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Grounded Theory Has the Power to Change Lives: A Tribute to Barney Glaser

Alvita Nathaniel, PhD

In November 2021, I had a very long late-night phone conversation with 91-year-old Barney Glaser. His eyes were failing and his body was weak, but his mind was sharp and clear. I could hear his wife, Carolyn's, voice in the background as our conversation waxed and waned. He told me about the next book he was planning to write—a theory on aging. He was keen to talk about grounded theory. As we ruminated, he mentioned some of his favorite theories. He remembered the names of the theories, their core categories, and the theorists—most of whom he had mentored. He reminisced about PhD students who had attended his troubleshooting seminars and about grounded theory colleagues we both knew. In his presence, I felt as if I were still his student. As our conversation was ending, he talked about all the people who had contacted him with letters, phone calls, and emails over the years. He asked, "You know what the concept is, don't you?" I was silent. "Grounded theory changed my life," he said. "They all told me that grounded theory changed their lives." Barney Glaser understood the spread of grounded theory and power of theory to change people's lives.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) changed the research landscape with their seminal work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, the book that first described the grounded theory method and established its rigorous procedures. The method was revolutionary. It was at the forefront of a qualitative research movement in the mid-20th century because it challenged several dogmatic precepts. *Discovery* and Glaser's subsequent works (1978, 1992, 1998, 2007, 2008) defied the inculcated beliefs about research inquiry: (a) that theory and research are separate endeavors, (b) that qualitative research serves primarily as a foundation for quantitative inquiry, (c) that qualitative research lacks rigor, (d) that qualitative methods are biased and unstructured, (e) that data collection and analysis should be separate processes, and (f) that qualitative research could produce only descriptive findings (Charmaz, 2000). As the popularity of grounded theory has spread throughout the world, the flaws in these precepts have been exposed.

In the *Future of Grounded Theory*, reprinted in this issue of *The Grounded Theory Review*, Glaser recognized the magnitude of change grounded theory had on the research world. He reflected on the worldwide spread of the method. Realizing the popularity of grounded theory, Glaser wrote, "Everywhere I travel, people come to my workshops at some expense and some distance to hear me and to ask questions. People compete for my attention. . . . I embody what they embrace—grounded theory."

Aristotle wrote that change requires the existence of a potentiality which can be actualized (350 B.C.E.). Those clamoring for Glaser's attention were bursting with potential.

In *The Future of Grounded Theory*, Glaser listed critical characteristics of a grounded theorist including an ability to conceptualize data, an ability to tolerate confusion, and an ability to tolerate confusion's attendant regressions. Successful grounded theorists have the desire to learn, courage to let go of the familiar, curiosity to understand others, and the patience to allow patterns to emerge—all potentialities waiting to be actualized.

As Glaser predicted, grounded theorists' lives change as they learn and master the method. But even greater change has been effected through application of grounded theories, which teach us about previously unknown psycho-social and social-structural processes. We know so much more about living with illness, being an alcoholic, convincing physicians, succeeding at business, dying in the hospital, and violating moral values. The list goes on and on. What Glaser gave us with the method he and Strauss developed is a way to look at the world and see hidden processes in everyday life. This gift allows us to understand and predict behaviors and change systems to improve lives.

He didn't say it as we talked on the phone that cold winter night, but I'm sure Barney remembered that I was one of those people who said to him, "Grounded theory changed my life." It changed me as a person, it boosted my academic career, it added to the knowledge base of my discipline, and it made me part of a community of scholars. As I remember that lovely late-night phone call, I know that I will be forever grateful to Barney—my teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend.

About the Author

Alvita Nathaniel, PhD, is the Editor of *The Grounded Theory Review*, an open access online journal focusing solely on classic grounded theory. Dr. Nathaniel is Professor Emerita and past department chair at West Virginia University School of Nursing. Mentored by Barney Glaser, Nathaniel continues with grounded theory initiatives. In addition to her grounded theory publications, she co-authored the nursing textbook, *Ethics & Issues in Contemporary Nursing*, which is now approaching its 6th edition. Writing the ethics textbook led to her grounded theory research on moral reckoning, which she continues to pursue along with additional scholarship focusing on the two main foci of classic grounded theory and nursing ethics. She is Fellow of the Grounded Theory Institute, Fellow of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, and Fellow of the West Virginia University Academy of Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Email: anathaniel@hsc.wvu.edu

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