sense of what is going on. They have come to grounded theory to escape the preconceived problems, concepts, and format methods of data collection and the processing of it. They wish to escape producing the irrelevance that is based on approved formed methods.

Being able to conceptualize is a must so long as it can be linked to the data and is not pure one incident impressionism. It must be linked with the tedium of constant comparisons. So, conceptualizing is just a start that can fail if it is not submitted to the rigor of grounded theory's constant comparisons. I have met students who do not have an ability to relate conceptualization to data, even on the impression level. They are not in the future of grounded theory, nor is the researcher who cannot conceptualize and who is slated to just story-talk or incident trip, never realizing the interchangeability of indicators but continuing to collect the same idea over and over with different data. Redundant data

collection soon becomes a source of phasing them out of a grounded theory thesis. Thus, there is a constant weeding out of those who do not succeed in doing grounded theory from those who do. The people who do succeed in doing grounded theory probably cannot do much else because their natural inclinations lead them to become formed by grounded theory's rigorous methodology. In the bargain, they spread its use. Those who can only incidentally trip and work at the impression level barely spread grounded theory, even though they may profess by jargonizing that they are spreading it. It is merely a legitimating rubric in their case.

### **Spread of Grounded Theory**

There are several reasons for the spread of grounded theory. First, the disciplines that use and support grounded theory deal with important, highly relevant dependent variables, for which grounded theory gives answers to their variation. These variables are involved in pain, cure, social-psychological fates, profit, management problems, learning, and so forth.

Second, the spread of grounded theory is following on the tail of globalization. Globalization is occurring by communication, spread of business and manufacture, and travel. The core variable in this process is that people, including researchers, are constantly running into the multitude of ways in which diversity affects the worlds of business, health, and education as globalization continues.

The formulated evidentiary methods work far better in more homogeneous environments of culture and structure. Preconceptions fit and hold better. In culturally diverse environments, these methods do not work as well because preconception can lead the researcher far astray from realities that are not in his or her cultural view. These differences cannot be imagined or conjectured. They must be discovered to be relevant, work, and fit.

What is more obvious and visible in the globalization of economies is that cultural and sub-cultural differences abound everywhere. What is more apparent on macro levels now can be seen on micro-levels. Differentials abound, and preconceptions do not tap them because preconceptions are too normative.

Third, as a consequence of cultural diversity, more and more researchers and users of the more evidentiary, preconceived formulated research have become disaffected with their data collection, their findings, what they should find, and whatever hypotheses should be tested. Smoldering disaffection has grown as findings are seen to be beside the point, irrelevant, moot, and unworkable. And Ph.D. dissertations are going under because of this irrelevance and the lack of cogent explanations of important dependent variables. This is very serious on the human level, where identities and careers are in precarious involvement.

So, along comes grounded theory years after its inception, saying, let us find out directly what is going on and how we can account for it. Let us see what the main concern of the participants in substantive areas is and how they resolve it. Let us generate the concepts for the theory. Then, research will help in the area under view.

This promise of grounded theory, which has been fulfilled many times, is highly motivating and a sure thing for doing dissertations. People are latching onto it and feeling confident about producing something; they are feeling creative, original, and meaningfully relevant. Particularly in the world of business and health, people are very disaffected with preconceived evidentiary proof research because it is not producing findings that make business or health problems any better. These dependent variables, which are profit and cure related, are very important. Answers that work are wanted. Grounded theory tells us what is going on, tells us how to account for the participants' main concerns, and reveals access variables that allow for incremental change. Grounded theory is what is, not what should, could, or ought to be.

The conceptual grab of grounded theory is a very important factor in its growing popularity. It frees the researcher to be his or her own theorist, and it is empowering. Once the researcher has a grounded theory for what is going on in a substantive area, no one can tell him or her much different; new data just get compared into the theory, and the researcher's concepts have grab for others. People start to see the concepts everywhere (e.g., default remodeling, commodifying self, super normalizing, "elsewhereism," credentializing, cultivating, risky rapport, creative undermining). As a result, the researcher's empowerment as a theorist continues.

These concepts are not offensive to the people in the area. They help the participants to see that apparent disparate facts have an underlying uniformity. It is offensive to tell them in a descriptive way what they already know anyway, with no conceptual handles. "We spend all this money on research for you to tell us what we know goes on anyway" is the usual complaint. But giving them a way in which to conceptualize the pattern underlying dispersed facts gives them the power to control it better.

A friend of mine who did a study of corporate mergers discovered default remodeling. Everywhere he goes and mentions it, executives will say, "God, that is what is going on." In their heads, these executives see examples of this concept. They are empowered.

The spread of grounded theory is also linked to perceptual empowerment. By this, I mean that the comparative process constantly raises the conceptual level of the study, which gives the researcher a continually transcending perspective, a constantly larger and less bounded picture. A good substantive theory has formal implications. The credentializing of nurses easily leads to the credentializing of all areas of work to ensure "expert" quality and to control abuses. Becoming a nurse, then becoming a health professional, then becoming a professional expert on whatever the subject, and finally becoming an expert is seen as the socialization process of social experts, whatever the subject.

Routinely grounded substantive theory is a third perceptual-level theory. Data go to concepts, and concepts get transcended to a core variable, which is the main underlying pattern. Formal theory is on the fourth level, but the theory can be boundless as the research keeps comparing and trying to figure out what is going on and what the latent patterns are. Now, probably most important for the spread of grounded theory and why we had to wait so long is, as I indicated earlier, that there are fields— particularly business,

health, and education—that require research on high-impact dependent variables that help them to understand and handle problems by ‘imbuement’.

They are tired of ideology about how to make profit, relieve pain, and educate. What works is needed. Grounded theory does this. Many grounded theory studies now are altering the preconceived processes in fields of practice. For example, imposing treatment paradigms on patients that do not fit their lifestyles and thereby get ignored is changing to designing treatment regimes that fit their lifestyles, so there is hope for compliance. This is but one brief example of the many preconceptions that are being altered by grounded theory.

I am called by M.A. and Ph.D. candidates from all over the world to discuss using grounded theory in their theses. Their reasons are the grab, openness, freedom, and conceptualization provided by the method. But most of all, they wish to get at what is relevant and works. They want to make meaningful and lasting contributions. Grounded theory, with its conceptual freedom from time, place, and received concepts, gives them this chance. It is a sure thing for success because what is going on always is there, and preconceptions are not. They realize that it is only through discovery that they can find out what is going on. They could not have dreamed it or deduced it from preconceived ideas and are turned off by the blind alleys of reformulated ideas in evidentiary, preconceived research and pre-study literature reviews. Researchers who are new to the scene are looking for a method that yields research that fits, works, is relevant, and is readily modifiable.

That a resulting GT is modifiable is crucial for two reasons. First, in many preconceiving, verification methods, it is the data that are poor, not the theory. Second, grounded theory shows that all data, no matter what their quality, can constantly modify the theory through comparisons. This modifying of theory is crucial because it constantly keeps up with what is going on as changes occur and it increases its formal abstraction. It constantly corrects for poor data (e.g., response sets of interviewers), and it brings the theory into closer grounding.

I can give two succinct grounded theories of cultural diversity problems. Cultural diversity can ruin the production of a factory when the foremen are Japanese and the workers are English, or it can affect the client relationships and profit of a consulting firm that has one third local nationals and two thirds foreign nationals. The cultural conflicts could not have been anticipated beforehand because they were so subtle.

The survival of a small business is another example. Studies abound in this area, but only the grounded theory studies have shown how various forms of family slavery, black market, cash economy outside the tax system, imposing client relations, moment capture ability and closed networks really help the small business survive. Also, the growth of virtual organizations, while looking large, turns to small business contractors. So, some small business is on the rise under this umbrella.

High-impact dependent variables that are linked to research that yields good interpretations and theoretical accountings are highly motivating to researchers. By contrast, I used to see many researchers trying to study what was not there but what was

preconceived to be there. This condition led to discouragement, reduced energy for the research, disaffection with research and resulted in the loss of potentially good researchers.

### **Poor Grounded Theory**

In the future of grounded theory, there frequently will be poor grounded theory research, but it must be seen as developmental. It takes time to fully learn how to do grounded theory. The realization process takes more than a year and often a few research studies.

Poor grounded theory is fine when it portends the future. People use a bit here and a bit there, and learning grows. There is a lot of competitive incident tripping, there is a lot of impressing out, and there is a lot of logical conjecture as people take off on very rich theory bits. Grounded theory produces its own conjectures. It is okay when the future is the continuing skill development in doing grounded theory.

Novice grounded theorists with no experienced grounded theory mentor, of whom there are many throughout the world, are particularly subject to this delayed action development. My admonition is to solve the skill problem discovered on one study during the next study. As the critical mass of grounded theorists grows, they will help each other in skill development through joining networks based on telecommunications and the internet, especially when personal contact and seminars are not possible. The future is developmental in skill, which is snowballing in researchers.

### **Qualitative Grounded Theory**

Let me be clear. Grounded theory is a general method. It can be used on any data or combination of data. It was developed partially by me with quantitative data and partially with qualitative data. It is expensive and somewhat hard to obtain quantitative data, especially in comparison to qualitative data. Qualitative data are inexpensive to collect, very rich in meaning and observation, and very rewarding to collect and analyze. So, by default to ease, costs and growing use by many, grounded theory is being linked to qualitative data and is seen as a qualitative method, using symbolic interaction. Qualitative grounded theory accounts for the global spread of its use.

I can only caution the reader not to confuse this empirical spread with the fact that it is a general method. It is a kind of takeover that makes routine qualitative research sound good by positive stigma and jargonizing. Only highly trained grounded theory researchers can see the difference and the confusion. Much of it revolves around the notion of emergence versus forcing and the failure to use all the grounded theory methodological steps. For instance, any kind of data can be constantly compared but that does not ensure a grounded theory. However, it is prudent for researchers to go with qualitative grounded theory when that is where the resources are to do it and when that is where researchers can reap career and personal rewards.

### **Social Fiction**

So much of the action in the world is run by socially structured fictions. Many people have large stakes in maintaining these fictions and have the power to maintain them.

Grounded theorists often find out what is really going on and discover that the “powers that be” are running on fictions.

In the future, grounded theory will uncover more and more of these fictions, which will not always be welcomed by the participants. To prevent these people from stopping the spread of grounded theory, it is important for the researcher not to myth-break, whistle-blow, structure-bust, finger-point, bubble-burst, and so forth. Grounded theorists never should be seen as crusaders, subversives, or underminers. If they are, then they will be averted or crushed. Grounded theorists should engage in incremental changes slowly, if at all. In fact, before even trying incremental change, the grounded theorist should analyze the functional requirement of maintaining the social fiction. Learning the categories involved will help to make the incremental change go smoothly. Furthermore, the functional requirement of the fiction might be more important to both the researcher and the participants than is the change.

### **Theory Bits**

Much of grounded theory’s future is in the use of theory bits from grounded theories; bits of theory from a substantive theory that a person will use briefly in a sentence or so, whether as a colleague, teacher, consultant, or student. It is too cumbersome to tell the whole theory, especially when a bit works. Talking about a core category has the necessary irresistible grab on others. But the bit can be any concept or hypothesis from the theory (e.g., he is “supernormalizing,” “cultivating” is the way to go, divorce lacks “ritual loss ceremonies”). It is easy to respond to these bits with meaning. Many colleagues will use theory bits when applying grounded theory instead of doing the tedium of emergent fit. In conversations with colleagues or friends, as well as in lectures or seminars about grounded theory, theory bits will be used almost unconsciously.

Theory bits come from two sources. First, they come from generating one concept in a study and conjecturing without generating the rest of the theory. With the juicy concept, the conjecture sounds grounded, but it is not; it is only experiential. Second, theory bits come from a generated substantive theory. A theory bit emerges in normal talk when it is impossible to relate the whole theory. So, a bit with grab is related to the listener. The listener can then be referred to an article or a report that describes the whole theory.

As grounded theory goes into the future and accumulates more and more information, theory bits of both types will be heard. Theory bits are impossible to stop because of their instant grab. The person talking can show his or her skill and power instantly.

Grounded theory is rich in imageric concepts that are easy to apply “on the fly.” These are applied intuitively, with no data, with a feeling of “knowing” as a quick analysis of a substantive incident or area. They ring true with great credibility. They empower conceptually and perceptually. They feel theoretically complete (“Yes, that accounts for it”). They are exciting handles of explanation. They can run far ahead of the structural constraints of research. They are simple one- or two-variable applications, as opposed to being multivariate and complex. Theory bits can become stereotypical and routine as they get into the local culture. They are quick and easy. They invade social and professional conversations as colleagues use them to sound knowledgeable. Competitive parlance

stimulates them. They are relatively safe, non-stakeful utterances. The danger, of course, is that they might be just plain wrong or irrelevant unless based in a grounded theory. Hopefully, they get corrected as more data come out. The grounded theorist should try to fit, correct, and modify them even as they pass his or her lips.

Unfortunately, theory bits have the ability to stunt further analysis because they can sound so correct. Theory bits stunt cognitive thought. They can seduce and denude one of motivation to go further in an analysis. Multivariate thinking stops in favor of a juicy single variable, a quick and sensible explanation. Also, they can jinx or label a person or situation badly enough to bring on negative consequences. People force them on us as routine explanations, to be unquestioned by further thought, much less further research.

Theory bits allow us to escape the particularistic, experiential explanation of an incident in favor of sounding as if one is applying sound, fundamental general knowledge. At least grounded theory bits are grounded, not biased, prejudiced, or conjectural. Multivariate thinking can continue these bits to fuller explanations. This is the great benefit of trusting a theory that fits, works, and is relevant as it is continually modified.

As grounded theory spreads, its future will, in part, be in spawning bits (concepts or hypotheses) that, in juicy richness, can be applied to situations or incidents to explain and make sense of them. But a responsible grounded theorist always should finish his or her bit with a statement to the effect that "Of course, these situations are very complex or multivariate, and without more data, I cannot tell what is really going on."

### **Structural Location of Training**

The future structures of training and doing grounded theory are sporadic. It is not yet a widely taught methodology in spite of the qualitative research takeover. Although there are many schools with teachers who train people at some level in grounded theory, usually mixed with other methodologies, it is not yet possible to just go anywhere and expect to obtain training in grounded theory. There is not yet a critical mass of grounded theorists in any school or department. A student searching for grounded theory training must pick known specific teachers of grounded theory and go to the teacher's school.

Given the increased numbers of those who wish to do grounded theory, this apprenticing is not yet easy to obtain. There are many novices without mentors who learn grounded theory from my books and do it as best they can with little or no support. Often, the only formal training they can obtain is in my seminars. As they meet each other and then engage in telecommuting and internet communicating, they become a mutual source of support and can exchange ideas with each other. Soon, grounded theory associations might emerge.

We have started a grounded theory institute and a journal for grounded theory articles. This is abetted by the internet and will empower those learning grounded theory through minus mentoring by connecting them to the growing global network of grounded theory researchers.

Because grounded theory is still an 'adopt-and-adapt' method, it will continue to be routinely offered as an option, to some degree, within departments that support other

methodologies to a greater extent. Where no teachers of grounded theory exist, the minus mentorees must find each other through the telephone, via the internet, and at seminars. Then, they must maintain long-distance contact when returning home.

### **Justifying Grounded Theory**

The future will bring less need to legitimize grounded theory; hence, there will be less need to justify using it. Now, many researchers have to explain it and argue for its use. Its future portends that grounded theory will be as accepted as are other methods (e.g., surveys) and will require little or no explanation to justify its use in a research project. With its use, grounded theory will empower the Ph.D. candidate with a degree, a subsequent career, and the acclaim of an original creative theory.

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