



## Confusion in Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory

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### Abstract

Most novice researchers want to conduct their research correctly and accurately; they may even want to plan things out clearly. Those things are not bad desires at all. However, in Glaserian classic grounded theory, confusion is needed, tolerated, expected, and mandatory because if a researcher plans out certain elements ahead of time, then the tenets of the design will be violated. The “trick” in this case is to expect confusion and welcome it because confusion offers a researcher some important opportunities that must be understood.

*Keywords:* Confusion, Glaserian classic grounded theory

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When doing qualitative research, many researchers will generally (but not exclusively) have a semi-structured interview (or focus group) protocol with predetermined questions for participants to answer. After each session, the scholar will then meticulously transcribe the conversation. While these elements may be requirements for many qualitative designs, they also give a sense of security to novice researchers who want to do things correctly—especially if they are working on a thesis or dissertation. With these elements, there are easy, well-documented, and generally straightforward procedures that these scholars will follow. And with this straightforwardness comes a sense of comfort, stability, and understanding because they can see their progress in the form of repeated ideas that will become themes or prominent topics in their research.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, however, there are no semi-structured interview protocols; meticulous, word-for-word transcripts are not created and then analyzed. Additionally, a theory will not be known until much later in the analysis stage, to the great dismay of some novice researchers. Based on their graduate classes, some of these scholars are not accustomed to not having a (reasonably) straightforward and clear path as data are analyzed. In short, they are unaccustomed to being confused and have difficulty tolerating confusion (Glaser, 2001). To them, confusion about data collection, the analysis procedures, and not knowing what their theory is, are quite frightening (Glaser, 1998).

But there is another way to look at this confusion—a way that may be perhaps more

tolerable to less-experienced researchers. This perspective requires a different point of view, which necessitates a brief discussion about the one question that is asked in a Glaserian classic grounded theory study: a tour question.

The notion of “tour questions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 137) is not exclusive to classic grounded theory. They come from ethnography (Spradley, 1979) and consist of numerous different types (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Spradley, 1979) of which classic grounded theory uses a typical grand tour question like: could you tell me about . . . ? Or, could you describe . . . (Spradley, 1979)? Such a question is intentionally vague to allow the participant to talk in an open-ended manner about whatever is important to them. In classic grounded theory terms, the question “instills a spill” (Glaser, 2009, p. 22) of valued and valuable information. But the question does more than allow a participant to talk about whatever is of concern; the question allows the researcher to explore the topic with a sense of wonderment. I will explain.

Just before a scholar starts collecting data, because (obviously) the theory is not yet known, and the researcher does not know what will be discussed during data collection, there is a need to have an open mind about what will be discovered. In Zen Buddhism, this term is called *shoshin*—“beginner’s mind” (Zhang & Shi, 2025, p. 32). With this innocent perspective, a researcher is not able to preconceive and not inadvertently pollute, destroy, or inadvertently manipulate the data (Chametzky, 2022, 2024) with extraneous information. A “beginner’s mind” (Zhang &

Shi, 2025, p. 32) is one way to accept what is yet unknown and tolerate confusion in Glaserian classic grounded theory. Only when researchers are able to look at the data with as pure a mindset as possible (Simmons, 2011) can they begin to understand the data.

So, however anxiety-producing it may be, confusion is a good thing in Glaserian classic grounded theory. Only through the acceptance of this uncertainty—Glaser (2005) used the term "epistemological anarchy" (p. 43)—can researchers engage actively in the required preconscious work

(Glaser, 2008) needed for theory development. Glaser (2010) was explicit when he stated that a researcher must “tolerate some confusion, and an ability to tolerate confusion’s attendant regression” (p. 4) because there are many times during the development of a theory that a researcher will and must be uncertain and confused. Do not shy away from these feelings because they are beneficial and absolutely encouraged; they are “a powerful learning tool” (Glaser, 1998, p. 100).

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