Understanding Bias and Preconception in Classic Grounded Theory

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Abstract

A commonly accepted truth in qualitative and quantitative research is that bias is a bad thing. Such a statement would be accurate. However, in classic grounded theory, bias is not a concern—a very different perspective. A discussion about what bias is and why it is not an issue will be discussed, along with an explanation of the constant comparative method. On the other hand, and additionally, the term preconception is explained with a more nuanced discussion about why that researcher-derived externality is not allowed in classic grounded theory.

Keywords: bias, classic grounded theory, constant comparative method, preconception, prejudice

As a doctoral dissertation chairperson, I have a responsibility to guide my candidates to a successful completion of their dissertations. One milestone in that journey is obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. During the IRB process, candidates are required to discuss how bias may be in their proposed study and the ways they would mitigate such issues. On several occasions, I have seen candidates write that there is no bias present, to which I respond that there always is bias in research. Such a concept is abundantly clear when one does a search in Google Scholar for "bias in research" in the last 5 years and finds more than 12,000 results.

Before going further, an understanding about bias and preconception is needed. Bias and preconception are based on a number of factors, like the prior experience, feelings, or knowledge of the researcher (Yarwood-Ross & Jack, 2015); and they are assumptions that significantly color how classic grounded theory researchers would interpret data (Glaser, 1978; Yarwood-Ross & Jack, 2015). As such, they must be minimized as much as possible; such "nongrounded ideas" (Glaser, 1998, p. 182) erode and destroy the emerging theory and interfere with the classic grounded theory process. In this paper, a more nuanced discussion will ensue about what bias and preconception are, and how they are reduced in classic grounded theory

Understanding Bias

According to Weeks and Johnson (2025), bias is "prejudice for or against something based on one's prior experiences, knowledge, or presumptions" (p. 132). Given that a synonym of the word preconception is prejudice and the word means to form an opinion "prior to actual knowledge or experience" (Merriam Webster, 2025), it is reasonable to state that bias and prejudice are synonymous with each other. Thus, information that is preconceived or biased has no evidence to support the idea; it is not grounded (Glaser, 1998).

But the term bias is much more nuanced than a simple definition, as one might imagine, because the term may take many forms. For example, if someone were to say that they have a preference or tendency for or against something, that would demonstrate bias. For example, if a person were to state that they prefer classical music over Metallica because the latter type of music is evil, they would have a conscious bias against that form of music. On the other hand, bias can also be unconscious or implicit (Mrara et al., 2025) and is harder to discover because it covertly colors behaviors and perceptions (Ehmke et al., 2025). One example of an unconscious bias would be if a math teacher unintentionally called on boys more than girls.

In the realm of research, if an analyst or researcher wanted results to be in a certain way, looked only at a limited piece of the data, and then stated that those expectations were, indeed, a reality, then that person is said to have demonstrated bias. Researcher bias may be intentional or unintentional (Principe, 2022) and is an umbrella term for many other, more specific prejudices rooted in the researcher, like confirmation, cultural, or

question biases (Principe, 2022).

Given that bias exists consciously and unconsciously, it is evident in all research (Smith & Noble, 2025). Sometimes the bias may be in the instruments (Devine et al., 2025) and in the interpretation of the data. In qualitative research, though bias may be seen as a limitation (Mrabti & Alaoui, 2025) or perhaps delimitation, doctoral students and candidates are taught about strategies to reduce bias, such as reflexivity, member checking, and triangulation, to mitigate the impact of bias (QDAcity, n.d.).

In quantitative studies, various assumption tests are conducted based on whether the data are parametric or nonparametric. While the specific statistical tests and needed assumptions in and of themselves may be void of bias, there are specific ways bias may exist: (a) the choice of certain variables over others for analysis, (b) the use of incorrect statistical tests (Darling, 2024), and (c) the incorrect or lack of assumption testing (Jones et al., 2025), to name only a few. In these instances, the result would be biased, misinterpreted, and manipulated results. Therefore, regardless of the methodology, design, or instruments used, one of the primary objectives a researcher has is to take appropriate steps to reduce bias as much as possible.

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Types of Data in Classic Grounded Theory

To understand bias and preconception, there is value now to turn the discussion to the classic grounded theory realm and to talk about the different types of data that exist. Then, with that foundational information put in place, a discussion will ensue about the constant comparison model (Glaser, 1965), the skeletal foundation of classic grounded theory, to see more clearly how bias may be addressed in the research design.

In classic grounded theory, five types of data exist (Glaser, 1998): (a) baseline, (b) interpreted, (c) properline, (d) vague, and (e) conceptual. Each is discussed in turn in this section. Baseline data is the most comprehensive answer that a participant can give to a researcher as an answer to the tour question. All classic grounded theorists would like this kind of data. Interpreted data, as one might imagine, would be an explanation from the participant about how the researcher should view the data. Properline data would be whatever the participant thinks the researcher might want to hear.

Interpreted and properline data are similar to each other in that both have an external influence on them. For interpreted data, the influence is the bias or prejudice from the participant in how the researcher is to view the data, according to the participant. For properline data, the externality is also a biased perspective given by the participant to the researcher. For this type of data, participants state to the researcher what they think the researcher wants to hear.

Vague data would be offered when a participant does not want to present specific descriptions and intentionally to the researcher. Glaser (1965) offered an example

of when vague data would be offered to researchers; when "areas raise problems of secrecy, sensitivity, taboo topics, stigma, and legality" (p. 436) are discussed, intentionally vague data would be offered for safety. Finally, conceptual data may be "in vivo concepts" (Glaser, 1998, p. 138). These concepts are "abstract of time, place, and people" (Glaser, 2012a, p. 10).

Biased and Preconceived Data in Classic Grounded Theory

Based on the aforementioned short discussion of the different types of data in classic grounded theory, it is clear that interpreted and properline data have a biased externality to them. In classic grounded theory, unlike other designs where biased data would be deeply concerning, a researcher would still consider that data as valuable because according to Glaser (2002, 2008), everything and anything can be used as data in classic grounded theory (Chametzky, 2025); the famous dictum is "all is data" (Glaser, 2007, p. 8; Glaser, 2001, p. 145). Additionally, and more directly, according to Glaser (2007)

> That the data may not be reality or the truth, should not disturb the GT researcher. He should keep in mind that, after all, socially structured, vested fictions run the world, accurate descriptions run a poor second. Thus data is what is occurring, it is social produced and it is up to the GT researcher to figure it out, BECAUSE the participants are doing it, talking it, using it, think it, are it, respond to it, offer it and so forth (p. 2).

Second, through the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), as interpreted and properline data are constantly compared with each other, some elements will undoubtedly not fit in. Such an omission is acceptable since the substantive theory being developed is to account only "for most of the variation in the behavior about the problem" (Glaser, 2005, p. 17), not all the data.

The only issue of concern is preconceived data generated from the researcher; this type of data does not belong in classic grounded theory. To explain in detail why preconceived data are bad and have no place in classic grounded theory would exceed the scope of this paper and could easily require an entire book, or two. Yet, an extremely short paragraph explaining how preconception is bad is valuable. Preconception is bad because ideas in classic grounded theory must emerge solely from the data; preconceptions offer a researcher externality outside the rules of classic grounded theory and would cause significant issues in the proposed study. Additionally, by forcing ideas into data rather than having them fit based solely on emergence, data becomes bastardized (Chametzky, 2022, 2024). Data are fragile, and if a researcher manipulates data sufficiently, it will yield to what the researcher wants (Glaser, 1998) and would no longer be grounded.

Constant Comparative Method

To understand further why bias is not a concern in classic grounded theory, a discussion about the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) is needed. First presented in 1965, the constant comparative method (CCM) is the skeletal version of what is now known as classic grounded theory.

Glaser (1965) explained that the objective "of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically than allowed by the second approach [coding followed by analysis] by using the explicit coding and analytic procedures" (p. 437). Thus, the novelty of the CCM was that the commonly-accepted theoretical verification of by the "great men" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 10) theorists in sociology, was not used. Rather, according to Glaser (1965), "generating and plausibly suggesting (not provisionally testing) many properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon" (Glaser, 1965, p. 438).

The CCM consists of four stages: (a) data are compared; (b) data are integrated into categories with their properties; (c) the developed theory is delimited; and (d) the theory is written in its final form (Glaser, 1965). Each stage is discussed in turn.

In the first stage, data are being collected. While data collection is going on, the researcher codes the data and writes memos on those codes. Memoing is vital in this process; Glaser (1965) commented that whenever a researcher has an idea to memo, coding must stop in favor of writing or jotting down that memo so it is not forgotten (Glaser, 1965). As the researcher writes memos, they are compared with each other—a vital part of classic grounded theory data analysis (Elliott & Lazenbatt, 2005)—and new memos and connections are potentially established. During this initial coding and memoing process, Chametzky (2024) explained that the researcher might feel as if they:

> are perhaps making things up or that there is no obvious connection between the two terms. To the first part, I would say that you [the researcher] are not making things up. What you are and will be demonstrating are the 'conscious and preconscious realizations' (Glaser, 2014, p. 3) that are being established. To the second part of the concern regarding no obvious connection between codes, I would offer that you might need to reflect—perhaps in some stream-of-consciousness writing—to see what preconscious connections might be presented consciously. If there are no evident and obvious connections, that is acceptable as that code might be connected to a different code (pp. 37-38).

In the 2nd stage, as the researcher continues to compare the memos with each other, broader categories start to develop. And within each category, properties start to develop. During this stage, codes and memos are still being written and compared with each other, but the "constant comparative units change from comparison of incident with incident to incident with properties of the category which resulted from initial comparison of incidents" (Glaser, 1965, p. 440). Memos form the "mortar" (Glaser, 2014, p. 44) to bring together and solidify the categories of a theory.

In the 3rd stage, the theory is delimited in two important ways. First, as the categories and their properties become more conceptual, the number of concepts needed becomes smaller (Glaser, 1965). Second,

during the memo sorting process, by comparing memos one with another and with the categories of the emergent theory (Elliott & Lazenbatt, 2005), if a memo does not fit in because of "nongrounded ideas occurring from personal biases, personal biases, personal experiences of an idiosyncratic nature, logical conjectures or deductions, received preconceptions and so forth" (Glaser, 1998, p. 182), then the researcher would have one of two options: (a) weed out the memo that does not fit through constantly comparing it with the other memos and categories, or (b) set the memo aside. According to Glaser (1998), bias is corrected through the constant comparing of memos. If there is only one incident of a behavior, then through the constant comparative method, that incident would get weeded out. Additionally, if there are ideas in memos that do not fit in with the theory, those memos must be set aside (Glaser, 2014) and "put in a 'left out' pile as non fit [sic] or non relevant [sic]. Usually this pile is small" (Glaser, 2014, p. 85). During this memo sorting process, by sidelining these biased or non-relevant memos, the emergent theory remains grounded and well-focused instead of overloaded (Glaser, 2014).

The idea of delimitation, then, is not merely a researcher-based omission with little more than a stray paragraph or so provided, as seen in some doctoral dissertations. Rather, it has a more active role in the constant comparative method and classic grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically, "the universe of data that the constant comparative method uses is based on the reduction of the theory and the delimitation and saturation of categories" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 112).

On the other hand, perhaps bias intentionally exists in a study because that idea is a core component in the memos. In this case, it is to be woven "into the constant comparative analysis" (Glaser, 2012b, p. 30) and would be treated no differently than any other concept used in classic grounded theory.

With the theoretical saturation present in the categories and properties of the theory, the researcher enters the 4th stage of the CCM. In this stage, the sorted and organized memos become the theory that the researcher can now present.

Conclusion

Intentional or unintentional bias, whether derived from undesired or misinterpreted information, is managed in classic grounded theory in a productive (Deady, 2011) manner through the constant comparison method. In classic grounded theory, bias is therefore not merely something to be avoided but understood and dealt with appropriately. On the other hand, the researcher-focused externality of bias, preconception, does not belong in classic grounded theory because that perspective would very possibly result in the manipulation of data and destruction of the emergent theory. In this short paper, a more nuanced discussion of bias, preconception, and, by extension, delimitation, in the constant comparative method and classic grounded theory will hopefully help less-experienced researchers understand and, in turn, manage the terms more carefully and productively (Deady, 2011).

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