



# GROUNDING THEORY REVIEW

## An international journal

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In Memoriam of Grounded Theory’s Co-Founder, Barney G. Glaser

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June 2022

*Grounded Theory Review*, Vol 21 (Issue #1), 39-43

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://groundedtheoryreview.org>

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Originally published by Sociology Press

<https://sociologypress.com/>

Archived by the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies

<https://www.mentoringresearchers.org/>

**“Stop story talking! What’s the concept?”**  
**In Memoriam of Grounded Theory’s Co-Founder, Barney G. Glaser**

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There are those rare moments in a life that are just meant to be. You might encounter a person, a piece of text or perhaps an idea that hits you in a way that you couldn't possibly know beforehand. And yet you intuitively know it is a decisive moment. You get a sense of a cutting point, a transition that leads you on to a new path in life. There is a time before and a time after. But there is no way back.

I have lived with grounded theory for two decades. I was lucky to be part of many activities within Barney Glaser's expanding methodological landscape, and I used to meet him in person several times a year.

In this very moment I can already hear Glaser's dark, friendly-teasing voice ring in the back of my mind: “Stop story talking! What's the concept?”

Since Glaser himself often referred to grounded theory as a delayed action phenomenon, I will take this opportunity to put some important concepts on hold for yet a while. I trust in emergence while writing this piece in memoriam of one of the globally most impactful and original sociologists of the two last centuries. Most probably he would qualify for the title unrivalled winner of concept innovation as well; at least the unrivalled contributor of publicly published new concepts over a lifetime. He didn't like to compete. But he liked to empower PhD students, who were in their early careers and preparing for future service to society.

His stated aim in later years was two-fold. First, conceptual theory building grounded in data. Second, using grounded theory to help PhD students achieving their degrees. The discovery of the first goal manifested already in his early thirties (Glaser and Strauss 1965, Glaser and Strauss 1967). Throughout the rest of his life he never gave in or compromised on these original ideas. Not even when he formally left academia and developed a successful business career using GT tools. He only further developed them as he collected more data. His passion was to create, and facilitate for, abstract concept development that could help people improving their lives.

While Glaser ran his businesses and raised three children as a single parent, academic rivals repeatedly set out to belittle the original grounded theory design. Suddenly, the term grounded theory would take on new meanings that he as a founder did not recognize; “grounded theory” was adopted by concept competitors who deliberately started replacing its built-in tenets as a general method with distracting elements from qualitative data analysis.

Glaser stood up for his academic integrity through disputatious writings in books and articles. As always when disagreement is in the air, the international academic crowd

loved the spectacle. The rhetorical wrestles at the time drowned out the fact that grounded theory was already an established method and a methodology solidly grounded in empirical data. His further writings were meant to further explain the method and differentiate it from others. But from then on, it became more crowded in the grounded theory space. Glaser's grounded theory concept was re-labeled *classic grounded theory* to keep some conceptual order.

Paradoxically enough, or maybe quite logically, Glaser's most productive academic years started unfolding from the turn of the century on, at a chronological age when most of his peers were retired. When I first met him, he was 72 and stood in a hotel lobby in Covent Garden, London. He was dressed in a yellow college sweater and a pair of blue jeans, ready to walk to a nearby restaurant for the evening meet-and-greet, which always marked the opening of his seminars.

Looking back from a 2022 perspective, I think some of the seminar magic sprang out of all the fun and wholehearted encounters already at the meet-and-greet. Glaser's very presence released a remarkable, immediate trust and sharing among most participants. We were of different ages, disciplines, nationalities, with differing expectations and at different stages of our PhD trajectories. The only thing we had in common was grounded theory.

The acrossism approach proved to be an extremely productive dimension of Glaser's seminars. Personally, I had hardly ever met a person who posited such an innovative and humorous arsenal of new words. This man could apparently name whatever patterns of human behavior one might find. He constantly conceptualized. But without being normative, and with a respectful recognition of diversity. In my study of the seminar model, "Atmosphering for conceptual discovery," (Gynnild 2012a) I included an episode with a seatless chair to illustrate Glaser's use of reversal humor to tone people, as he called it. He could act like an actor on the spot just to get a spontaneous reaction and to bring you slightly out of balance. Situative humor and joyfulness were his smartest weapons to open up the minds of theorizing newbies.

At the social scenes that he enjoyed the most, Barney Glaser was an artist, a linguistic juggler, an inspirator, a confidence builder, a networker and an empowerer. His focus was to bring participants to the conceptual level. He facilitated idea development and autonomous growth, and downsized competition and prejudice. But he could be tough. Often, new participants would hold their breath when Glaser started demonstrating his verbal skills in cutting through story talk. What is the pattern? The core? The dependent variables? In cases when emotions dominated space, he could say "why worry? It's just data. Do memos and find out what's the concept. The concept will help you change the situation!" In such situations, his use of playfulness was invaluable.

Barney Glaser's grounded theory seminars were a hot spot for steep learning curves, conceptual breakthrough moments and tons of chaotic thoughts as there was so much to grasp and think of. Breakthrough moments led to momentary feelings of lightness and a strong sense of joy. In everyday life they are known as eureka moments, or the aha-moment – when you get a glimpse into another world, become aware of something that you had not previously noticed. And you get incredibly curious about what is going to happen next.

The research joy that I got in touch with through Barney Glaser's works intrigued me. From the first time when I found *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967) at the university library, I got this sense of being uplifted. It was as if the text spoke directly to me, and I got this strong feeling of being understood. How did this author, so precisely, manage to explain and put into words the issues that I as a PhD student so desperately grappled with, for instance the experience of data overload, and how to analyze it all? The opening page of his and Strauss' seminal work was the first in a row of GT moments that changed the direction of both my academic career and my everyday life. Getting to know that academic work could be filled with discoveries and pattern naming really triggered my PhD-to-be-curiosity.

But most importantly: I learned that research could be fun! What a profound discovery! Research took on a totally new meaning; it became energizing. It was like going on a drugless trip, which was Glaser's term for creative processing.

It was indeed a special occasion when Glaser said yes to come from California to Bergen to be an opponent at my viva in 2006. He seldom engaged in structured academic assessments, and this was one of the few times he did travel to Europe for a viva.

His primary interest was as always the fostering of autonomous research originality. So, he started asking about my future growth as an academic. Where did I plan to publish? What would be my next project? How could the theory of journalists' creative cycling processes be applied? While on stage he demonstrated how moment capturing could be used in practice: "With the PhD you can walk as a theorist among theorists," he said. A typical trait of doing Barney in action. He constantly empowered grounded theorists by pointing out the unique value of their knowledge work.

Glaser was not concerned with formalities or status as such, but with the products of intellectual processes. At the viva he was dressed in a dark suit and a tie, which gave him a new and different kind of authority. In other settings, his dressing down philosophy symbolically visualized equality. Thus, I came to think of sense orchestrating as a premise to open for abstract conceptualization (Gynnild, 2012a). Creating relaxing contexts might be more important for academic growth than we tend to think. Many times, people were afraid to ask him questions, as they were thinking along right-wrong-lines, and whether they were good enough. Glaser immediately arrested their thinking and repeatedly stated that "there is no such thing as a good question. There are only questions. They lead you to new ideas."

By getting to know people's patterns, Glaser decided whether they would be trustable. When he asked me to become the new editor of the *Grounded Theory Review* in 2012, after Judith Holton stepped down, he said: "Feel free to do whatever is needed. But remember there is no money in it. It's all based on volunteering. Grounded theory should only be done for the right reasons. It is very powerful." In the next six years he never intervened in the editorial work or criticized any articles that were published. But he listened. He would always be there if I wanted to ask about something. In return came his famous one-liners, very quickly, or he would suggest a phone call. He slipped key words, concepts, for me to think about. But never readymade solutions. He would respect my autonomy, as I were to respect his when he, only upon request, would come up with a text that could fit the next issue of the *Review*. As his book production

escalated, he particularly enjoyed offering the first chapter of his next book. I got to know a distinct writing style constantly developing to explicate the dimensions of grounded theory as good as possible. In his perspective, ideas were always ascendant over presentation. Step by step his grounded theory life plan became manifest. "It is the ideas that count," he said.

At one of the New York seminars he once sighed: "I'm not a university, I'm just a guy who tries to teach a simple method over-complexified by QDA people." And at the Stockholm seminar in 2015: "I am the one writing the books sitting in the hills in Mill Valley," he said with a grin. "I am alive and I'm thriving."

Barney Glaser took on an almost impossible job for a one-man-band, even if he worked on an abstract, conceptual level. As we all know, it is not possible to claim copyright to of a concept or an intellectual idea. Once released, concepts are in free flow. What Glaser had hoped for, was that the originality of the grounded theory concept would be respected and not mixed up with qualitative data analysis (QDA). "I don't care what they do in QDA," he often said, "as long as they don't call it grounded theory." In fact, Glaser himself referred to copyrights as anti-science blocks. He saw copyright as preventing new ideas. "And you always want as many ideas out as possible," he pointed out at the first grounded theory seminar I attended in London in 2004.

Barney Glaser did not only build theories. He also built houses, physical houses for people to live in. He enjoyed creating frameworks that could be useful for others. Throughout the years, many grounded theorists were invited to his and his wife Carolyn's wonderful home in the Californian redwoods. It was designed by himself, built of planks and equipped with innumerable steps and floors, surrounded only by the sounds of the wilderness. "I need much alone-time," Glaser shared in a conversation we had (Gynnild 2012b).

From his wooden nest Dr. Glaser initiated the build-up of a global community of grounded theorists that he served for the last twenty years of his life. The new ideas were prompted by a lifestyle turn due to his wife's accident, which required they travel less and stayed more in their home in California. Instead, Glaser saw new opportunities for continuing his intellectual life work. He was well equipped for a youthifying career. He managed to balance international seminar activities, writing periods, and a constant flow of emails from grounded theorists who wanted advice or thank him for changing their lives.

He was grounded in the redwoods and in the universe. Many will say he was ahead of time. Others will say that the true value of his contribution will only be fully acknowledged in a distant future. Yet others will point out that grounded theories are timeless. They cut through time and space. And yet, I think, what actually counted most for Dr. Glaser was the grounding in his own family. Without the love and comprehensive support from Carolyn and his children, Lila, Jillian, Bonnie and Barney Jr., grounded theory might not have flourished as it did in his late life.

A dark February night this year I was notified that Barney Glaser was experiencing worsening progressions. There might be a last chance to see him. Would I get in touch?

There are those moments in a life when you get this uneasy feeling, as if the world is about to stop. When you are suddenly surrounded by silence, even if you are in the most crowded of places. And you get this spontaneous need to find out what is going on. It is the kind of silence that can't be touched. It just encapsules you like an invisible fog. And you know that capturing this exact moment is of great importance, too. There is a time before and a time after. But there is no going back.

"Don't worry – the literature won't go away," Glaser used to say when PhD students started asking about literature reviews before collecting their own data. After he passed on, his statement took on a new meaning. His books will be available for generations to come. The literature from the original source won't go away.

For sure, Barney G. Glaser proved that classic grounded theory fits, works and will forever be relevant.

In the end, it is the ideas that count.

### **About the Author**

Astrid Gynnild is a Professor PhD of Media Studies, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway. She is Head of the Journalism Research Group, and works at the intersection of journalism innovation, new technologies, and creative processes. She was Editor of the Grounded Theory Review 2012-2018, and is now a reviewer of the journal. She is a Fellow of the Grounded Theory Institute.

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