



## **Reading and Using the Literature<sup>1</sup>**

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With regard to grounded theory research methodology, there are three types of literature: (1) non-professional, popular, and pure ethnographic descriptions, (2) professional literature related to the substantive area under research, and (3) professional literature that is unrelated to the substantive area. First, I will consider the related literature, then unrelated, and lastly descriptions.

### **Related Literature**

The question continually arises when doing grounded theory as to what is the best pacing of reading and using the related professional literature in the substantive area under study. We are still all used to the normal, extensive literature review to ascertain gaps to fill in, hypotheses to test, and ideas to contribute to, in descriptive and verificational studies. In contrast, the dictum in grounded theory research is that there is a need *not* to review any of the literature in substantive areas under study.

The dictum is brought about by the concern not to contaminate, to be constrained by, to inhabit, to stifle, or to otherwise impede the researcher's effort to generate categories, their properties, theoretical code from the data that fit, are relevant and work with received or preconceived concepts that may really not fit work or be relevant, but appear so momentarily. It is hard enough to generate one's own concepts, without the added burden of contending with the

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"rich" derailments provided by the related literature in the form of conscious or unrecognized assumptions of what ought to be found in the data.

The logic behind this dictum is clear. Grounded theory is for discovery of concepts and hypotheses, not for testing or replicating them. Thus, the license and mandate of grounded theory is to be free to discovery in every way possible. It must be free of the claims of related literature and its findings and assumptions in order to render the data conceptually with the best fit. Grounded theory must be free of the idea of working on someone else's work or problems. It needs to make no bows to the existing literature or renowned sociologists.

However, this stance is part of the methodology only in the beginning. For grounded theory, we collect the data in the field first and then start coding, constantly comparing incidents to codes, analyzing, and generating theory. When the theory seems sufficiently grounded in a core variable and emerging integration of categories and properties, *then* the researcher may begin to review the literature in the substantive field and relate the literature to his own work in many ways. Thus, scholarship in the same area starts after the emerging theory is sufficiently developed, so the researcher is firm on his discovery and will not be forced or preconceived by preempting concepts. Indeed, the researcher may be hard put to know *which* substantive field his theory is in until it has emerged sufficiently.

The ways the emerging grounded theory will relate to existing literature in the same field will vary with the amount and kind of it. There may be virtually none, a modicum amount, or an abundance to the point of saturation. If there is virtually no work in the area or just the barest of straight descriptions, then the grounded theory opens up the area with relevant concepts and hypotheses, and many directions and leads for future research. The researcher is a preempting pioneer, to be footnoted extensively for beginning a new path in

sociology. Thus, Anselm and I opened up the whole field of awareness of dying in hospitals.

*A modicum of literature:* this is the most likely condition. The researcher should not worry about covering the literature in the same field, since it will always be there. It does not go away! And there will be plenty of time during the grounded theory process to integrate this literature with the emergent theory during saturation and sorting. Especially during sorting and then writing, the researcher-analyst, by constant comparison, reconciles differences, shows similarities in concepts and patterns, and imbues his work with the data in concepts in the literature. He may footnote them as having worked on the same idea or in the same area, too, or he may integrate them directly into his theory, depending on their relevance for the processing of a problem that the theory attends to. He may also add to, extend, or vary the extant theory with his ideas, as an aside to generating his own theory. The researcher, by now, knows his own categories quite well and cannot be shaken from them. He can only sharpen them by better fit ideas in the literature, not merely by catchy ones. Other integrative connections will surely occur to the researcher as he compares his work to related literature, and his contribution to it becomes clear.

As these connections occur, the researcher must remember that his job is to generate, not to verify. So differences between his and others' work do not produce verified or unverified hypotheses or findings. It is incumbent upon the researcher to compare and show the variations as different properties under different conditions and then integrate them. Verification begs off the task of constant comparison and theoretical integration; it sets up controversy when it should extend theory.

Happily, reading the literature in his substantive area comes faster for the

researcher at this later stage, since he can look through literature quickly for what relates to the emerging theory he is generating. He is astutely relevant with the grid of his emerging framework. All does not look for the same importance. The researcher can skip and dip when reading, thereby gaining a greater volume of coverage, since he now has a clear purpose for covering his field. This purpose is to integrate his generated theory with the other literature to show its contribution. This approach is quite currently appropriate, since many researcher-analysts are finding that with the proliferation of publications, there is more and more to read and less and less time to do it. It is far more efficient than reading the literature beforehand with no clear notion of relevance.

Reading, however, is *work*. When reading for his research, the analyst should read for ideas, whether the ideas are in the literature or in his generating the concepts himself from constant comparison. Reading for ideas, extant or generated, gives the analyst a conceptualization of the book he is reading that is easily remembered, and it provides a conceptual connection to his own emergent theory, soon to be book. It is important to note that if the researcher generates the concepts from the reading of others' work, he should take credit for it and not attribute the concept to the author and so state in his footnote or text. Thus, to say that the Taxi Dance Hall book is about social isolation is my idea of the book, not its author.

Ideas, of course, make one theoretically sensitive, and the more ideas he gets in his readings, the more they connect with the emergent theory, the more the tendency to make the researcher sensitive to what he may discover in his data. This, of course, resolves itself into a direct help in theoretical sampling, with continual modification and increase in scope of his emergent theory. And the researcher, again, must remember, "why the discrepancy?", the question that arises between his theory and what he is reading is an occasion for

comparing, analyzing, and theoretical sampling overlooked data to achieve this. It is not an occasion to negate or invalidate others' work, but to explain it.

*An abundance of literature:* Some substantive fields have been heavily studied, such as alcoholism. I always favor areas that need opening up as the richest for grounded theory or a field with a sparse amount of literature, so contributions are clear and strong. But some fields with major funding of research provide researchers a chance for a study in spite of the immense amount of work already accomplished. Then, grounded theory, we have found, typically transcends, organizes, and synthesizes large numbers of existing studies. This is a contribution to be sure since the two prime attributes of theory are achieved: parsimony and scope. For example, in one alcohol study, it was discovered that the process of turning oneself from reliance on internal controls to external controls as a way of stopping drinking brought together many empirical studies with few concepts.

The contribution in well-worked areas is usually not a new concept or pattern, since these are usually saturated. It is the basic social processes that are missing that grab together so much in a conceptual grasp.

### **Unrelated Literature**

But reading and use of the literature is not forsaken in the grounded theory process until the later stages of a project. It is vital to be reading and studying from the outset of the research, *but in unrelated fields*. This, as I have said, maximizes the avoidance of preempting, preconceived concepts that may easily detract from the full freedom to generate concepts that fit and are relevant when coding and analyzing the data as it is collected. While at the same time, this reading of the unrelated keeps up the researcher's continual theoretical sensitivity to the conceptualization of data and to

theoretical codes, which are replete in the literature.

Theoretical sensitivity is also increased by reading for styles such as integrative models and English formats. It helps hold these models in the researcher's mind, while not forcing the current substantive data. By style, I mean exactly what the author is doing when writing, not what he says he is doing. How he orders his piece, not how he says it is ordered in the table of contents, or in the introductory chapter, or in chapter introductions. What he says, not what he said he will say or did say. Other aspects of style to carefully attend to are the constructive techniques of the total work, theoretical codes, integration schemes, densification, scope, clarity, sources of data, and degree of grounding. Comparing the diversity of authors' styles and properties of them is crucial to deciding what style to write in to best render the emergent theory.

Such comparisons of unrelated literature to one's own ongoing work also provide support for it as the researcher sees how his style fits into the normative styles of the literature and where his contributions lie. I say normative support, not validation or verification, just that his ways fit a certain way into the bigger picture of his profession.

Reading for ideas, style, and support generates sensitivity, which in turn stimulates the researcher's preconscious processing when generating categories and properties. This reading keeps him thinking sociologically, holding his ground against the thinking style of the subjects, and is especially good for stimulating a break in a jam-up of both too many and no thoughts as one is coding and memoing and seems to come with nothing yet (see "Input" and the "Drugless Trip" in *Theoretical Sensitivity*).

How to think sociologically for the style the researcher will write in is best found by reading the kind of piece that we will write: The researcher should read papers in the

journal that he wishes to publish in, read dissertations when writing a dissertation, and read the kind of monographs he will wish to write. He should read those kinds of pieces in which the author grapples with the data as he is doing. He should read many pieces of the same range of style so he understands the variations of the norms he will have to deal with, such as the ratio of theory to illustrations, which varies greatly. Lastly, the researcher should always keep in mind that what he is reading is the author's knowledge, if for the grounded theorist, data in a perspective.

Reading in unrelated fields can stimulate theoretical sampling or going back to the field to find more data on a gap or thin area to use to generate concepts from. Seeing what tack an author took in another area can provide a lead to explore in the researcher's area. For example, a quick dramatic change in life circumstances, like a large inheritance, can cause a redesigning of lifestyle, a lead provided by a dramatic change in physical health, such as a heart attack necessitating a redesigning too, and these theoretical sampling leads that do not preconceive the researcher's substantive area.

Slowly, as the grounded theory emerges with strength and formulation, the researcher can start to switch at a commensurate pace to the related literature.

### **Nonprofessional, popular, and ethnographic literature**

By these rubrics, I mean pure descriptions of various sorts with virtually no or minimal conceptualization, such as those found in ethnographies, biographies, diaries, documents, manuscripts, records, reports, catalogs, and the like. These materials are and should be related to the substantive area being studied and, therefore, are to be considered just more data to be constantly compared for generating categories and properties. They may be read at any stage of the research as data. They may be seen as supplemental to a

field study or a survey, but in fact, as they are brought into the analysis by constant comparison, it does not much matter. They help generate concepts and hypotheses, just like all data, and no one knows the difference when studying the theory. These readings are just more data for analysis.

Thusly, as just more data, the accuracy, veracity, or authenticity of the data is not a problem. The researcher must consider these readings as data from a perspective, and it has to be analyzed as such, and let the constant comparison method correct through integration, as it does for all generated concepts. For example, psychologists tend to give interpreted descriptions, that is descriptions modeled by their training. They can never just tell it straight; there is always an evaluation and mild diagnosis built in. By correction, I mean that perspective data yields different properties of the same category. And indeed, the field data itself must be seen as a type of perspective, that is, an effort at unbiased, clear description.

In sum, this sort of data, when carefully constantly compared and analyzed does not produce findings, so veracity or "checking it out" does not matter. It just produced hypotheses or suggestions to be further tested or checked out in verification studies or by its user in vivo in applying the grounded theory. And this is all our carefully collected data produces too.

In conclusion, the researcher, as a prospective author, should also be a reader to learn the license of an author; once written, a piece must be OK, to be believed, to be studied, since it was sanctified by publication. And grounded theory produces authors, or the grounded theory will go unheeded into the world of private or small group fantasy. Being a good author requires a lot of reading.