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The History of Grounded Theory based on Quantitative Methodology

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## The History of Grounded Theory Based on Quantitative Methodology<sup>1</sup>

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The idea for a grounded theory methodology came from the 1950's when Lazarsfeld<sup>2</sup> started to do methodology of quantitative studies. The methodology he created was not that of the initial procedures applied to quantitative studies but rather trying to figure out the procedures that had been used in "good" quantitative studies. The procedures emerged. As he figured them out, other researchers studied them and started to use them and research methodology was born. This is, of course, how Anselm and I developed GT methodology. We figured out the procedures we had used in the dying study research and in writing it up in **Awareness of Dying** (1965) and **Time for Dying** (1967). Other researchers wanted this GT methodology: they wanted to know how we "did it".

When Lazarsfeld started to do methodologically-oriented quantitative studies, he also started relating the resulting research to theory. He began to discover that the preframed quantitative studies based on speculative, conjectural theory in the 50s was showing the theory to be wrong or not relevant. So he started correcting, modifying or changing many theories based on research data. They were usually studies of social class, voting, employment, etc. So many of these theories steeped in ideology were wrong. He discovered, using methodology, many unobserved variables which changed extant theories and simple findings.

Thus, he came up with the idea -- why not just get theory from the data first; data based on a sound methodology. But he was not quite to the idea of GT, since he was still fixed on correcting extant theory with solid, accurate studies based on new studies. Most of his corrections were descriptive and used

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is Chapter 1 of Dr. Glaser's book, *Doing Quantitative Grounded Theory* (Sociology Press, forthcoming)

<sup>2</sup> Paul F. Lazarsfeld was founder of Columbia University's Bureau for Applied Social Research

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

unobserved-to-date facts. There was little conceptualization and the conceptualization was theoretical codes, not substantive codes. Why? Because the newer methodologically-based quantitative studies were seen as producing accurate truths used to test theory. So it was a combination of generating new theory as tests to correct speculative theory with very little conceptualization and mostly unit-bound description. Quantitative research is still pretty much in this mode today; constantly correcting extant theory by testing it with accurate findings. There is little focus is on substantive conceptual generating. Most research generates a few descriptions and some ideas, then back to testing.

GT took this approach a few steps further by just generating conceptual theory abstract of unit, time, place and people, and with no preframing by extant theory before the research began. Then the discovered theory is related back to the literature, both descriptive and theoretical, but not so much to correct it as to advance it with modification by constant comparative transcending concepts, and using many of them in a multivariate theory.

GT, in the hands of Strauss and I, made this abstract move using qualitative data; data which was easier to use and did not have the theory-accurate data-testing wrestle model dominating it. Of course, not too many years later (and to be expected in the bargain) the qualitative methodologists remodeled GT away from conceptual generation to accurate qualitative description (see **The Grounded Theory Perspective II: Description's Remodeling of GT**). But still, and in spite of this remodeling undermining of classical GT, many GT researchers use the GT methodology to generate conceptual substantive theory. It is these pure GT researchers who are lately asking me to write a book on doing quantitative grounded theory (henceforth QGT). In taking on this task, it has brought me back to the roots of the conceptualization of the methodology behind the discovery of GT methodology.

To build up to the detailing of QGT methodology, there is much to consider in keeping it clear of how quantitative research is commonly accomplished. This detailing merely adds to the many forms of quantitative research. It in no way changes or supplants these forms.

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

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## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

### Paul F. Lazarsfeld: Roots of GT

Lazarsfeld constantly stressed the idea that sociology, like any scientific discipline, should aim at producing controlled knowledge to give it a more satisfactory direction. Thus the idea most closely associated with Lazarsfeld's name is that of "methodology" (Boudon, 1993, p.12). "Methodology" does not aim to answer questions of the type 'what should be done?' It proposes instead to look at convincing studies in order to understand why they are convincing, why they appear to generate genuine new knowledge." This is of course how we came to discover GT from the **Awareness of Dying** book.

Lazarsfeld repeatedly proposed the French approach *l'explication de text* as the method "par excellence" to write methodology as one studies good writings of research. I, of course, studied *l'explication de text* as a student at the University of Paris where I was a student for one year. It is simply studying a work line by line to see exactly what is being said. It shows how written research has been built; whether it works well or badly. The value of methodology, Lazarsfeld says, is twofold. It has both theoretical interest and practical interest. On both levels, it makes subsequent research more effective, more reliable, and more able to solve complex theoretical and practical problems. Under Lazarsfeld, methodology became a new discipline. Scholars became methodologists, and were sought to help plan and appraise research.

In generating methodology as a discipline, Lazarsfeld developed many effective procedures. A list relevant to QGT is: the interchangeability of indices; the flexible relationship of two and three variables using elaboration analysis; implementing a language of variables and multivariate analysis; the search for unobserved findings in simple distributions; the rule relaxing of strict quantitative procedures for achieving accuracy, tests of theory and verifications in favor of the flexible generation of grounded theory; that is, to generate concepts and their multivariate hypothesis interrelations. The generated meaning of variables often remains ambiguous or unobserved if they are not examined in the context of several emerging hypotheses in which they are used (Lazarsfeld, p.172). QGT provides this emergent context.

## **The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue**

Two more examples of rule relaxing are the use of crude indices and the suspension of text of significance. A third is the flexible search for relationships that were not preconceived or preframed. He also started the use of property space analysis to find underlying dimensions which feed into the development of typologies. These procedures easily feed into generating QGT as well as being the foundation for discovering and generating substantive, conceptual grounded theory with qualitative data.

Lazarsfeld never used a technique in a mechanical fashion, because his object was always to understand the meanings behind human behavior. He never forgot that a joint distribution defines both a majority of cases contributing to the finding but also a minority of deviant cases, which were potentially just as important and required further analysis for their meaning, both quantitatively and also through the qualitative interviews that had been used to develop the survey interview schedule. "This gave the insight into complex processes and decisions" (Boudon, 1993, p.15). This often led to the measurement, meaning and discovery of unobserved variables which, in turn, led to and inspired elaboration analysis and latent structure analysis (more on this technology in chapter xx below), which were the roots of discovery of core categories and subcore categories in the methodology of discovery of GT. His techniques of quantitative analysis for discovery gave birth to the legend of his "quantomania" to discover the non-preconceived, unobserved latent patterns which is, of course, what we do in generating GT with qualitative data and will, with this book, in generating with quantitative data.

He sought in this quest for the unobserved causal statements which, of course, are the roots of the GT quest for resolving the main concern by a core category analysis. He showed the "statistical zealots" of the one time survey that qualitative data were important in the development of causal analysis of one-moment-in-time quantitative data. The qualitative data came from both the interviews made for generating the survey questionnaire and subsequent theoretical sampling interviews. He also compared quantitative studies (for example, in voting) to generate causal

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

inferences, sometimes descriptive and sometimes conceptual.

Thus we see the seeds of the constant comparative approach of GT. In this comparative quest, he began introducing contextual variables as they emerged through these comparisons. Contextual analysis helped explain the unobserved, emergent variables as conceptual hypotheses, not accurate findings. Thus rule relaxing in the service of generation of GT was begun. He also thus showed that predictions based on a one time survey had a great chance of failure, while his multivariate, comparative approach with other quantitative studies and qualitative data had great application prospect. This again, of course, fed directly into the practical use of multivariate GT using qualitative data, as we detailed in **Discovery of GT** (see Chapter V). Lazarsfeld felt that the use of social research was critical common sense, both to justify the value of social research and to show that the many “common sense” statements of political pundits and advisors were invalid. Thus social research was needed to correct the mechanical, simplistic, ungrounded, particularistic conjectures heretofore very powerful. Although Lazarsfeld focused on politics, this applies in “whatever realm”. Again we see the roots of the main position of the **Discovery of GT**. Familiar cultural products are not necessarily correct and grounds for action, as they properly distort ideas of small groups protecting themselves from the larger, more general social inputs. Thus social research according to Lazarsfeld, and GT according to the Glaser and Strauss in **Discovery of GT**, is needed to consider contradictory representations and determine what is actually going on. The influence and use of survey research under Lazarsfeld became very strong in the history of sociology, as it is today for GT. Thinking about social issues and problems changed for the educated and for many of those in control of a myriad of social structures.

Lazarsfeld’s approach to correcting by social research also led to a more critical view of a priori theoretical thinking of scholars, again a fundamental use of GT as we have seen so many times. He felt that the theorists could not give up their tradition but could be more critical and look to social research for the critique. Lazarsfeld took on the grand theorists with research data as best he could. It was a big struggle. GTers

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

now feel why bother with a prior theory - why let it potentially impede discovery. Thus the relation of theory to research was growing toward the current position of GT years later: to wit, no preconceptions.

Lazarsfeld realized that survey social research was costly requiring big grants and organizational frameworks - a research institute - and a large research staff with various skills in statistics, interviewing, computers, analytic ability and so on. The division of labor in a research institute would attract funds for survey research. Lazarsfeld said, "A program for the empirical study of action required a staff of collaborators trained to collect and analyze data whenever a research opportunity offered itself." (Lazarsfeld, 1993, p. 152)

Obviously this did not follow into qualitative GT, much GT was done by individual or small, non-enduring or temporary teams. Now I am saying in this book that the same style can prevail using secondary analysis of extant survey data. The danger of institutes for QGT is to preframe by management and to preconceive by senior researchers the research and thus inhibit discovery. Institute research typically requires choosing a specific problem for research and to structure it up. GT just requires an area of interest and an open mind to what problems may emerge.

Though Lazarsfeld essentially put methodology "on the map" by formulating it, he strongly admitted that it capped a trend waiting to happen. The sociological pioneers were strong in the belief that standardized quantitative observations were a condition of objectivity and scientificity for empirical research. He codified generating methodology as a discipline and in the bargain, insisted on the combining of qualitative and quantitative analyses. He made empirical social research based on methodology a necessary style that has lived to this day. So, it was natural when we were asked how we did **Awareness of Dying**, that I wanted to explain it as a methodology. Anselm [Strauss] agreed and therefore we wrote **Discovery of GT**.

Lazarsfeld was not without objectors to his empirical methodology research style by many macro-sociology theorists who experienced the challenge to their theories based on conjecture or non-researched thought. He failed to see that his

## **The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue**

methodology and emphasis on empirical research were inimical to the highly respected thought of scholars like Weber, Simmel, De Toqueville, Durkheim, Blumer, Pareto, Parsons, etc. He simply felt they should be submitted to empirical research to ascertain their validity. He ignored the accusation of research as just spurious checks. As the reader knows, empirical checks on theory are routine now and GT has gone one step further by stopping preconception of research by extant theory to just discovering theory anew for what is going on and then seeing how it fits into current theory that is relevant.

Lazarsfeld talked about how methodology could help by the process of substruction. The means reducing types in a theory to their essential attributes or dimensions and then systematically putting them back together with indicators from the survey data by constructing indexes, and 2 and 3 variable property spaces to test the theory and discover unobserved variable relations to it. QGT does the same with elaboration analysis but does not draw on extant theory and its substruction; substructing instead the emergent theory patterns that come from initially pursuing an area of concern using elaboration analysis. By substruction, theory starts to be built or generated in QGT, rather than using quantitative findings to correct theory.

Lazarsfeld insisted “take your favorite theory ... and translate it into lines connecting points in an attribute space (by substruction). While you will not obtain an empirical answer, you will be helped by the clearer formulation of problems and by seeing unexpected connections between possible solutions.” (Lazarsfeld, 1993, p.261). Substruction produces the emergent as the dimensions of a concept are worked with and related to other concepts. Clearly, this was the precursor to GT methodology, especially in using the interchangeability of indices.

Lazarsfeld continues, “The technical and organizational nature of empirical social research leads to formal ideas, to distinctions and interconnections relevant for many sociological pursuits well beyond the realm of strictly empirical research.” The language is not what we use today, but the ideas are for GT. He is saying that methodology and substruction can generate concepts with formal implications; that is, the general

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

implications of the concepts go well beyond the substantive realm where they are discovered. This idea anticipates my book on doing formal GT” (Glaser, 2006).

In QGT, getting at the underlying pattern of what is being said or what is going on through the intense *explication de text* of written words, in papers or interviews or 3 variable tables is a joy. It is an experience to which the reader would not otherwise have access; it convinced Lazarsfeld of the value of the methodological approach. We, of course, see this all the time in the line-by-line analysis of interviews and field notes when generating substantive GT.

As I said above, the increasing draw to quantitative methodology started the need for institutes for methodological training, large team work and the managing the funds required for surveys. The appropriate organizational structure kept changing its form. But whatever the form, the consequence of this was that the institute, pushing its methodology, became a technical training ground for graduate students in which their educated interests were subordinated to institute needs and their dissertations supervised to be sure the methods were applied correctly.

Lazarsfeld said, “Students who receive most of their training on organized quantitative projects become one-sided; instead of developing interest on their own, they become mercenaries of their employers, where institutes become influential, important sociological problems are neglected because they do not lend themselves to study by the “Research Machinery”. People who work best on their own find themselves without support and are regarded as outsiders.” (Lazarsfeld, 1993, p. 268)

Here is where GT left the methodology movement. Its methodology fostered and inspired the single researcher or small team working with qualitative data, unencumbered by the constraints of an institute structure that maximizes the institute’s preconceived notion of creativity. Many GT researchers, if fact, are minus mentorees working in isolation (Stern, 1994). Others network by the internet to help each other. The Grounded Theory Institute is merely a source of networking for Q&A among its participants. Grounded theory

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

troubleshooting seminars are strictly voluntary and not university or institute linked. QGT using secondary analysis can follow in this single researcher approach with no constraints on the creativity afforded by discovery. While quantitative research institutes can provide secondary analysis data, as a GT researcher, one should always negotiate the freedom to work on one's own area of interest and discovery whatever may emerge. GT methodology preserves the traditional scholarly value of creativity. The GT researcher's career is based on solo creativity, not on the destiny of an institute. QGT must follow in this path of solo creativity.

Methodology, started over 40 years ago, brought in the utilization of research findings in both the applied social research realms and in the correction of grand theory as it grounded research to everyday realities. This utilization has been improved immensely with the growth of qualitative substantive GT. I see no reason that QGT will be any less useful.

Qualitative analysis was not always so useful. Lazarsfeld thought that utilization was an urgent problem in the 70's. He said, "I do not believe that empirical social research of the type we are discussing [methodologically driven] can contribute much to social revolution" (Lazarsfeld, 1962, p.262). On the other hand, does empirical social research help the agencies and organizations that solicit and pay for the research? Lazarsfeld doubted it. He said, "The greatest difficulty in providing concrete examples [of utilization] comes at the two extremes of the utilization spectrum: the exponents of basic social change and the people who want guidance for immediate policy and action are most often disappointed" (Lazarsfeld, 1962, p.262). but he felt that modest utilization was impressive. I have discussed usefulness of GT at length in my books. It is very useful as it provides empirical, theoretical explanations with intervention variables and by imbuing ongoing thought for goal-oriented action of important dependent variables. (See chapter X in **Discovery**, Chapter 14 in **Awareness of Dying** and Chapter 6 in **Doing Formal Theory**.) I have seen the usefulness of GT time and again in interventions as one realizes the general implications of core category analysis (See Glaser & Holton, **The GT Seminar Reader**). QGT will fit into

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

this usefulness very easily. .

### Conclusion

In sum, the seeds of GT in general are all through Lazarsfeld's writings on methodology. Methodology forces one to be explicit about the procedures used in research to better future research. It guides future research, supervised research and contract research. It did not require a social movement to take hold. It was a natural step to achieving a generalized goal of all research - a reliable product. Grounded theory is a clear set of procedures for generating conceptual hypotheses about how people resolve a main concern. It is not a lock step, rigid methodology as are some statistical methodologies. For GT, methodology is a set of procedures that go on sequentially, subsequently, and simultaneously as applied to different parts of the theory as they emerge. GT methodology guides the search for latent patterns. It assures the consistency of type of product in many GTs, and cuts to a minimum the particularistic thought of the GT researcher. The remodelers of GT methodology (see **The GT Perspective II**) try to break through this consistency of product. GT methodology points out and resolves the often "at odds" difference between research and speculation, thus changing the way people think about the issues and main concerns research.

As we saw above, quantitative methodology got started and became popular by correcting extant grand theory. In this, we have seen many of the seeds of GT methodology. In the next chapter, we turn to looking at the difference between testing methodology and generating methodology; and especially how the formulation of QGT methodology changes and affects statistical, testing quantitative methodology. To be sure, QGT methodology is waiting to happen and will in this monograph.

## The Grounded Theory Review (2007), Special Issue

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