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Are There Two Methods of Grounded Theory?

Demystifying the Methodological Debate

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Abstract

Grounded theory is an inductive research method for the generation of substantive or formal theory, using qualitative or quantitative data generated from research interviews, observation, or written sources, or some combination thereof (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In recent years there has been much controversy over the etiology of its discovery, as well as, the exact way in which grounded theory research is to be operationalized. Unfortunately, this situation has resulted in much confusion, particularly among novice researchers who wish to utilize this research method. In this article, the historical, methodological and philosophical roots of grounded theory are delineated in a beginning effort to demystify this methodological debate. Grounded theory variants such as feminist grounded theory (Wuest, 1995) or constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990) are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Development History of Grounded Theory Methodology

Most authors situate the beginning of grounded theory methodology with the publication of the 1967 book, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*. However, the first published account of grounded theory methodology was in 1965 when Barney Glaser published the article, "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis" (Glaser, 1965). This article contained all the rudimentary elements of grounded theory methodology as published, two years later (See Table 1 for comparison) and, in fact, this article was reprinted verbatim as chapter five of that book, as the major methods component of the book (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Perhaps this is why researchers frequently use the term *Constant Comparative Method* as a synonym for grounded theory, as did Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 230). Glaser wrote eight chapters, including all of the methods chapters of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* while Strauss was on an extended trip to Europe and then Strauss wrote the remaining three chapters upon his return – introductory chapter (chapter 1), the library as caches of qualitative data (chapter 7), and the final chapter (11) on insight and theory development (Glaser, 1998, p. 22).

In 1978, Glaser published *Theoretical Sensitivity*, considered by many to be the "bible" of grounded theory. In fact, several graduate students studying with Strauss used this as their sole reference for learning GT while doing a post-doctorate in chronic illness in the late 1970s (Barbara Artinian, personal communication, May 2006). In this book, Glaser elaborated on the

key procedures of grounded theory which had merely been touched on in Glaser's 1965 article and the 1967 book; in particular, the aspects of theoretical sampling, substantive and theoretical coding, and grounded theory writing were clarified. Glaser continues to publish books on grounded theory, releasing one new book approximately every two years, as well as publishing the international journal, *The Grounded Theory Review*. The content, of these more recent books and articles on grounded theory, does not describe a different grounded theory method than that which was as originally published (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) because grounded theory methodology has remained virtually unchanged throughout the past 40 years, as shown by the comparison in Table 1. Rather, Glaser expands on, or more fully delineates particular components of grounded theory. These particular topics are chosen based on questions received by grounded theory researchers or to counteract erroneous assumptions or methodological errors found in recently published articles or dissertations, in which grounded theory has been used.

Strauss (1987) wrote a section on grounded theory analysis as the last half of chapter one of his book, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Strauss stated that the information in this part "is reproduced almost wholly from Barney Glaser's *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 1978, with some editing and supplementation" (Strauss, p. 22). Strauss invented the term *axial coding* to refer to the coding of properties of each of the categories, and provided a schema for identification of the types of properties that could be found in the data that had been collected. However, the above changes did not change the major procedures of grounded theory as previously published. Open coding had always include the coding of both categories and their properties and the types of properties that might be found such as causes, conditions, and consequences had already been delineated (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, graduate students who worked with Strauss at the time have asserted that he was already doing a different method than previously published (personal communication, Jill Rhine, October 2006).

Strauss' final break with grounded theory methodology, as originally conceived, began with his collaboration with Juliette Corbin. Strauss and Corbin (1990) published an article "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria" in the journal *Qualitative Sociology* and indicated that their book was forthcoming (p. 4). In the article, they asserted that grounded theory had not changed in form since 1967 but that some of its procedures have been more specifically elaborated (p. 5). However, the procedures described in this article and their two subsequent books deviate substantially from the 1967 grounded theory method because the researcher overlays the data with his or her preconceived theoretical codes rather than discovering them as they emerge from the data. Glaser (1992) passionately refuted this deviation from discovery of what is found in the data through emergence, and proposed that this was a different method with a focus on full conceptual description from the researcher's perspective rather than that of the participants (GTs focus). Glaser's critique is justified by referring to quotations made by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the Discovery book. For example, "…we believe that forcing the connection between theory and data is completely opposed to our emphasis on a fit between them" (p. 29), and "To preconceive relevance is to force data, not to discover from data what really works as a relevant explanation" (p. 143). A more elaborate and forceful notation appeared in this same book.

Potential theoretical sensitivity is lost when the sociologist commits himself exclusively to one specific preconceived theory (e.g., formal organization) for then he becomes doctrinaire and can

no longer "see around" either his pet theory or any other. He becomes insensitive, or even defensive, toward the kinds of questions that cast doubt on his theory; he is preoccupied with testing, modifying and seeing everything from this one angle. For this person, theory will seldom truly emerge from data. In the few instances where theory does emerge, the preconceived theory is likely to be readily dropped or forgotten because it now seems irrelevant to the data. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p 47)

Strauss' and Corbin's first book, Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques was published in 1990, and the second edition was renamed slightly to Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory and published in 1998, over a year after Strauss' death in December 1996. Rather than being simply a more specific delineation of the grounded theory method, the procedures expressed in these writings differ from the 1967 method in significant ways: method purpose, theoretical focus, type of reasoning, and overall approach to theory development (use of the researcher's preconceptions, experience, and literature) to the point that only the most naïve researcher would fail to notice that it is a different method, entirely These differences will be briefly articulated in the next few paragraphs and are summarized in Table 2. However, interested readers are encouraged to read the primary sources and make their own comparisons with Glaser's and Strauss' 1967 book, as well as the extensive and poignant contrast of these two methods by Glaser (1992).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that the purpose of the grounded theory method is discovery of theory from data (p. 1), and the theory that has been generated explains the kind of behavior under observation (p. 36). The theory elements that are generated "are first, conceptual categories and their conceptual properties; and second, hypotheses or generalized relations among the categories and their properties" (Glaser & Strauss, p. 35). However, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), "The purpose of a grounded theory is to specify the conditions that give rise to specific sets of action/interaction pertaining to a phenomenon and the resulting consequences" (p. 251). The grounded theory product is an *explanatory* substantive or formal theory (Glaser & Strauss) but this has been revised to include mandatory *description* along with explanation and possibly some *prediction* as well (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory is an inductive theory generation method (Glaser & Strauss, p. 114) with minimal deduction used in the process of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, p. 32; Glaser, 1992). This inductive method develops theory that is "more trustworthy than logico-deductive theory for the simple reason that the latter often requires forcing of data into categories of dubious relevance to the data's meaning" (Glaser & Strauss, p. 98). The new method by Strauss and Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, Strauss & Corbin,1990,1998) is mainly deductive with minimal induction, and can be summed up by their statement of "verifying inductively what we proposed deductively" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 111).

Verification was never a part of the original grounded theory method, in fact, verification was repeatedly condemned by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as "stifling to the creative energies required for discovering theory" (p. 7), and as producing a less than adequate theory (pp. 27 & 29). In fact, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss) was written to provide students a defense against "doctrinaire approaches to verification" and "verifiers who would teach them to deny the validity of their own scientific intelligence" (p. 7). However, verification is built into

Strauss' and Corbin's method and is a pivotal feature throughout the coding process. In fact, Strauss and Corbin have revised the definition of "grounded" from "the discovery of theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, p. 1) to, instead, mean "verification", "We are building grounded theory, and it is the purposeful grounding or verification process that makes this mode of theory building different from many other modes of theory building" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 112). A later statement confirms this same verification definition, "Validating one's theory against the data completes its grounding" (p. 133).

The Strauss and Corbin method is no longer an emergent process of theory discovery; instead there is a 'forcing' process for developing theory, as exemplified by the following methodological suggestions: 1) Concepts from the researcher's preconceptions or the literature may be brought into the study rather than emerging from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7); 2) Each category "must be developed in terms of its properties and dimensions of the phenomenon it represents, conditions which give rise to it, the action/interaction by which it is expressed, and the consequences it produces" (Corbin & Strauss, pp. 7 & 8); 3) "Process must be built into the theory" (Corbin & Strauss, p. 10); and 4) Techniques, such as the flip-flop technique, are recommended when the answers to researchers' questions are not found in the data - they can simply imagine the opposite to what the data indicate and develop provisional categories and their properties (Strauss & Corbin, p. 84). All of the above strategies are in stark contrast to the original grounded theory method proposed by Glaser (1965) and Glaser and Strauss (1967).

One of the most significant deviations from traditional grounded theory was the addition of the conditional matrix or paradigm (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and renamed the conditional and consequential matrix (Corbin & Strauss, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This paradigm determines the questions that will be asked of participants and directs the theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). A third type of coding (axial coding) has been added between open and selective coding, and the meanings of open and selective coding have been changed. In addition, there are three types of sampling to correspond with each of these three coding types. Rather than waiting for the core category to emerge prior to reviewing the literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 37), Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommended reading the literature both before and throughout the grounded theory process, for purposes such as identification of the research problem (pp. 35 & 56); selection of concepts and potential relationships that can be verified later with actual data (p. 50); and, using philosophic/theoretical stances that suggest possible ways to interpret the data collected (p. 51). In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested going to the literature to find examples of our phenomenon "to stimulate our thinking about properties and dimensions that we can then use to examine the data in front of us" (p. 44), and reading descriptive studies so the researcher knows what to look for in the data, as well as to help generate questions to ask respondents (p. 50). In distinct contrast, grounded theory categories and relationships are emergent from the data, itself, and grounded theory questions are emergent during the interviews as participants tell their stories, or during the subsequent analysis of this participant data. In their final book, Strauss and Corbin (1998) finally acknowledged that their method deviates from the original grounded theory method (p. 10), and did not suggest that their readers should read the previous books grounded theory books by Glaser and Strauss (1967) or Glaser (1978), which is a significant departure from their 1990 book. However, Strauss and Corbin continued to call their method *grounded theory*, suggesting

that it is just Strauss' approach to grounded theory (p. 12). Unfortunately, this assertion is unjustified as demonstrated above, and has most certainly contributed to the ensuing and current confusion over what grounded theory methodology actually entails.

It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that the most recent method promoted by Strauss and Corbin is not grounded 44 theory at all; the methodology has been changed completely, and in many instances is antithetical to grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967). See Table 2 for a summary comparison of the two methods. Although, Strauss and Corbin have maintained some of the grounded theory terminology such as theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and open and selective coding, the meanings of these terms deviate drastically from their actual meanings in grounded theory methodology, particularly in the 1998 book. In short, the only thing 'grounded' about the Strauss and Corbin method is that the theory is 'grounded' in the perspective of the researcher, rather than that of the participants. This new method is a clear case of 'exampling' as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967):

Another opportunistic use of theory that **cannot** [emphasis mine] occur with grounded theory is what may be termed "exampling". A researcher can easily find examples for dreamed-up, speculative or logically deduced theory after the idea has occurred. But since the idea has not been derived from the example, seldom can the example correct or change it (even if the author is willing), since the example was selectively chosen for its confirming power. Therefore, one receives the image of a proof when there is none, and the theory obtains a richness of detail that it did not earn…In contrast, grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data" (Glaser & Strauss, p. 5).

After the unfortunate death of Strauss in 1996, this new method has sometimes been referred to as *qualitative data analysis* (Corbin, 2003) and continues to be promoted by Corbin. However, qualitative data analysis is also a generic term that encompasses a variety of different approaches to analyzing data that are qualitative. It is the author's belief that Strauss and Corbin have developed a totally new method and should be labeled with a name that is consistent with its descriptive, deductive, and verificational focus. Researchers have been encouraged to "take the method in any direction they wished" (Glaser, 1978), however, this freedom comes with the responsibility to rename the new method, appropriately. The renaming of the Strauss and Corbin method is unlikely given that Corbin (2007) has recently labeled their method *Straussian Grounded Theory* and has asserted that it is not a research methodology but rather a qualitative data analysis approach. However, grounded theory (frequently referred to as classical or Glaserian grounded theory) is a complete research methodology (Glaser, 2003) therefore cannot be downgraded to merely one alternative among many for analysis of qualitative data.

Philosophical and Methodological Underpinnings

Many textbooks of qualitative research methods indicate that symbolic interaction is the philosophical underpinning of grounded theory methodology. However, this assertion is consistently challenged by Glaser (2005b), the original and primary author of grounded theory methodology. Probably a more precise characterization is that Glaser and Strauss, the authors of grounded theory, were influenced by different methodological and philosophical ideas during their graduate studies, and that these diverse ideas probably influenced the way in which they

later articulated or described grounded theory methodology. Several of these influences have been acknowledged in the various books published by them.

Glaser graduated from the University of Columbia with a PhD in sociology, during a time when quantitative methodology, particularly that of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Robert K. Merton's middle range theory were highly influential. When Glaser (1965), published the constant comparative method (CCM) he acknowledged that the CCM procedure for selection and coding of categories followed that of Becker and Geer (1960), while aspects of theoretical saturation were influenced by the ideas of Merton (1957). In addition, Glaser stated that this1965 manuscript had been extensively edited by Robert K. Merton, prior to publication. Later, Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated that it was Merton who first called for the clarification and codification of qualitative research methods in 1949 (p. 16), and went further to state that Merton was concerned with "grounded modifying of theory" (p. 2). Glaser (2005a, b) attributed content regarding conceptualization to his training with Merton, in substantive and theoretical coding. Originally, Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledged that Lazarsfeld's notion of the interchangeability of indicators contributed to the grounded theory idea of theoretical saturation (no more indicators). Furthermore, the use of quantitative data to generate grounded theory was a variation of Lazarsfeld's elaboration of survey data (Glaser & Strauss, p. 186). Most recently, in a paper titled, *The Roots of Grounded Theory*, Glaser (2005b) identified several methodological beginnings from Lazarsfeld, which he integrated as ingredients in grounded theory procedures for generating substantive theory: index formation model to generate concepts, interchangeability of indicators to generate concepts, and the core variable analysis model. Hans Zetterberg was Glaser's dissertation supervisor (Glaser, 2005b) and Glaser and Strauss identified him as the person to whom they attributed their idea of the importance of integration of theory (p. 223). However, they contrasted the grounded theory method with Zetterberg's approach of doing exploratory research to determine problems and then going to the literature to obtain formal theories to assist with these problems (Glaser & Strauss, p. 239). Glaser (1992) summarized the key individuals – Robert K. Merton, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Hans Zetterberg, Herbert Hyman and Hanan Selvin - who were his intellectual roots and forefathers and had a great impact on the formulations of grounded theory methodology (p. 125).

Strauss graduated with a PhD is sociology, from the University of Chicago, where qualitative methodology was the tradition, and an approach to studying the life and conduct of humans (later known as symbolic interactionism) was espoused by individuals such as George Herbert Mead, William James and others. The term symbolic interactionism was first coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937 (Blumer, 1969). Blumer, who had been a student of Mead's, was Strauss' advisor (Stern & Covan, 2001). According to Blumer, it was Mead who mainly laid the foundations of the symbolic interactionist approach, although Blumer further developed this methodology (p. 1). Strauss took a course from Mead on social interactionism at the urging of Blumer (Stern & Covan). After Mead's death, Strauss edited and wrote an introduction to a book of Mead's writings, *The Social Psychology of Geroge Herbert Mead* (1956), published post-humously. No mention of Mead was made by Glaser (1965) when he originated and published the constant comparative method, from which grounded theory methodology was derived, and, in fact, this article was reprinted in full as the analytic method for grounded theory, in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss referred to Blumer (1954), for the notion of sensitizing concepts in their discussion of one of the two characteristic features

(analytic and sensitizing) of the types of concepts generated through grounded theory (pp. 38 & 39). However, they revised the "sensitizing" meaning somewhat to refer to only one characteristic feature of their grounded theory concepts, rather than characterizing the whole nature of that concept as was Blumer's meaning of sensitizing (Blumer, 1954). In addition, Blumer's sensitizing concepts "lack precise reference and have no bench marks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7), whereas with grounded theory, the sensitizing characteristic will "yield a "meaningful" picture, abetted by apt illustrations that enable one to grasp the reference in terms of one's own experience" (Glaser & Strauss, pp. 38 & 39). Perhaps this is why Glaser (1978) later began to refer to this characteristic feature as *imagery* (p. 70) or *imageric*, and has continued to do so (Glaser, 1998), as did Strauss (1987). It is evident that Strauss had attended classes as a student of Blumer because of a footnote reference to the classes about inappropriate application of both 'imported' and sociological theories, in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (p. 238). Strauss was trained by Blumer and Everet Hughes in qualitative research and symbolic interactionism (Glaser, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990) acknowledged that grounded theory procedures are not bound by any discipline, nor did the researcher need to "subscribe to the Interactionist perspective to use it (p. 26). This is verified by the observation that neither Mead's nor Blumer's ideas were incorporated into grounded theory methodology; the one tangential reference (characteristic feature of sensitizing) was later dropped by both Glaser and Strauss. Added to this, is the fact that there are many differences between symbolic interactionism (SI) and Glaser's and Strauss' grounded theory method which make it impossible to situate GT methodology within this theoretical and philosophical perspective (See Table 3 for a summary of these contrasts).

Corbin's and Strauss' new method, recently referred to as *qualitative data analysis*, does have theoretical underpinnings in symbolic interactionism (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 1996). The most recent update of this method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was a complete break with original grounded theory methodology and a definite move to be incorporated within the symbolic interaction perspective: No longer do Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommend that the researcher read the previous grounded theory books, and the assertion that the researcher does not need to come from a symbolic interactionist stance (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was also removed in this second edition. The remaining paragraphs in this section will be devoted to a discussion of SI and to contrast symbolic interactionism with grounded theory methodology. First, a brief discussion of the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism will be delineated to facilitate the subsequent comparison.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is rooted in the philosophies of pragmatism and idealism (Reynolds, 1990). Interactionists have touted symbolic interactionism as a general sociology (Reynolds, 1990). Blumer wrote about symbolic interactionsim as a perspective in empirical social science (p. 21) but indicated that the writings of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey contain the outlines of a humanistic philosophy.

Up until 1969, four years *after* Glaser had published the constant comparative method, there was no clear statement of the position of symbolic interactionism (also called interactionism), nor had relevant research methodologies been delineated (Blumer, 1969). Much later, in 1990, Reynolds

noted that there are anywhere from 2 to 15 varieties of interactionism, therefore, there is not a common 'doctrine' that is agreed upon by proponents of this theoretical and philosophical position. The major depiction of interactionism is that interaction is the central focus, that one's situation is defined by mutual understanding, that is, through interaction with others (Reynolds, 1990). Also, the view of society is a process view in contrast to the functionalist's equilibrium view of society (Reynolds, p. 121).

Blumer (1969) correctly asserted that no specific research methodologies had as yet been specified for the interactionist perspective. However, Mead (1938, 1956) did frequently talk about the scientific or experimental method. Cook (1993) articulated Mead's pragmatic notion of scientific inquiry as described in *The Philosophy of the Act*, "It is the function of scientific inquiry to analyze such [uncertain, ambiguous] situations, distinguish what is problematic from what is unproblematic in them, propose a hypothesis that tentatively revises the problematic meanings thus identified, and then put this hypothesis to the test by seeing whether it can successfully guide the conduct that has broken down" (p 177). Furthermore, for Mead, scientific knowing deals with the problematic aspects of human experience (not an objective, absolute reality) and truth is not an absolute but rather is relative to the situation, and refers to the hypothesis that successfully reconstructs (overcomes) the problem situation (Cook, pp 177 & 178). Cook suggested that "Mead's general views about scientific inquiry, knowledge, and truth thus echo those of Dewey at nearly every point" (p. 178). Therefore the general approach to inquiry which Mead proposes is deductive, with hypotheses proposed by the researcher and then checked out later in data. This method is contrary to grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) but congruent with the new method of Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998).

Reynolds (1990) cited several criticisms of interactionism, levied by interactionists and noninteractionists. A summary of these combined criticisms is as follows: Symbolic interactionism is ahistorical, noneconomic, apolitical, has an astructural bias, is devoid of transcultural applicability, ignores the unconscious, and does not deal with human emotions (Reynolds). In addition, Reynolds stated that interactionism is an utopian view which sees the world as it *wants to be*, not as it is (p. 140). These perceived shortcomings of symbolic interactionism are not shared by grounded theory methodology, because of grounded theory's preoccupation with "what *is* happening", and all of the above aspects unaccounted for in symbolic interactionism are possible derivations in grounded theory. Any of these aspects can be incorporated into the grounded theory as categories or their properties, as long as they emerge from the data, that is, they must have earned relevance.

The previous discussion demonstrates that the underpinnings of grounded theory as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) are primarily methodological. This is also corroborated by Glaser's (2003) assertion that grounded theory did not evolve from either positivism or symbolic interactionism but rather came from his methodological notes taken during his own research and teaching activities (p. 62). Anyone who has read Glaser's (1964) published dissertation, *Organizational Scientists: Their Professional Careers*, will recognize that Glaser was developing grounded theory methodology during his doctoral work; this dissertation is a clear case of grounded theory using quantitative data. Any philosophical 'underpinnings' attributed to grounded theory were ascribed decades after this research methodology was developed and published; have been resolutely denied by Glaser the first (1965) and primary originator (1967)

of this method; and are tangential, possibly even inimical, to the operationalization of grounded theory methodology.

The perceived need to attribute grounded theory methodology to roots in symbolic interactionism may be attributed to non-intentional sloppy scholarship or intentional revisionist history. However, it is frequently condoned by scholars who feel uncomfortable about using a research methodology that they cannot attribute to some overarching grand philosophy, as if grounded theory is somehow 'legitimated' by such a connection. As demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, grounded theory methodology did not and could not come out of symbolic interactionism, and, when done correctly, it is methodologically distinct and divergent from symbolic interactionism. Ironically, the preoccupation with linking research methodologies to a grand theoretical or philosophical scheme is antithetical to post-modern thought, espoused by several of these same authors. Fortunately, grounded theory methodology is significantly powerful when done properly and can generate a substantive theory whether or not the researcher espouses a symbolic interactionist framework – as long as this framework is purposefully 'suspended' for the duration of the research, along with all other researcher preconceptions.

[please see pdf version for table: Comparison of the Constant Comparative Method and the GT Method (Original and Current)]

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