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Experiencing Grounded Theory: A Review

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Abstract

Experiencing Grounded Theory takes the reader on an enjoyable, easy-to-read journey through Simmons's 55 years of learning, doing, mentoring, teaching, and applying grounded theory. It is an engaging book written for beginner to experienced grounded theorists. It is laid out in a well-organized fashion, beginning with Simmons's introduction to grounded theory and progressing through his years of teaching the methodology. This article provides a quick overview of each chapter. While there are many books written on grounded theory, few explain the method as clearly as this one. It is a recommended read for both novice and practicing grounded theorists.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, grounded action, grounded therapy

Experiencing Grounded Theory is a book 55 years in the making. It presents Dr. Odis Simmons's journey of learning, doing, mentoring, teaching, and applying grounded theory from his first introduction to the methodology in 1967 to his experiences learning the methodology directly from Drs. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss to his experience teaching grounded theory for over 50 years. The book also details Simmons's own

application of grounded theory in grounded action and grounded therapy. The following review will summarize each chapter and how readers may benefit from the book.

This book begins with an unorthodox approach. Simmons placed a glossary of terms preceding the first chapter rather than at the end of the book. Grounded theory has its own unique terminology, and Simmons expressed that familiarity with the terminology would aid the reader in understanding the book and methodology.

In chapter one, "My Discovery of Grounded Theory," Simmons beckoned readers into *Experiencing Grounded Theory* with his first-hand account of discovering grounded theory as an undergraduate student. Simmons wrote as a close confidant, guiding the reader through his historical journey of finding and becoming an early pupil of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the beginning days of grounded theory's development.

Simmons began the second chapter, "Is Grounded Theory the Methodology for You?" by situating grounded theory within the context of existing research methodologies. He presented grounded theory as a bridge for the gap between research and theory generation. Next, Simmons explored various research designs, breaking them down based on characteristics, such as inductive versus deductive properties and descriptive versus theoretical purposes. Simmons also explained the differences between classic grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory, arguing that the constructivist approach falls prey to preconception. Finally, Simmons offered an in-depth analysis of how classic grounded theory can be positioned within the theoretical schools of constructivism and objectivism. He determined that, while classic grounded theory incorporates necessary components from both and is an unparalleled methodology for theory generation, it is conceptual and may be used by researchers of any philosophical position. This chapter is informative but not instructive; it serves mainly to present classic grounded theory as an excellent choice for theory generation and clear up common misconceptions about the methodology.

In chapter three, "Dealing with Committees: Special Considerations for Classic Grounded Theory Students," Simmons identified common challenges facing students as they select and work with their dissertation or thesis committees. Simmons began this chapter by providing guidance about how to select committee members. This guidance applies to any students who are allowed to select their own committee members. He then added more specific advice on selecting committee members for a classic grounded theory study. Next, he discussed the characteristics of committee members that may support or hinder a student using the grounded theory method. Simmons also provided tips for working with committees and overcoming challenges. This chapter is directed at students preparing for their dissertation or thesis. While applicable to students forming a dissertation or thesis committee for a grounded theory study, many of the tips provided may help students select and work with their committee regardless of the methodology they have chosen. Simmons clarified that most of his experience has been with US institutions and may not reflect the norms in other countries.

In chapter four, "Learning and Doing Grounded Theory," Simmons offered the basic definitions and skills needed for learning grounded theory. This chapter is the longest and

most in-depth chapter in the book. It offers excellent opportunities for practicing what Simmons is teaching; this is the doing part of the learning. In the chapter, Simmons described the steps one should take to conduct a grounded theory study. The first step is preparing for the study, which includes developing theoretical sensitivity, suspending preconceptions, and learning to conceptualize. The second step is data collection, including interviewing, observing, using literature as data, and documenting your data. The next step is substantive coding, which involves conceptualizing and discovering the core variable/category. Memoing is the fourth step. The fifth step is theoretical coding and the creation of a theoretical outline. The final step is the theoretical write-up. It should be noted that steps 2-6 are cyclical in nature, such that one may need to add more data, code it, and analyze it. This chapter is a must-read for anyone who wants an easy-to-read overview of each step of conducting a grounded theory study and practice activities designed to build the skill needed by a grounded theorist.

In chapter five, "Grounded Action," Simmons introduced the reader to grounded action as an extension of grounded theory. Simmons developed the grounded action method after a classic grounded theory workshop participant lamented, "Glaser and Strauss said that grounded theories would give you a theoretical foothold for action, but they didn't say how to do it!" (p. 162). In response, Simmons used the tools of grounded theory to develop the process of grounded action that has an "*earned* connection" (p. 162) to the explanatory theory. This iterative process operationalizes the grounded theory and works toward an action plan that is assessed and modified as the operational theory is acted upon. Simmons illustrated grounded action by describing an unsuccessful anger management program that he modified into a successful program using the grounded action method. In describing how he transformed that program, he likewise illustrated grounded action as a particularly useful tool for program development and evaluation and as a natural next step for grounded theorists.

In chapter six, "Grounded Therapy," Simmons shared his discovery that "grounded theory is a useful model for guiding a grounded therapeutic process" (p.226). He made a convincing proposal by addressing issues and problems he discovered and experienced during his research and practice as a psychotherapist. The issues and problems Simmons addressed fall into three categories within counseling and therapy: a) preconception, b) the therapeutic culture, and c) the therapeutic relationship. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, Simmons expertly laid the framework for doing grounded therapy and provided ample case studies as examples. Presenting a practical and original approach to the therapeutic process, he contended that assuming a "grounded" approach in therapy ensures that therapists do therapy "with" rather than "on" or "to" a client, positioning the reader for a critical review of status quo therapy. Citing his research and experience as a therapist, Simmons argued for using grounded theory procedures in therapy because this results in significantly improved client outcomes due to maximized grounding. Overall, Simmons presented an enlightening approach to grounded therapy, adding significant value for those serving clients in the therapeutic fields while highlighting the practical value of applied grounded theory.

In chapter seven, "Teaching Grounded Theory," Simmons offered a succinct review of the grounded theory method with valuable teaching points. Simmons repeatedly stated

that anyone can conduct a grounded theory study, and his conversational tone reinforces this idea. In this chapter, Simmons reviewed the steps involved in conducting a grounded theory study and offered insights from his 50-plus years of experience teaching it. His sharing of these steps and his own experience make this chapter useful to both grounded theory students and teachers.

While this book does not replace reading the original book on grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the subsequent books by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998, 2002), *Experiencing Grounded Theory* is the perfect place to start one's introduction to grounded theory. Glaser (2001) wrote, "My books are a bit hard to read as they are dense and too long for everyday use" (p. 3). However, Simmons's book is just the opposite. It is an engaging book written for beginner-to-experienced grounded theorists, and it is laid out in a well-organized fashion. As is Simmons's way, he wrote the book in a conversational manner, which makes reading this book very easy. At times, students and faculty may be surprised by his informal tone. Ultimately, however, Simmons's laid-back, conversational style makes the book readable and accessible. This book is sure to become a part of the essential reading list for novice and practicing grounded theorists. This team of authors strongly recommends this book as a great introduction to grounded theory, grounded action, and grounded therapy.

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