



Moving Beyond Substantive Grounded Theory: Mid-range Grounded Theory, Formal Grounded Theory, and Applying Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The grounded theory methodology has been primarily used to develop substantive theories; however, since its inception, the developers of the methodology have encouraged researchers to move beyond substantive grounded theory by developing mid-range and formal grounded theories and applying grounded theories. While still a “neglected option,” this article discusses each of these options and explains how these options all involve the continued collection of data within new areas and new populations, the use of the constant comparative method of analysis to compare indicators within the data, and the modification of the existing theories for fit and relevance. The article concludes by discussing some possible barriers to moving beyond substantive grounded theory. With awareness of these obstacles, we may be better able to address them and increase the development of mid-range and formal grounded theories and the application of grounded theories.

Key Words: mid-range grounded theory, formal grounded theory, applying grounded theory, grounded action, grounded practice

In 1967, Drs. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss articulated a new research methodology, grounded theory, which was designed to systematically generate theory from data. In the years since, many substantive theories have been developed using grounded theory. A substantive grounded theory is a grounded theory that has been developed within a specific setting and population.³ However, from the beginning, Glaser and Strauss discussed that the grounded theory methodology could also generate formal grounded theory. A formal grounded theory extends the reach of a substantive grounded theory's core category by analyzing data from many different areas using constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 2007). Mid-range theories extend beyond the bounds of a substantive area but do not reach the scope of a formal grounded theory. While many substantive theories exist, mid-range and formal grounded theories are less frequent. While developing mid-range and formal grounded theories may be an end goal for some researchers, these types of grounded theories may begin to be developed as researchers work on applying grounded theories to new areas.

This article will explore moving beyond substantive grounded theory in two ways: (1) developing mid-range and formal grounded theories and (2) applying grounded theories. Core to moving beyond substantive theory in both the development of mid-range and formal grounded theory and the application of grounded theories is the continued collection of data within new areas and new populations, the use of constant comparative methods of analysis

³ This is not how Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally defined substantive grounded theory. Originally, they defined it as a theory “developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry, such as patient care, race relations, professional education, delinquency, or research organizations” (p. 32). In an interview, Odis Simmons explained that as grounded theory expanded beyond sociology and was increasingly employed by professionals within the practicing fields, Glaser shifted the meaning of substantive theory from one originally designed to produce theory for “a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry” (p. 32) to theory focused on a particular setting and population (Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies, 2024).

to compare indicators within the data, and the modification of the existing theories for fit and relevance (Glaser, 2007, 2014).

Developing mid-range and formal grounded theories

Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced the idea of formal grounded theory in the *Discovery of Grounded Theory*. They explained that the constant comparative method of analysis can produce substantive or formal theory and that these types of theories lie along the same continuum but vary based on generality. “Substantive and formal theories exist on distinguishable levels of generality, which differ only in terms of degree” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 33). However, Glaser and Strauss also explained that a substantive theory must be formulated before moving towards a formal theory and that both are developed from data.

The process of moving from a substantive to a formal grounded theory involves collecting data from theoretically similar settings and/or populations⁴ and analyzing that data via the constant comparative method of analysis. As the researcher gathers, analyzes, and modifies the substantive theory based on data collected from theoretically similar areas, the generality of the theory increases. Just as in the development of a substantive theory, data collection is guided by theoretical sampling⁵ as the researcher explores the fit, refit, and emergent fit of concepts and categories (Glaser, 1978) and the relevance of the theory, including the core category and main concern to the new areas. Fit means that concepts and

⁴ A theoretically similar setting or population is one that shares key theoretical concepts with those in the original theory. A theoretically similar setting or population may appear very different on a descriptive level while being similar on a theoretical level. For example, Lee’s (1993) theory, *Doing time: A grounded analysis of the altered perception of time in the prison setting and its effects* was based on a study of prisoners, yet the concepts in the theory are conceptually similar to how people “do time” on long airline flights (Simmons, 2022).

⁵ Theoretical sampling is the approach to sampling used in substantive and formal grounded theory whereby the researcher uses the concepts and developing theory that have emerged from previous data collection and analysis to guide the researchers to what data is needed next (Glaser, 1978).

categories must fit the data. Refit means that modifications should be made to concepts and categories based on additional data so that they fit all the data. “The analyst should readily modify them as successive data may demand. The analyst's goal is to ground the fit of categories as close as he can” (Glaser, 1978, p. 4). Emergent fit is the process of confirming that existing concepts from literature are grounded in the data from the study. Glaser (1978) explained,

We do not have to discover all new categories nor ignore all categories in the literature that might apply in order to generate a grounded theory. The task is, rather, to develop and [sic] emergent fit between the data and a pre-existent category that might work. Therefore as in the refitting of a generated category as data emerges, so must an extant category be carefully fitted as data emerges to be sure it works. In the bargain, like the generated category, it may be modified to fit and work. In this sense the extant category was not merely borrowed, but earned its way into the emerging theory (p. 4).

This is specifically relevant to the development of formal grounded theory because Glaser discussed the use of literature as a beneficial source of data for developing formal grounded theory (Glaser, 2007).

When moving along the continuum from substantive to formal grounded theory, the theoretical outline from the substantive theory is a useful tool for guiding data collection via theoretical sampling within new areas. The theoretical outline provides a quick view of the concepts, categories, and their interrelationship. As data collection begins within a new area, the researcher begins looking for the fit, refit, emergent fit, and relevance of the concepts in the theory, especially of the main concern and the core category. Initial focus on the main

concern and core category is important because if they are not present in the new area, it is unlikely that the theory fits and is relevant to the new area.⁶ In this case, the researcher needs to move to a different area that has theoretical similarities.

If the researcher discovers the core category and the main concern fit and are relevant to the new area, the researcher uses selective coding and constant comparative method of analysis to (1.) identify which concepts from the substantive theory also fit and are relevant, (2.) identify any new, relevant variation based on the data from this new area modify the concepts for refit, and (3.) be open to new concepts which may emerge for this new data. As new variations and concepts emerge, the researcher follows the grounded theory process of collecting data, coding, and memoing while engaging in the constant comparative method to develop and integrate this new information into the theory. Just as in the development of a substantive theory, sorting is used, which will likely lead to modifications to the theoretical outline and theory.

Moving from substantive to formal grounded theory is likely to involve raising the level of abstraction of the theory to account for the new variations. Once the researcher discovers and integrates the variation in one area, the researcher moves to additional new areas, repeating the process. As the researcher gathers and analyzes data, modifies the existing theory to reflect the variation discovered in these new areas, and integrates new concepts and

⁶ Movement from a substantive theory to a formal theory may be hampered by poor selection of the next setting from which to select data. While a new setting may appear theoretically similar, the researcher will not actually know if the new setting is theoretically similar until data is collected and analysis within this new setting begins. The researcher should expect to find areas where the theory fits and can be expanded and other areas where it does not fit. When such areas are found, the researcher has found a grounded boundary. A grounded boundary is a condition(s) where the theory longer applies because, under those conditions, the pattern of behavior being explained (i.e. the core category) no longer explains how the main concern is being resolved.

relationships into the theory from increasing numbers of areas, the theory moves from substantive to mid-range to formal grounded theory.

Applying Grounded Theories

Just as Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced the idea of formal grounded theory in the *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, they also envisioned the applicability of grounded theories from the research method's inception. They stated, "We shall discuss how grounded theory has been developed in order to facilitate its application in daily situations" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 237). While applying grounded theories to daily situations was a goal of the methodology from the beginning, its application has been limited. So much so that in 2014, Glaser wrote *Applying Grounded Theory: A Neglected Option*, wherein he stated, "The application of GT has been almost totally neglected in the literature on GT, yet it is a vital topic for our profession and for ourselves" (p. 2). The application of grounded theory is still mainly limited to the informal and casual application of individual concepts (usually core categories) from a theory rather than a systematic approach to applying concepts or a whole theory (Glaser, 2014).

Glaser (2014) provided five necessary properties for a grounded theory to be applied. He stated, "to be applied a GT must fit the area to be applied, must be relevant to the people applied to, must be understandable to the people in the area applied, must be sufficiently general, and must give the appliers some control" (p. 2).

Fit

As mentioned previously, fit means that concepts and categories must fit the data. To be applied, a theory must fit the setting and population to which it is being applied. The fit of a theory is foundational to the other properties necessary for a theory to be applied (Glaser,

1967, 2014). A substantive theory that has been developed within the topic area will fit the area and be directly applicable to the area because the theory is “closely related to the daily realities (what is actually “going on”) of the substantive area and so to be highly applicable to dealing with them” (Glaser, 2014, p. 45).

Relevance

Rather than entering the topic area with a predetermined research problem, relevance is achieved by allowing the problem⁷ and theory, which explains patterns of behavior used to address the problem, to emerge through analysis of data collected from the research area.

Relevance is achieved by following the lead of the data to understand, conceptualize, and explain (not describe) what is happening within the topic area. Glaser (1978) stated, “Grounded theory arrives at relevance because it allows the core problems and processes to emerge” (p. 5). Thus, what emerges is directly relevant to the research area and the people within it.

Understandable

A grounded theory is understandable when it fits the data. Such a theory reflects the “daily realities (what is actually “going on”)” (Glaser, 2014, p. 45) and is understandable. It “makes sense” (p. 46) to the people within the research area, which makes people more receptive to the application of the theory in addressing their area(s) of concern. Glaser (2014) stated, “Their understanding the theory tends to engender readiness to use it, for it sharpens their sensitivity to the problems that they face and gives them an image of how they can potentially make matters better” (p. 46).

⁷ Within the grounded theory methodology, this problem is often referred to as the main concern. The main concern emerges from the analysis of the data collected as a main problem, issue, or concern being experienced by the people within the area being studied (Connor et al., 2024, Glaser, 1992).

General

Grounded theories are conceptual, not descriptive. Description, as common to many qualitative methods, limits the generality of the research. Such research is bound by time, population, context, etc. Grounded theories are conceptualized, becoming abstract enough to transcend time, population, context, etc. It is an abstract conceptualization of the data rather than a description of it that makes a theory general and flexible enough to explain and serve as a guide to the multi-conditional and ever-changing daily realities of the situation (Glaser & Strauss, 1965; Glaser, 2014). However, the theory should not be so abstract that it loses its fit, understandability, and applicability to the substantive area.

Control

In order to apply a grounded theory within a setting or population, there must be a level of control. “The substantive theory must enable the person who uses it to have enough control in everyday situations to make its application worth trying” (Glaser, 2014, p. 53). The theory does this by providing the person with understandable yet abstract concepts that fit the situation. These concepts are not isolated concepts; they are part of an integrated theory that can and should be used to guide the change and help predict the outcomes. To do so, the theory must provide controllable concepts with “much explanatory power” (Glaser, 2014, p. 56), guide the person applying the theory, and help control the interaction among the concepts, which often involve multiple people’s interactions. The theory must also identify access concepts that allow, guide, or give access to the controllable concepts or to the people who control them (Glaser, 2014, p. 57) in order to manage the controllable concepts with minimal unintended disruption to other aspects within the situation. A grounded theory with controllable concepts and access concepts can be used to bring about change in the situation by

providing a “theoretical foothold” (Glaser, 2014, p. 53) and leverage points where change is possible.

Grounded Action

While Glaser explained the properties necessary for a grounded theory to be applied, repeatedly exhorted the application of grounded theories, and discussed how some specific concepts and theories could be applied, he provided little guidance on how to do it. However, he included a chapter on grounded action by Simmons and Gregory in *Applying Grounded Theory: A Neglected Option*. Grounded Action is a research-based approach for applying grounded theory. Grounded action is a pragmatic, applied research method that expands on grounded theory as a research-based approach to planning and implementing action or change within a substantive area (Simmons & Gregory, 2003; Simmons, 2022). Grounded action is built upon the same principles and methods as classic grounded theory to ensure that the application of the theory is grounded in the data. The application may take various forms, including but not limited to actions, interventions, strategies, programs, and models (Simmons, 2022).

The process of applying a grounded theory using grounded action involves a systematic, six-step process where the first step is developing a grounded theory (Simmons, 2022; Simmons & Gregory, 2003). In grounded action, this is referred to as the explanatory theory because it explains “what is actually going on, not what ought to go on” (Glaser, 1978, p. 14) in the substantive area. Using the explanatory theory as a guideline or theoretical framework, the researcher creates an operational theory that identifies where actions to promote change are possible within the substantive area (Simmons, 2022). The operational theory operationalizes the explanatory theory. Then the researcher uses the operational theory to develop a

specific action plan to implement within the substantive area (Simmons, 2022; Simmons & Gregory, 2003). As the action is implemented, the researcher continuously collects and analyzes data using the constant comparative method of analysis while implementing the action (Simmons, 2022; Simmons & Gregory, 2003) following the same idea that “all is data” (Glaser, 2001, p. 145). Theoretical sampling, constant comparative method of analysis, and memoring that began during the discovery of the grounded theory continue with grounded action and are used for modification at any level needed. As change happens as a result of the application, it is expected that modifications will be made (Simmons, 2022; Simmons & Gregory, 2003). This may include modifying the action, the action plan, the operational theory, or the explanatory theory based on the analysis of new data. This aligns with the tenet that a grounded theory is always modifiable based on new data. Glaser (2014) stated, “The person who applies the theory will, we believe, be able to bend, adjust or quickly reformulate a grounded theory when applying it, as he tries to keep up with and manage the situational realities that he wishes to improve” (p. 74). Using grounded theory to guide practical actions within the substantive area increases the likelihood that the actions will produce the desired effects. Grounded action provides a research-based approach for designing and implementing such action.

Grounded Practice

Another option for applying grounded theory is grounded practice. Grounded practice is the application of the logic of the grounded theory methodology and the skills used within the grounded theory methodology to inform the work of practitioners. They may also apply relevant grounded theories that fit and are relevant within their practice. Several examples of grounded practice currently exist. Grounded therapy (Simmons, 1994, 2022) is an example of

grounded practice applied within the therapeutic setting. According to Simmons, grounded therapy⁸ is “a client-centered, non-pathologizing method of counseling/therapy that uses the logic, canons, and procedures of classic grounded theory” (p. xviii). Another approach to grounded practice is grounded learning⁹. “Grounded learning is an application of the GT methodology to the art and practice of teaching” (Olson, 2008, p. 7). Finally, grounded leadership and emergence coaching (Wright et al., 2022) are additional examples of grounded practices. These practices were developed across several disciplines as practitioners recognized the applicability of the logic and skills used in grounded theory to their fields. However, none of them went so far as to identify the overarching category of grounded practice, as identified within this article.

Grounded practice is a client¹⁰-centered approach where the practitioner develops an individually customized action plan to meet a client's needs. Grounded practice begins by gathering information (data), often directly from the client but also from other relevant sources, following the “all is data” approach used in grounded theory. Gathering data from the client frequently involves a conversation-based approach, similar to open-ended interviewing, including the use of a grand tour or spill question.¹¹ The conversation may begin with a question as simple as “What brings you here today?” The practitioner uses the information (data) and the grounded theory question, “What are they working on?” to discover the main concern of the client and to determine the client’s current state or, as Glaser (1978)

⁸ For more information about grounded therapy, see Simmons (1994, 2022).

⁹ For more information about grounded learning, see Olson (2008) and Olson & Raffanti (2004, 2006).

¹⁰ Client is being used here to describe the population with whom the practitioner works, such as patients, students, etc.

¹¹ A grand-tour or spill question is “a very open common non leading question slash inquiry designed to prompt a respondent to say what they want about the topic on their terms” (Simmons, 2022, p. xviii).

would say, “what is actually going on” (p.14). This information is then used to determine what action the practitioner may take. This may involve looking for a grounded theory that fits and is relevant to the situation. If such a theory is found, the practitioner can follow the step outline in grounded action; however, this is often done more informally than in a grounded action study. It is used as a form of professional practice rather than research. If no grounded theory currently exists, the practitioner may use the logic and skills used within the grounded theory methodology to identify the client’s patterns of behavior and the factors influencing these behaviors. When conceptualized, this information can provide a deeper level of insight for the practitioner and a theoretical foothold where action may promote change for the client. The logic and skills with grounded theory and grounded action also provide the practitioner with a way to assess the client’s progress and modify how the practitioner works with the client over time.

This article presents a general discussion of the application of grounded theory and a couple of examples of how grounded theory may be applied. However, this is not meant to imply that these are the only ways to apply grounded theory; rather, it is meant to provide some possible options for applying grounded theory since there has been limited work in this area to date. Next, we will look at some possible reasons for this.

Obstacles to Moving Beyond Substantive Theory

Since the inception of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (2007, 2014) advocated for moving beyond substantive grounded theory, primarily in two ways: the development of formal grounded theory and the application of grounded theory. Despite repeated calls for more development in these areas, it is still a “neglected option” (Glaser, 2014). I propose that there are three main reasons:

1. One and Done: Burnout
2. Limited articulation of how to develop a formal grounded theory and how to apply grounded theory
3. Lack of mentorship

Many grounded theorists I have encountered used grounded theory for their dissertations or theses. While they love the grounded theory methodology, they feel burned out after their dissertation or thesis. For many of these researchers, choosing to use the grounded theory methodology meant fighting for the methodology and doing it without much support or guidance. They are one and done, meaning they did one grounded theory, and now they are done. They never do another grounded theory study or do more with their existing theory. This, combined with limited articulation and mentorship of how to develop a formal grounded theory and how to apply grounded theory, contributes to the limited number of formal grounded theories being developed and the limited application of grounded theories.¹²

While Glaser has mentioned formal grounded theory and applying grounded theory in multiple publications, only one book on each topic delves deeper into the subjects. These books focus more on the need for it rather than systematic guidance on how to generate a formal grounded theory or apply a grounded theory. Since many grounded theorists only complete one grounded theory, they may not feel they have mastered the methodology enough to move beyond a substantive grounded theory, especially with limited guidance.

Despite the number of grounded theory studies that have been conducted since the development of the research methodology, there are still very few experienced grounded theory mentors, leaving many novice researchers to navigate their first study alone. Even fewer

¹² It is also possible that grounded theories are being applied but in ways that do not lead to a formal write-up for publication.

grounded theory mentors are available to mentor people through the development of mid-range and formal grounded theories and the application of grounded theory, grounded action, and grounded practice. More guidance in these areas might encourage more researchers to move beyond their substantive theories.

Conclusion

While the grounded theory methodology has been primarily used to develop substantive theories, Glaser and Strauss encouraged researchers to move beyond substantive grounded theory by developing mid-range and formal grounded theories and applying grounded theories.

Mid-range and formal grounded theories expand the scope of a substantive grounded theory beyond the original population and setting through the collection of data within new settings and populations, the use of the constant comparative method of analysis, and the modification of the existing theory. Developing mid-range and formal grounded theories is one way to move beyond substantive grounded theory; another is applying grounded theory. While the application of grounded theory has been mainly limited to the informal and casual application of individual concepts, grounded action and grounded practice are two ways of applying grounded theory. However, for researchers and practitioners to heed the call to move beyond substantive grounded theory to the development of mid-range and formal grounded theories and to the application of grounded theories, more instruction, mentorship, and support are needed.

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