Playing Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This article reconceptualizes grounded theory research methodology as a form of structured play. Challenging linear and instrumental views of research, it argues that inquiry in social contexts unfolds through improvisation, rehearsal, and low-stakes experimentation akin to play in human learning. Drawing on Vygotsky's theories of play and the notion of zone of proximal development, Dewey's account of play as an intrinsically meaningful activity, and Huizinga's concept of *Homo ludens*, the article positions learning and research as inherently social and developmental practices. Game design theory further frames play as free movement within rule-based systems. Within this perspective, grounded theory methods, including interviewing, coding, memoing, and memo sorting, may be understood as research *toys* that afford exploration, discovery, and theory generation. Emphasizing play may revitalize qualitative inquiry, fostering curiosity, reflexivity, and what Barney Glaser described as "youthifying" research practice.

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Play

In many respects, research is an extemporaneous activity. Research is traditionally thought to be carefully planned, systematic, with predictable start and end points, way points, and other temporal junctures. However, research doesn't really unfold in such a controlled way. Much of the research that takes place in social settings takes place *in the wild*. Human beings, as well as animals, learn by rehearsing in contexts that are not purely in the wild but a safer subset of the wild. This rehearsal takes place in a context in which the other interlocutors all understand that this is a low-stakes context. It is a context in which actions may be tried with minimal consequences. It is a context in which there can be the rehearsal of even very dangerous or even deadly actions without the risk that would take place in a truly *wild* context. This is a relatively safe rehearsal of actions that can be practiced for the purpose of learning. Consider lion cubs who, from birth, seem to continually practice hunting on each other. They sneak up on one another and pounce and even scratch and bite one another, but in ways that do not seriously injure. In this context, they practice being hunters. Similarly, human children take on roles in which they change the way they speak with each other. They may say things such as *I am the mommy, I am the daddy.* Through this form of play, they pretend to be someone they are not and practice possible future roles and identities. As the noted Soviet psychologist Vygotsky (1967) mentioned,

> In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior. (p. 16)

We learn many things through play. Children and adults alike engage in some relatively low-risk actions to test out behaviors, experimenting with what we have seen from others. Another noted educational psychologist, John Dewey, also proposed reflections on the topic of play (Dewey, 1913) and experience (Dewey, 1938) in learning. For Dewey, play is,

> A name given to those activities which are not consciously performed for the sake of any result beyond themselves; activities which are enjoyable in their own execution without reference to ulterior purpose. (Dewey, 1913, p. 725)

A word that is closely related to play is the word *fun*. When we are engaged in play, we usually have fun. We traditionally distinguish play from work and *serious* actions. Most English speakers have probably heard the saying, *It was all fun and games until…* Play is often associated with freedom, while work is often associated with structures and obligations. We pay people to work because otherwise they would not work. We do not typically pay people to play unless that play is done for a different purpose than playing itself.

Why is play so enjoyable? We think play is enjoyable because when we play, we are thinking and learning. Learning is

inherently enjoyable. It seems that we are creatures who have evolved to find learning enjoyable. It's a good thing, too, because if we didn't enjoy learning, we might not bother, and that would place us in a very dangerous world without the knowledge and skills to survive and thrive.

There's an interesting thing that takes place during play. If the play activity is too easy, it becomes boring. We lose interest in it. We then seek for greater challenge in the play. This is exactly what takes place in learning. Vygotsky (1978) referred to this as a zone of proximal development. This means that learning activities should target the level of development just above the level of the player…er… learner. In that way, the activity is a little bit challenging. Again, if it is too easy, it ceases to be compelling. It ceases to be fun if the level is too high. If the activity is too difficult, then it also becomes boring or uninteresting. *It's too hard. I don't want to play anymore*. Learning activities, or play activities, are fun when they are just at the right level.

There's another funny thing about play and learning. That is, we must indeed learn a great many things to survive, but we also must learn and do all of this with other people. Human beings are prosocial beings. We learn in social contexts because our very existence from birth takes place in the presence of other people. We have to do a heck of a lot of learning just to figure out how to function with all these other people. Humans have something else that needs a lot of practice, and that is learning language. The use of language is inextricably linked to being human. This requires a lot of learning

and a lot of play…. And is a heck of a lot of fun. And involves a heck of a lot of other people. It seems that for all of us, to be human is to be social and to learn through play. As Dutch theorist Johan Huizinga (1955) proposes, we are "Homo ludens" and play is not just a cultural phenomenon but a feature of human civilization.

Another aspect of play is improvisation. Game design theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) define play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (p. 4). When games are played, there are rules that define the parameters of action. But within those parameters, there is a great deal of improvisation. The best players of games are those who are good at improvising within the rules of the game and testing the limits of said rules. When a jazz musician improvises, they are doing so within some specific rules. These may be rules related to the scales that are played along with specific chords or harmonic progressions. But this is play bounded by rules.

For any activity that humans engage in, there may be tools. In fact, one of the dimensions of being human, or that defines humanity, is tool use. This notion was once commonly used to distinguish humans from animals, but in recent years, there have been too many observations of tool use among animals, such as termite fishing with sticks among chimpanzees. But if we are talking about play, we can also talk about tools for play. It seems that when we talk about play, we also talk about *toys*. Toys are objects that we play with. A tool is an instrument that is used to extend the reach of the user. The tool

affords actions that extend the reach of the wielder of the tool. A toy is a tool. A toy is a tool for play. A toy extends the reach of the player. Like with play, there are rules for tool use or toy use. They are objects that have been designed for play. How they are used is not strictly designed, but there is a range of acceptable toy uses. This is the same for any *tool*.

If play involves learning and learning involves play, then we can say that we use toys for learning. We also **design** tools for learning as we design toys for play. A good toy excites the imagination. A good toy inspires improvisation and mediates an experience that was not possible without the toy. A game may involve the use of many toys that are used in concert.

A Methodology

The interrelated set of tools or methods used in research may be referred to as a methodology. In this way, a methodology is an interrelated set of tools that are used to find things out. They are used to answer research questions. In grounded theory, methodologies are tools for building theory. They are toys that have been designed to extend the player's research power in the game of grounded theory.

Unfortunately, when we grow up, society seems to expect that we become a bit less playful. This means that we are also expected to engage less in learning experiences. Like the proverbial dogs who don't learn new tricks, we lose some ability to move in and out of play states. With the pressures to use our time productively, we lose a bit of our willingness to play games. However, it seems that throughout our lives,

we do retain the need to continually learn new things. We can retain some of our ability to learn new things in adulthood by hanging on to play. We should learn that what we do is not a not-so-serious game. It should not be so serious. It should involve improvisation. It should be social. It should be done in ways that use zones of proximal development. I have been privileged to attend many seminars on Grounded Theory research methodology with its co-creator, Barney Glaser. He typically began these seminars with a bit of a warm-up talk. This included some remarks about the benefits of attending a grounded theory seminar. One of the benefits he referred to as "youthifying." I always understood that to mean that doing the *work* in a seminar would be fun. It would then be more like play than work. Like a tiger cub, I could try out actions without hurting or getting hurt. Learning grounded theory must be playing with grounded theory.

This activity of social research is one that involves learning, through playing a game at my own level with other people. It is a practice. There are levels of practice. Mentee. Rookie. Journeyman. Expert. Master. Grandmaster. There are many levels that involve not only practice but also helping others. The expert teaches and helps others with their problems. They troubleshoot. They may also design experiences for the novice. They design games that the player… er …learner would engage.

To be in learning mode is to be playful. It is to be not so serious. It is to be social. It is to be willing to make mistakes. It is to be relatively safe. It is to be welcoming to others in social contexts. It is to be friendly to new

actions and feelings. To learn is to acknowledge that you are not a finished product. To learn is to accept the invitation of curiosity.

If learning grounded theory is indeed youthifying, as Barney Glaser said many times, how can we be sure to maintain its youthifyingness? First, it would make sense to define what we mean by youth; what may be some of the qualities of youth? An important quality of youth is that it is unfinished; it is full of potential. Something that is not settled is something that implies movement. Think of a toddler; and wherever their attention lands will be a space of wonder and discovery. Toddlers are never still; they must touch everything, they must put things in their mouth, and if they don't get it, a tantrum may follow. Researchers must aspire to be more like toddlers (sans the tantrums). Grounded theory takes the toddler (researcher) to the playground of inquiry. It allows us to set aside the adult mentality of preconceived rules and conventions and allows us to approach data from a place of curiosity. It facilitates an approach to research in which wonderful things can emerge from data rather than being forced by working the data. Let us consider the difference between working with data and playing with data. Working implies a relationship in which you force a perspective to extract a result. Playing implies a relationship in which you feel it out and approach it with curiosity. Rather than having a fixed expectation from research, you are open to what concepts may emerge.

We might be able to think of a few rules for playing the game of grounded theory.

This is a game of learning grounded theory. It is also the game of discovering new theory with the grounded theory methodology. Let us consider some of the basic methodological practices of the game of grounded theory. First, we have an area of interest. This should not be too structured. It should not be too clear. We should not hold on to it too tightly. It should be general. It should not provoke anxiety. It should be one that we can explore in a playful manner. It might start with what Glaser called a grand tour question. It might begin with a professional concern. It might begin with a lifecycle concern. Once we have an area of interest, we can start to play with the central concerns of the participants. What do they care most about? What is their main pain? This is not necessarily the same as our own main pain. Our central concerns might be steeped in careerism or something else, but once you have the central concern of the participants, you can get at what it is they continually DO to resolve the central concern. Once we have this, we will have the makings of a grounded theory.

There is play with the game of what to study . There is play with the game of coding. There is too much talk about coding, and I won't get into why that is the case. But there are rules for the game of playing with coding. There are rules for the game of playing with memoing. Coding and memoing are both toys that are used to play the game of grounded theory. They are the equipment that is used in the sport.

The work of memoing must be playful. Memos should be thought of as toys. Memos are playfully written artifacts that capture the thinkings, the wonderings, the ah-

ha-ings of the researcher. One rule for the game of writing memos is that they have a title and are written separately from the data. This is important in the game because memos should be sorted. This is a very playful activity that is indeed youthifying! There is a bit of a meta game that takes place with memoing. That is, there is a game about a game. There is play in the writing of the memos, and there is play in the sorting of the memos. Memoing is not very serious. It is not an activity that should be too serious. It must be playful.

Coding and memoing are parts of the same game. With coding, the researcher continually asks of bits of data, What category does this incident indicate? What is this? Here it is again. It is … A phrase that I have found helps with this game is *Give it a name! Give it a name! Give it a name now!* (sung to the tune of *Give it Away* by the Red Hot Chili Peppers (Kiedis, et al., 1991). Part of the game of giving names is using gerunds. This is maybe not really a rule. But it is a useful practice. We may think of it as a mechanic. So, use these phrases: Give it a name, now! Stop, drop, and memo! Here it is again it is…., Use gerund jive! Another possible rule for this game is for those who are using grounded theory methods in ways that are not very strictly classic grounded theory. I mean, if you have research questions, you can code specifically for the research questions. That is a code to use and reuse.

Grounded theory is just a research methodology. Barney Glaser once said in a seminar while emphasizing the nature of grounded theory, "It's just a fucking methodology!" In this way, we may think of grounded theory as a game. We learn it by playing it. It has tools or *toys* that afford this play. These toys include the interview, coding, memoing, memo sorting, theoretical writing, and many others.

By emphasizing that a research methodology is a field of action that is playful, we may imbue it with a sense of fun. It is then youthifying. It is less serious. It is less structured. It involves improvisation. It involves learning in social contexts. It involves making mistakes and learning from them. It involves coming in with an idea of where you were going and finding yourself pleasantly surprised that you landed somewhere unexpected.

The best way to learn grounded theory is to learn it through play. While thinking of play with learning, we must think about activities that are interest-based, active, and involving critical analysis and reflection. This is the play that is involved in any learning. It is the play that is involved also in research. Grounded theory is a field of action that is playful, and it is engaged in social contexts. It is a rule-based game. It is something that we can play at and therefore learn. It is inherently fun. It is something that we can continually engage to create new knowing and cultural change.

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