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Using Grounded Theory in the Managing Diversity Context[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of grounded theory methodology in diversity research, highlighting its suitability for developing substantive theories that practitioners and laypersons can effectively use. Grounded theory, originally formulated by Glaser and Strauss, ensures theories meet key criteria such as fit, understanding, generality, and control—making them applicable in real-world diversity contexts. The paper contrasts the discovery-driven approach of grounded theory with the limitations of preconception-based research, emphasizing the importance of theoretical sensitivity over imposing predefined concepts. Key methodological steps, including data collection, coding, memoing, and sorting, are outlined to illustrate how grounded theory facilitates the emergence of meaningful theoretical insights. Ultimately, the paper underscores the value of grounded theory in conceptualizing variation, making it an ideal approach for managing diversity research.

Keywords: grounded theory, managing diversity, theoretical sensitivity, concept development

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Although Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory primarily for generating sociological theory, from the beginning, they recognized its potential for use in practical applications (Glaser and Strauss, 1965, p. 159 and 1967, p. 3). In the ensuing years, researchers in applied professions, such as nursing, business management and public health have discovered its usefulness for developing substantive theories that are of use to practitioners and lay persons. Its suitability for conducting research in the managing diversity context has also been recognized. I will attempt here to illustrate why grounded theory is a suitable choice for diversity research.[2]

Glaser and Strauss (1965, pp. 259-273) maintain that in order for a theory to be fully useful in an applied context, it must meet several important criteria:

Fitness: In order for a theory to achieve fit, it must be closely related to the everyday reality of the substantive area[3] under study. It should not be so formal or abstract that it misses important particulars of this substantive area. Furthermore, it should not be imported from existing, particularly mid-range or formal theories, which have been developed either in an "arm chair" fashion or from other sets of data. Although this type of "force fitting" is common, it results in concepts and theories that have only a vague relationship to the data which they purport to explain.[4] This makes it difficult for lay persons and practitioners to figure out just how to apply them.

Understanding: Social scientists are often criticized for using theoretical and conceptual

[2] The ideas here are primarily those of Barney G. Glaser's and Anselm L. Strauss'. My intent is not to stretch the boundaries of grounded theory, but merely to introduce and describe it for readers to whom it may not be familiar, and to demonstrate its suitability for diversity research.
[3] The term "substantive area" refers to units of study, such as employee-management relations, juvenile crime, physician-patient relationships, managing diversity, etc.
[4] For discussions of this problem see Blumer (1940), Cicourel (1964), Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978 and 1992).

jargon that obfuscates rather than illuminates its subject matter. Although such jargon may be understandable to other scientists, it may not "make sense" to lay persons. For that reason alone, it is unlikely that such theoretical constructs will be used in applied situations. Lay persons will be more likely to use theories that are closely related to the substantive area with which they are concerned. In order for them to apply a theory, they need to have a reasonably clear sense of what it can do for them, and how it can be done. Even if they intend to enlist the help of a professional practitioner, it is unlikely they will use a theory they do not understand.

In order for concepts and theories to be of practical value to lay persons and practitioners, they must be both analytic and sensitizing (Glaser and Strauss, 1965, p. 263). For a concept or theory to be analytic, it must go beyond mere description of the substantive phenomenon at issue. It must specify relevant properties, categories and dimensions of this phenomenon. For a concept or theory to be sensitizing, it must present a meaningful mental image of the substantive phenomenon, which matches the lay person's experience. This will allow them to see the extent to which it fits and is relevant to their needs. It will also allow them to project just how they might make use of it.

Generality: According to Glaser and Strauss (1965, p. 265), to be of practical value, concepts and theories should be specific and close enough to their substantive matter to remain sensitizing. At the same time, they should be general enough that they can be easily modified to account for ongoing change in the substantive area. This level of generality will also ensure that they can be used in a wide variety of settings, not just the one from which they were derived. In other words, a useful concept or theory is one that is readily moveable over space and time.

Control: In order for a concept or theory to be effectively applied, it must give the user a "controllable theoretical foothold" (Glaser and Strauss, 1965, p. 268) over ongoing situational

realities. It must enable the user to predict and produce change, and to predict and control consequences. Although sophisticated, multidimensional theories can only be developed by trained, experienced social scientists, to have power in the real world, they must be understandable and usable for lay persons, as well as social scientists and professional practitioners.

In order for a theory to achieve the above four criteria, it must be induced from the everyday reality of the substantive area. Concepts and theories that are imported in a deductive, ad hoc or post hoc manner, seldom provide the fit, understanding and control required to achieve a useful grasp of substantive situations.

Grounded theory methodology was developed from research in a specific substantive area--patient care issues around death and dying in hospital settings (see Glaser and Strauss, 1965, 1968, 1970). It was designed to systematically induce theory which in addition to advancing social science knowledge, is useful in real world applications. Properly done, grounded theory produces concepts and theories that fit, are understandable and are sufficiently general to assist practitioners and lay persons who are attempting to engineer and manage social change. These features make it suitable for diversity research.

Rather than attempting to "convince" the reader of its suitability for diversity research, I shall provide a brief portrait of grounded theory--its logic and procedures--which will hopefully make its own case. I will leave it to the reader to measure the extent to which it may be useful in her/his research and application problems.

As mentioned above, grounded theory is a research method designed to systematically generate theory from data. It is important to note that grounded theory is designed for discovering, not verifying theory. Although it is comprised of an internal interplay between

deduction and induction, its overall sequence is inductive.

With a verification approach, concepts, variables, and such are brought into the research. The type and range of data are pre-selected and shaped to fit a preconceived theory or hypothesis. In verification research, the concepts and theory are "borrowed" by the researcher, and applied to the data either before or after it is collected. More often than not, the theorist and researcher are not the same person.

With a discovery approach, codes, variables, etc. are drawn from the data. The fit of data to theory emerges during and from the research process. The researcher and theorist are usually the same person.[5] The initial connection of data to theory with a grounded theorist is one of theoretical sensitivity, not preconception (Glaser, 1978). It may help to outline the difference.

Preconception: According to Webster's Third Dictionary, to preconceive is "to form an opinion of beforehand." In research, this can take many forms. Some examples:

One form of preconception (already mentioned) is pre-selecting the type and range of data to fit an existing theory or pre-established hypothesis. This is probably the most common approach to social science research.

A second common type of preconception is using a priori categories, concepts, ideas, hypotheses, theories, etc. to make sense of a subject matter before data is collected or analyzed. This type of preconception can be very insidious, particularly for experienced social scientists. For instance, it is common for sociologists, almost automatically, to place their research into one of sociology's many conceptual units, such as "deviant behavior," "social change," or "social problem." Although this seems innocent, it can lead the researcher far astray from what is

[5] Of course, some grounded theorists employ assistants to help in data collection. However, it is rare for a grounded theorist to not participate in at least some data collection, particularly in the early phases of a project. Grounded theory can also be a team effort.

actually going on in the data.

For example, it would seem reasonable to place a study of bordellos into the category, "deviant behavior."[6] One could then apply readily available concepts or theories about "deviance" found in ample supply in the social science literature. However, if the researchers were to look closely at what is really going on in the data, she/he would discover that the most essential property of a bordello is that it is a servicing operation, designed to provide sexual services for its clientele, for a fee.

To be sure, the socially deviant definition assigned to bordellos (even where they are legal, such as in parts of Nevada) will have consequences for the organization and its participants. Participants will have to deal with such matters as self-identity, secrecy and privacy. But, "deviance" is merely one of numerous properties of a bordello. The essential "problem" being processed in a bordello is giving and receiving sexual services, for a fee. This fact explains far more behavioral variation in a bordello than its socially deviant status. "Servicing" for a fee is the essence of the organization, thus its structure and process will have more in common with such service enterprises as barber, beauty and automobile repair shops than other "deviant behaviors," such as check forgery, shoplifting or public nose picking

A third type of preconception occurs when a researcher presumes the relevance of a particular type of information, category, variable, etc. This is a common practice of survey researchers, who often assume the relevance of "face sheet" variables.[7] It is also a common practice of counselors and therapists, who regularly presume the primacy of emotional states and

[6] This example comes from my once having participated in an analysis of data collected by another researcher for a study of bordellos.
[7] To be clear, this is not a blanket condemnation of survey research. Some research problems, such as verifying the frequency and distribution of variables in a population, can be properly addressed *only* with survey research. A good survey is one in which the relevancy of variables has been pre-established through prior "discovery" research.

the relevance of "family of origin" variables (Simmons, 1994) in explaining, particularly problematic behaviors. Another version of this form of preconception occurs when a researcher/theorist persists in using "pet" categories, despite their not having "earned" their way into an analysis through a systematic consideration of the data.

A fourth type of preconception occurs when a researcher defines her/his research problem with basic preconceiving questions such as "who," "when," "where," "what," "why," "how," "how much," etc. It is misleading to assume that you know the relevance of these types of questions at the outset. If you pose your research problem as, "in this research I will address the question of why people become users of illegal drugs," you are implicitly assuming personal motivation and choice to be key variables in explaining illegal drug use (they may turn out to be, but you can't know this before you begin). It would be best to employ neutral phrasing such as, "in this research I will explore the process by which people become users of illegal drugs." Although the word "process" is a theoretical code,[8] all instances of "becoming" occur over time, so it is a given that the process of becoming a drug user will occur over time. This phrasing refrains from assuming the relevance of any particular questions or variables beyond the general topic.

A fifth type of preconception occurs when a researcher either intentionally or unintentionally has a personal "investment" in a particular outcome or finding. This type of preconception takes two forms--preconception that arises out of personal experience and that which is driven by the researcher's ideological preferences.

Personal experience preconceptions occur when a researcher presumes that the range of explanations available to make sense of a particular behavior are those which are compatible

[8] See Glaser (1978, pp. 72-82) for a discussion of theoretical coding.

with one's own personal "vocabulary of motives" (Mills, 1940). This is particularly insidious because we naturally filter our understandings of the social world through our personal vocabulary of motives, usually assuming--incorrectly--that this covers all reasonable alternatives.

To illustrate, imagine yourself to be a cultural anthropologist about to begin a study of a completely "foreign" culture, which has not previously been studied. How do you begin your study when you can't know what to look for, what questions to pose, what is most relevant, etc. without incorporating assumptions, concepts, understandings and so forth which come from your own cultural experience. Even if you are scientifically virtuous enough to refrain from entering your study with the kinds of preconceptions mentioned above, you may be unable to refrain from allowing your personal cultural experience from tainting your study, from the beginning.

Conducting studies in your own cultural can be even more hazardous, because you share a generally common language, as well as numerous common assumptions, expectations, knowledge, and so forth with your research subjects. In this situation it is rather easy take your personal experience and knowledge for granted, assuming certain things to be "given." Many anthropological and sociological studies are corrupted in this manner, without the awareness of the researcher.

Ideological preconceptions occur when a researcher collects and examines data through "ideologically colored glasses." This may be an intrinsic peril in the diversity field, because it is (legitimately) ideologically driven, and favors social change with particular outcomes. However, it is a field that can ultimately succeed only by understanding what "is," along with what "ought to be." Understanding what "is," will make it easier and more certain that managed social change will have the desired outcome.

Theoretical sensitivity:[9] Although at first glance the distinction between "preconception" and "sensitivity" may appear to be a bit unclear, a closer look reveals important differences. Preconception involves specific substantive and/or theoretical presumptions about a subject matter or set of data. Theoretical sensitivity transcends particular sets of data. Theoretical sensitivity is both an attitude towards data and theory as well as a researcher's combined knowledge, understanding and skills, which can be applied to data collection and interpretation.

The knowledge, understanding and skill component of theoretical sensitivity involves a general regard for ideas, a broad exposure to ideas (not just in one's own field), and the ability to use ideas analytically. It involves the ability of a researcher to see the relationship and relevance of particular ideas to particular data and particular ideas to particular ideas, through a process of emergent fit.

The attitude component of theoretical sensitivity includes a disposition to enter a research setting with as few predetermined ideas as possible. It also includes the intellectual patience and courage required to let a theory emerge from the data, at the proper time. It requires that all categories, concepts, etc. earn their way into the emerging theory, by attending carefully to what is happening in the data. Emergence can be a fearful process for a researcher. It is comforting to "already know." However, that is not a sufficient reason for ignoring what is happening in the data.

Theoretical sensitivity also demands of a researcher/theorist the attitudes and skills required for thoroughness. Grounded theory is systematic. It consists of a series of steps, none of which can be eliminated, without compromising the fit, richness, density, integration, and so forth of the theory. Briefly, grounded theory consists of the following stages:

[9] For a thorough discussion of theoretical sensitivity, see Glaser (1978).

Data collection:[10] In grounded theory, data is collected from specific substantive "units" (population groups, subcultures, social settings, etc.), not to provide a detailed substantive description of that particular unit, but as an arena for discovering generic variables. The study is not about the unit. The focus is on discovering and developing theoretical understandings of basic social processes, structures and conditions which occur in that unit,[11] and which will be found in other units. Because of this generic aspect of grounded theories, they will be found to be relevant and useful in other settings, with minor modifications. Grounded theories are not bound by space (location) and time.

Because grounded theories are not intended to be generalized to populations, but to generic processes, structures and conditions, and because grounded theory is designed to discover theory, not verify it, just about any type or source of data can be useful. The data is used to generate ideas, not make statements about frequency, distribution or "truthfulness." Although a considerable amount of internal verification is built into the grounded theory research process, verification of such matters as frequency and distribution is best left to verificational methods and studies.

In perusing the literature, it appears that most grounded theorists use the method for qualitative studies, although as Glaser (1993) illustrates, it is also suitable for quantitative studies.[12] Probably the most efficient type of data collection for a grounded study is open-ended,

[10] In grounded theory "the literature" is treated essentially as "data," to be analyzed and integrated into the evolving theory. Concepts from the literature must *earn* their way into the evolving theory, just like any other concept. Therefore, grounded theorists do not begin their research with a thorough review of the literature. To do so would preconceive the relevance of borrowed concepts. It could also shut down the analyst's creativity, by leading her/him to conceptualize the topic as it has already been conceptualized. Grounded theorists begin to incorporate the literature into their emerging theory, only after they feel confident in their own theoretical rendering of the data.
[11] For a detailed discussion of the generic aspects of grounded theories, see Bigus, Hadden and Glaser (1979).
[12] It may interest the reader to know that Barney Glaser's professional roots are heavily "quantitative," having been a student of Paul Lazarsfeld (at Columbia University), considered by many to be the "father" of modern social statistics.

intensive interviewing. Many grounded theorists use a combination of open-ended interviews and participant observation.[13]

Analysis: In grounded theory, analysis commences very soon after data collection begins. This is particularly important to grounded theory because, once the initial data are collected, data and analysis inform one another, in a back-and-forth manner. Glaser and Strauss refer to this process as "theoretical sampling." It is of fundamental importance to grounded theory, because it provides for the emergence of a thoroughly grounded theory.

Procedurally, once the first several pieces of data (interviews, or whatever) are completed, analysis begins. This analysis informs the researcher where to go next, in terms of subject matter and context. This analysis provides for ongoing "mini" hypotheses, which clue the researcher as to the kinds of topics to cover and questions to ask. Because of the generic nature of grounded theories (i.e., generic process, structure and conditions), this may entail collecting data from different settings, to look for variation on the emerging core variable.

The actual intellectual "hands on" analysis of grounded theory is what Glaser (1965) originally referred to as "constant comparative analysis." Constant comparative analysis is the technique by which grounded theorists relate data to ideas, then ideas to other ideas. This is done through "coding" the data. As Glaser (1978) puts it, "The essential relationship between data and theory is a conceptual code. The code conceptualizes the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators within the data. Thus, in generating a theory by developing the hypothetical relationships between conceptual codes (categories and their properties) which have been generated from the data as indicators, we 'discover' a grounded theory. Coding gets the analyst off the empirical level by fracturing the data, then conceptually grouping it into codes..."

[13] For easy to find examples of grounded theory studies, see Glaser (1993, 1994).

There are two types of codes, substantive and theoretical. "Substantive codes summarize the empirical substance of the area of research. Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory" (Glaser, 1978, p. 55).

The first step in substantive coding process is "open coding" (Glaser, 1978, pp. 56-72). In open coding, the analyst codes for as many categories as possible--anything and everything which might fit. This initial open coding initiates and guides the theoretical sampling process.

When conducting open coding the analyst asks three general questions of the data (Glaser, 1978, p. 57): 1) "What is this data a study of?" In grounded theories, this usually turns out to be something different than originally thought. 2) "What category does this incident indicate?" The long form of this question is "What category or property of a category, of what part of the emerging theory, does this incident indicate?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). This question forces the analyst to think in conceptual terms, and to begin relating concepts to concepts, from which eventually an integrated theory emerges. 3) "What is actually happening in the data?" This question is designed to get at the social psychological or social structural problems the research subjects are addressing and processing in the action scene.

Open coding is followed by "selective coding." Once visible patterns begin to emerge, the analyst begins to make some decisions as to exactly what the study is about. A properly done analysis will lead to a "core variable," which put simply is the variable that accounts for the most variation in the action scene.[14] At this point, the analyst delimits coding to matters significantly related to the core variable.

Theoretical codes are more abstract than substantive codes. They produce an integration

[14] It is possible to find more than one potential core variable in a set of data. In such a case, the analyst must decide which one will become the subject of her/his study. The other one(s) may be pursued at a later date.

of the substantive codes into a theory. That is, they organize and draw theoretically meaningful relationships between emerging substantive codes. Glaser (1978, p. 74-82) outlines eighteen "coding families," which provide useful frameworks for integrating and organizing substantive codes. For example, the "bread and butter" theoretical codes of sociology are what Glaser refers to as "The six C's." The six C's are causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances and conditions.

It is important to caution against using "pet" codes, regardless of their fit. Theoretical codes must fit the data (and substantive codes), just as substantive codes must fit the data. The fit of data to codes and codes to codes must emerge, not be preconceived.

Memoing: "Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (Glaser, 1978, p.83). Data collection, analysis and memoing are ongoing, and overlap. Memoing should take precedence, because it is the actual write-up of what is emerging from the data and the analysis. Data is always available, and can be analyzed at any time. Ideas are fragile. They should be written down at the earliest possible time.

In the course of memoing, the analyst should think and write theoretically, in a "stream of consciousness" fashion, and not worry about grammar, spelling, sentence structure, organization, and so forth. The important thing is to write about ideas as they occur to you. The results can be "cleaned up," reorganized and integrated with other ideas (through more memos) at a later time.[15]

Sorting: Sorting refers not to data sorting, but to conceptual sorting of memos. Sorting is the process of integrating and organizing what has been written about in memos. The actual

[15] One advantage of this approach is that it minimizes "writers block."

sorting process consists of "cutting and pasting"[16] memos and sections of memos so they fit a sensible (and modifiable) theoretical outline. This process usually stimulates more memos, and sometimes even more data collection.

Writing: A full sorting of memos into a theoretical outline produces the first draft of the write-up or presentation of the theory. Once again, this write-up should be about ideas, not data or people. Excerpts from the data are used merely to example and clarify the ideas being presented. A grounded theory write-up is a conceptual write-up of the core variable and its properties, dimensions, and so forth. The result is a theoretical suggestion about the topic, not a verified finding. Being well grounded, the theory becomes an excellent source of hypotheses for verificational studies.

The foregoing discussion of grounded theory is a sketch. My intent was not that the reader learn how to actually do grounded theory. Those who want to use grounded theory would be well advised to read the works of its originators--Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss.[17] My intent is to sufficiently familiarize the reader with grounded theory so she/he can measure the extent to which it may be useful in her/his own diversity research.

A closing remark: One of the many strengths of grounded theory is its ability to identify, conceptualize, and conceptually integrate variation. This makes it particularly suitable for diversity research, as the essence of diversity is variation

[16] "Cutting and pasting" can consist literally of using scissors to "cut" (a copy--not the original) and scotch-tape to "paste" memos and portions of memos, into a physical embodiment of the theoretical outline. This can also be done using a word processor. Many grounded theorists do some combination of both.
[17] I would also recommend talking to researchers who have experience with the method.

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