



## Theoretical Codes

Barry Chametzky<sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Editor, Grounded Theory Review

<sup>b</sup> Fellow, Grounded Theory Institute

\* Corresponding author: [barry@bluevine.net](mailto:barry@bluevine.net)

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### Abstract

In some Glaserian classic grounded theories, authors have worked hard to develop a multivariate theory but have neglected an important element: theoretical codes. These codes are what can make a theory truly special and unified. Yet, perhaps, people do not fully understand what they are and how to use them. In this short article, the author explains the value that theoretical codes have on a theory and why they are needed.

*Keywords:* Glaserian classic grounded theory, theoretical codes, theoretical unification

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In classic grounded theory, broadly speaking, we researchers develop codes from the raw data, write memos based on the codes, and sorts the memos which will eventually develop into the emergent theory. To have a multivariate theory, three or so substantive categories related to the core category (or variable) are needed to help explain how participants deal with a given main concern (Glaser, 1998). At this point in the research process, though the theory may seem complete, it is not. What is needed is an abstract way of how these categories may relate to one another (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2013). Theoretical codes accomplish that important task. While these codes are not required in a classic grounded theory study (Glaser, 2005), they are extremely valuable and “conceptualize how the substantive codes of a research may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72; Glaser, 2005, p. 2).

These codes form the “glue that connects the theories” (Chametzky, 2025, p. 114). With such codes, the substantive theory would more cohesive, “more relevant and more enhanced” (Glaser, 2005, p. 14) than it would otherwise.

Theoretical coding is not easy (Glaser, 2005) and, like substantive codes, must not be preconceived (Glaser, 1998); they are not to be forced into the data simply because they do “not come easily” (Glaser, 2005, p. 1) to many researchers. Scholars must continue “staying open” (Glaser, 2005, p. 1) to the data even at this final stage in the development of the theory and are admonished from resorting to “pet theoretical codes” (Glaser, 2005, p. 105). For novice researchers, I would offer this bit of advice: You’ve worked hard on learning classic grounded theory and you’ve developed a multivariate theory. Take a bit of extra time to develop the needed theoretical codes to make your theory truly shine.



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