

Having a Great Number of Codes in Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory

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Abstract

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, there is an expectation that a researcher will have a great number of codes (and memos) during a study as data are analyzed. While having many descriptive ideas may be acceptable in other designs, during open coding, a researcher needs to be mindful of the types of codes that are used. Codes in Glaserian classic grounded theory need to be conceptual rather than descriptive, which allows the researcher to reduce the potentially excessive number of codes. In this methodological memo, the author will discuss, explain, and offer examples of descriptive versus conceptual coding.

Keywords: coding, conceptualization, data management, description, Glaserian classic grounded theory

In qualitative designs (like case study, basic qualitative, or phenomenology), data collection can be done by interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and so on. Data would generally be analyzed by reading the meticulously-reproduced transcripts, finding recurring and thus important ideas to become the themes, using quotes or descriptive codes to support the themes, and then discussing each theme in turn. With some qualitative designs, should a researcher decide on a specific analytic model like data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2019) or qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), then coding of the data will be required as part of the analysis process. Of course, for the sake of time, space, and scope of this methodological note, I am intentionally oversimplifying things here.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, things are somewhat different. Researchers using this design will need to code the data conceptually rather than descriptively. In this methodological memo, I will briefly discuss what descriptive and conceptual coding look like, as this distinction is an area that some less experienced researchers may not fully understand. To remain true to the tenets of Glaserian grounded theory, though, since memos are extremely individual (Glaser, 2013a, 2013b) and cannot be forced into a specific, predetermined format (Glaser, 2013a, 2013b), they will not be discussed here. First, a discussion of descriptive coding will occur followed by a discussion of conceptual coding.

To make things easier for the reader, there is value in imagining that an interview was done and notes were taken in response to

a grand tour question of “What is it like to take this class?” From this fictitious interview, the following extract of fictitious data will be used:

I find the class so difficult because the content is something I’ve never encountered before. I’ve been a student for several years and all the other courses were consistent and easy. In this class, there are too many announcements and the course materials are so confusing. There is so much inconsistency and I don’t know what to do.

I would like share a personal anecdote as a preamble to discussing descriptive coding. I recall my first classic grounded theory study for my dissertation. I knew from my readings of Glaser that there would be many codes from the line-by-line readings I would have to do. Initially, all data are coded (hence the term *open coding*) because, following the tenet of classic grounded theory of not preconceiving, one does not initially know what would be valuable later on. As a doctoral candidate starting out with classic grounded theory, I did not realize that I would have a very high number of codes. At that point in my research, I was weighed down with codes because they were descriptive. And, tangentially, because I had so many descriptive codes, my collection of memos became as long as one of my dissertation chapters. The feeling of being weighed down because of the excessive number of codes will be made clearer after looking at Table 1. The data shown in Table 1 are the aforementioned example of fictitious data. On the left-side is the text (data) and on

the right-hand side, corresponding to the line-by-line presentation of the data, are the descriptive codes.

See Appendix, Table 1 – *Descriptive Codes*

At this point, if I were doing a Glaserian classic grounded theory study, I would write a memo on each code and then compare codes with each other using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). If the reader considers that the data in the aforementioned table is only four sentences from what may very well be a 30-minute interview, then it would be easy to understand, in the earlier anecdote, how one could get rather overwhelmed very quickly. I will offer perhaps a clearer and simpler example of descriptive coding.

In 2025, I wrote a paper on description and classic grounded theory. In this paper, I wrote about a sentence that I will use again here as an example: “I experienced a high degree of anxiety when I was required to talk with a large audience during my graduate course involving public speaking last year” (Chametzky, 2025, p. 2). If I were to code this sentence, I might have coded it as “high degree of anxiety due to public speaking” (Chametzky, 2025, p. 2). This code is descriptive and tied to a specific situation and time. Glaser (2001) termed this “stale dated” (p. 15).

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, codes must not be tied to a specific environment, time period, or group of people (Glaser, 2001, 2013a). While descriptions are not a bad thing (Glaser, 2002), they have a stronghold on people and “run the world” (Glaser, 2002, p. 24). For that reason, shifting to conceptualization may be challenging for

some novice learners. Researchers using Glaserian classic grounded theory need to be mindful of their codes and not slip into description. With this point, attention will now be turned to conceptualized codes.

If the same data from Table 1 were used, but now with conceptual codes offered, then the result would be what is shown in Table 2.

See Appendix, Table 2 – *Conceptual Codes*

The reader is to notice two things. First, from purely a quantitative perspective, there are fewer codes when compared with the descriptive codes presented in Table 1. The second point to realize is that these conceptualized codes elevate the concepts so that they are not connected to a specific person, time, and location (Glaser, 2007). For the simpler second example, a more conceptualized code might be *feeling anxious* or maybe *having anxiety* (Chametzky, 2025). Here is where Glaserian classic grounded theory differs from other research designs because with conceptual codes, the proverbial tie to the specific person, time, and location (Glaser, 2007) is broken. Glaser (1998) described this as “conceptual generality [rather than] unit generality” (p. 125).

In summary, when a researcher uses Glaserian classic grounded theory, they are strongly advised to fight the (potentially very strong) temptation of coding descriptively. If they discover that they are feeling overwhelmed and weighed down with too many codes, then it is a sure-sign that descriptive coding was done. Instead, they must code conceptually to elevate the ideas to be beyond a specific person, time, and

location (Glaser, 2007). That task requires practice and conscious effort.

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Appendix

Table 1

Descriptive Codes

Data	Descriptive Codes
I find the class so difficult because the content is something I've never encountered before.	A difficult class Unknown content experienced
I've been a student for several years and all the other courses were consistent and easy.	Other courses are easy
In this class, there are too many announcements and the course materials are so confusing.	Too many class announcements Confusing course materials
There is so much inconsistency and I don't know what to do.	Course Inconsistency Confusing

Table 2

Conceptual Codes

Data	Conceptual Codes
I find the class so difficult because the content is something I've never encountered before.	Being inexperienced
I've been a student for several years and all the other courses were consistent and easy.	Educational shifting
In this class, there are too many announcements and the course materials are so confusing.	Feeling overwhelmed
There is inconsistency and I don't know what to do.	Feeling confused

Disclosures

Author Contributions: The author is the sole contributor of this article and the content therein.

Conflict of Interest: The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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