

Managing Preconception in Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory: A Methodological Note for Novice Researchers

Kara L. Vander Linden^{a,b, c*}

^a Glaser Center for Grounded Theory, Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies, USA

^b Department of Research, Saybrook University

^c Clinical Psychology, Antioch University

* Corresponding author: kvanderlinden@mentoringresearchers.org, dr.k.l.vanderlinden@gmail.com

Abstract

Preconception is a central methodological concern in Glaserian classic grounded theory (GCGT), yet it is often misunderstood by novice researchers trained in more structured research traditions. This article (a) defines preconceptions within GCGT, (b) identifies common sources through which preconceptions enter the research process, and (c) provides practical guidance on how researchers can manage these influences to support the emergence of theory from data. Practical strategies for achieving this stance are discussed. The article concludes by positioning the management of preconceptions as a critical skill for novice researchers seeking to develop conceptually robust, empirically grounded theory.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, preconception, emergence, suspending preconceptions, managing preconceptions, novice researchers



One defining feature of Glaserian classic grounded theory (GCGT) is its emphasis on minimizing the influence of preconceptions during the research process. For novice researchers, this principle is often difficult to interpret, particularly because it appears to contradict the conventions of more structured research approaches. The purpose of this article is to clarify the concept of preconception in GCGT and to explain its implications for novice researchers. Specifically, the article aims to (a) define preconceptions within GCGT, (b) identify common sources through which preconceptions enter the research process, and (c) provide practical guidance on how researchers can manage these influences to support the emergence of theory from data. In doing so, the article seeks to help novice researchers develop an appropriate analytic stance aligned with the methodological principles of GCGT.

Defining Preconception

In GCGT, preconceptions are ideas, expectations, or assumptions about the study that the researcher brings in from sources other than the data. Preconceptions can refer to the beliefs, prior knowledge, theoretical commitments, or interpretive frameworks that researchers bring to a study (Glaser, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These influences often stem from prior training, disciplinary norms, personal experiences, and engagement with existing literature (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2013). The language commonly used in GCGT, specifically the dictum of “no preconception” (Glaser, 2012, p. 1) and the expectation that researchers *suspend preconceptions*, has also been widely debated

and, at times, misunderstood. To provide greater clarity, this article reframes the suspension of preconceptions as an active process of *managing preconceptions* in practice, while maintaining methodological fidelity to GCGT. This process involves becoming aware of one’s preconceptions about the topic area, deliberately looking for their potential influence at all stages of the research process and trying to limit that influence while working through the stages of a GCGT study.

In GCGT, the central concern is not the presence of preconceptions per se, but their potential to interfere with the emergence of theory from data. Glaser (1978, 1998, 2012, 2013) repeatedly cautioned that when researchers are guided by what they expect to find, rather than what is actually present in the data (Glaser, 1978), they risk constraining analytic discovery and limiting conceptual development.

The goal of GCGT is to generate a theory grounded in data that accounts for patterns of behavior in ways that are relevant, workable, and meaningful (Glaser, 1978). This process depends on the researcher’s ability to remain open to emergent patterns (Glaser 1978, 2013). When preconceptions shape the analytic process, the result is often a shift from discovery to confirmation, thereby reducing the explanatory power of the resulting theory. In this sense, the dictum to suspend preconceptions is best understood as a methodological safeguard designed to protect the process of emergence (Glaser, 1998).

At the same time, it is neither feasible nor desirable for researchers to eliminate



their prior knowledge. For this reason, the notion of suspending preconceptions may be more productively interpreted as an ongoing process of managing preconceptions. Managing preconceptions involves maintaining awareness of one's assumptions, beliefs, and prior knowledge while deliberately trying to limit their influence on data collection, coding, and theoretical development.

Sources of Preconceptions

Multiple sources of preconception have been identified in the grounded theory (GT) literature (Glaser, 1978, 2013; Holton & Walsh, 2017; Simmons, 2022). One source is the assumption that GT is exclusively a qualitative methodology (Holton & Walsh, 2017). In GCGT, however, the principle that "all is data" (Glaser, 2001, p. 145) expands the range of usable data to include both qualitative and quantitative data. Restricting data sources based on methodological assumptions can unnecessarily limit analytic possibilities.

Another source of preconception is the use of preconceived theoretical or conceptual frameworks (Glaser, 2013, 2014a). When researchers enter a study with a commitment to a particular theory, they are more likely to interpret data in ways that confirm that framework, thereby constraining the emergence of new categories (Glaser, 1998). Similarly, conducting an extensive preliminary literature review can shape expectations about what is important and meaningful. For this reason, GCGT recommends delaying engagement with the literature until a core category begins to emerge, at which point the literature can be

used more strategically as an additional source of data (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 2013).

Preconceptions may also arise from prior methodological training (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Many researchers are accustomed to beginning studies with clearly defined research problems and questions, predetermined sampling strategies, and structured data collection instruments (Glaser, 1998, 2011). While appropriate in other research traditions, these practices can limit the openness required in GCGT and lead to descriptive findings rather than conceptual theory. In addition, deference to authority, whether in the form of influential scholars, established theories, or widely accepted concepts from one's discipline or elsewhere, can further constrain analytic openness by discouraging critical engagement with assumptions (Simmons, 2022).

Another challenge arises when researchers have insufficient data, which may lead them to fill *conceptual gaps* within the emerging theory with speculation rather than grounded evidence (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Glaser (1998) described this process as "logical drift" (p. 97), in which preconceptions begin to shape the analysis in the absence of sufficient data. Thus, it is important to maintain analytic discipline by allowing categories to develop only as they are supported by ongoing data collection and analysis.

According to the GCGT no preconception dictum, researchers should avoid predefining a research problem, the participants' main concerns, relevant concepts, and the theoretical code used to integrate the theory (Glaser, 1998, 2011,

2012). These elements should emerge through data analysis. When understood through the lens of managing preconceptions, this dictum does not require researchers to disregard what they know, but rather to hold it in abeyance so that it does not prematurely structure the analysis.

Managing Preconceptions

In practice, managing preconceptions involves adopting an analytic stance of openness. Researchers begin with a general area of interest rather than a narrowly defined problem and begin data collection without imposing rigid structures (Glaser, 1978, 2013; Simmons, 2022). Early data collection is often guided by broad, open-ended questions that allow participants to shape the direction of inquiry (Simmons, 2022). As data are collected, the researcher engages in constant comparative analysis, allowing codes and categories to emerge inductively. Engagement with literature is intentionally delayed until sufficient conceptual development has occurred, ensuring that existing knowledge does not prematurely guide or constrain the analytic process (Glaser, 1978).

Managing preconceptions reflects a broader reorientation in how research is conceptualized. While many methodologies prioritize testing existing theories, GCGT is focused on generating theories grounded in data. Using GCGT to generate theories grounded in data requires a willingness to tolerate uncertainty and to prioritize emergence over confirmation (Glaser, 2013). For novice researchers, developing the capacity to manage preconceptions is an ongoing process that involves both

methodological discipline and awareness.

Managing preconceptions in GCGT begins with conscious awareness but extends beyond awareness through the systematic use of methodological procedures that limit their influence on the research process. One strategy for developing this awareness is for researchers to document what they know and believe about the topic area, including any relevant personal or professional experience (Glaser, 1998). Two ways researchers can document their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences are through self-interviews and journaling (Glaser, 2012). Documenting knowledge, beliefs, and experiences helps bring preconceptions into conscious awareness, which is a necessary first step in managing their influence.

One may ask how this differs from reflexivity in qualitative research. The purpose of reflexivity in many qualitative traditions is to make the researcher's role in knowledge production explicit and analytically useful (Creswell, 2013). In contrast, documenting one's knowledge, beliefs, and experiences in GCGT is intended to create awareness of possible preconceptions, enabling their influence to be managed while the researcher remains "open to the emergent" (Glaser, 2013, p. 4) concepts in the data. Although GCGT allows the researcher's experience within the topic area to be included (Glaser, 2014b), it is treated as just another data source, to be subjected to constant comparison and not privileged above any other data in the study.

Beyond awareness, GCGT researchers rely on methodological procedures to manage preconceptions (Glaser,



1998, 2012). Constant comparison requires that all analytic ideas, regardless of their source, earn their place in the emerging theory through repeated comparison with incident-based data. Open coding privileges emergence over forcing by generating conceptual codes from the data rather than applying pre-existing concepts. Theoretical sampling is guided by the evolving analysis rather than prior expectations, directing data collection toward saturation of emerging categories. Memoing serves as an analytic interrogation of ideas, including those derived from the researcher's experience, which must be treated as provisional and continually checked against the data. Delaying engagement with literature further reduces the risk of importing external concepts prematurely.

Another strategy for managing preconceptions is working with other researchers who are familiar with GCGT, especially those from different disciplines. Different researchers often notice different concepts in the same data because they bring different backgrounds and assumptions to the analysis. Talking through the data and analysis with other GCGT researchers can help make these assumptions more visible, especially the ones the researcher may not notice themselves. Working with other researchers to become more aware of assumptions does not replace analysis or change the role of the data. Instead, it helps the researcher return more closely to the data and continue comparing incidents rather than relying on unexamined assumptions.

Together, these strategies and methodological procedures help the

researcher manage the influence of preconceptions without requiring their elimination. Managing the influence of preconceptions helps ensure that categories are grounded in the data and that the resulting theory reflects patterns of behavior rather than prior assumptions.

Ultimately, integrating suspending and managing preconceptions provides a more precise and defensible understanding of this core GCGT principle. Suspension names the methodological intent: to prevent preconceptions from shaping the analysis, while management describes the practical, ongoing work required to achieve that intent. By adopting this integrated perspective, novice researchers can better navigate the challenge of maintaining analytic openness while navigating the realities of Glaserian classic grounded theory methodology.



References

- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *The basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence vs. forcing*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussions*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2001). *The grounded theory perspective: Conceptualization contrasted with description*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2011). *Getting out of the data: Grounded theory conceptualization*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2012). No preconception: The dictum. *Grounded Theory Review*, 11(2), 3–8.
<https://groundedtheoryreview.org/index.php/gtr/article/view/158>
- Glaser, B. G. (2013). *No preconceptions: The grounded theory dictum*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2014a). *Applying grounded theory: A neglected option*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2014b). *Choosing classic grounded theory*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Sociology Press.
- Holton, J. A., & Walsh, I. (2017). *Classic grounded theory: Applications with qualitative and quantitative data*. SAGE Publications.
- Simmons, O. E. (2022). *Experiencing grounded theory: A comprehensive guide to learning, doing, mentoring, teaching, and applying grounded theory*. BrownWalker Press.

Disclosures

Author Contributions: The author is the sole contributor of this document 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.

© 2026, Kara L. Vander Linden

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the Grounded Theory Review (GTR), the editor(s) and editorial board, and/or the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies (RTM) and RTM board. The GTR, editor(s) and editorial board, and RTM and RTM board disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.