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Themes Are Not Theory: Understanding Theory Development in Grounded Theory

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Abstract

Grounded theory studies increasingly report themes as their principal findings, despite claiming a grounded theory methodology. This article clarifies why themes and theory are not interchangeable analytic outcomes. Drawing on Glaserian classic grounded theory (GCGT), it distinguishes thematic analysis, which develops patterns of shared meaning through coding and interpretation, from the constant comparative method of analysis, which generates an integrated theory through coding, comparison, and conceptualization. The article traces how conceptualization, category development, and theoretical coding combine to produce a theory that explains a main concern in a substantive area, in contrast to the descriptive or interpretive accounts produced by thematic analysis. It offers researchers practical questions for evaluating whether their analysis is developing themes or generating theory. The distinction matters because reporting themes when a study claims a grounded theory methodology signals a mismatch between stated method and analytic outcome, and it supports more accurate and methodologically consistent reporting of grounded theory research.

Keywords: grounded theory, thematic analysis, constant comparative method of analysis, coding, theory, themes

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Problem Identification

The purpose of grounded theory is to develop a theory grounded in data (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, the results of grounded theory studies are often incorrectly presented as themes. This demonstrates confusion among researchers on the difference between thematic analysis and the constant comparative method of analysis. This confusion can be particularly problematic when a study identifies grounded theory as its methodology but reports themes as the primary or final analytic outcome.

Both thematic analysis and the constant comparative method of analysis often involve working systematically with qualitative data by coding data, comparing segments of data, and consolidating analytic insights into higher-order products. However, the similarity in these analytic activities can obscure a fundamental difference: themes and theory are different kinds of analytic outcomes.

Themes are the analytic product of thematic analysis. Themes represent patterns of shared meaning that the researcher has developed in relation to the research topic and dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). In reflexive thematic analysis, for example, themes are actively developed through the researcher's engagement with the data rather than simply discovered as frequently occurring topics(Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The resulting themes can provide a rich and interpretive account of a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

Grounded theory has a different methodological purpose and uses a different form of analysis to reach that outcome. The intended outcome of grounded theory is theory, and the constant comparative method of analysis is the form of analysis used to produce theory. Consequently, reporting themes does not align with the purpose or method of analysis used in grounded theory.

The purpose of this article is not to suggest that themes are an earlier or less-developed form of grounded theory. Rather, the purpose is to demonstrate that themes and theory represent different analytic products arising from different forms of analysis.

The issue, therefore, is not whether themes are useful or whether thematic analysis can produce rigorous qualitative research. It can. The issue is whether a study claiming to have used the grounded theory methodology has used the constant comparative method of analysis and produced its intended theoretical outcome.

Conceptual Clarification

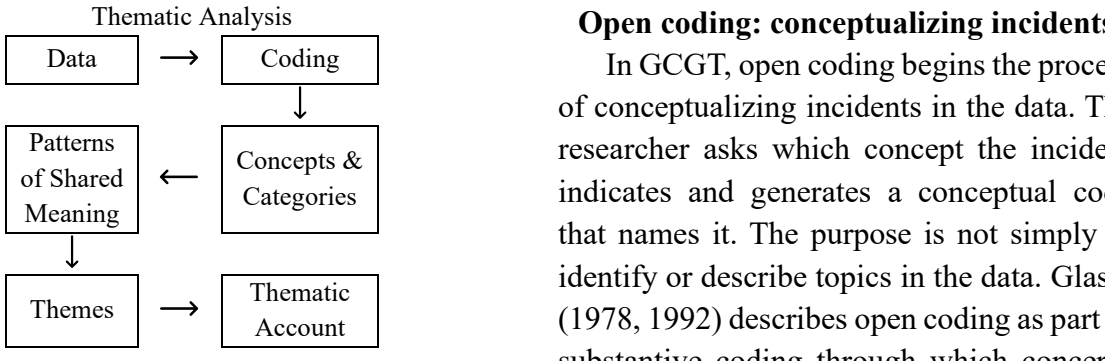
Themes and theory are different analytic products. Thematic analysis organizes and interprets patterns of meaning in a dataset. A researcher may code data, examine relationships among codes, develop themes, and construct an interpretive account of those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme can be conceptually rich and highly interpretive.

In contrast, grounded theory is concerned with generating theory using the constant comparative method of analysis. The constant comparative method of analysis is a defining element of grounded theory. The constant comparative method of analysis involves systematically comparing incidents and emerging concepts throughout the

research process (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through comparison, the researcher develops concepts and categories, identifies their properties and dimensions, determines their theoretical relevance, and discovers relationships that contribute to an integrated theory (Glaser, 1978). Analysis and data collection inform one another as theoretical sampling and emerging conceptualization develop (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparative analysis is not a process of identifying themes and then making those themes increasingly abstract. Themes are neither a stage in grounded theory analysis nor an intermediate step on the way to theory.

To clarify this distinction, this article uses Glaserian classic grounded theory (GCGT) to illustrate the analytic processes through which a grounded theory is developed. The distinction between thematic analysis and how the constant comparative method of analysis is used in GCGT can be represented simply:

Figure 1: *Comparison of Thematic Analysis and Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory*



Note. Panel A depicts the process of thematic analysis, in which coding leads to patterns of shared meaning, themes, and a thematic account. Panel B depicts the process of Glaserian classic grounded theory (GCGT), in which the constant comparative method of analysis (open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding) leads to theoretical integration and the generation of theory. GCGT = Glaserian classic grounded theory.

These representations are not intended to imply that GCGT proceeds through rigid, sequential stages. Its analytic processes are iterative and interconnected. The representations illustrate instead that the two approaches have different analytic purposes and products. Delving deeper into the data analysis in GCGT will make this distinction more apparent.

Open coding: conceptualizing incidents

In GCGT, open coding begins the process of conceptualizing incidents in the data. The researcher asks which concept the incident indicates and generates a conceptual code that names it. The purpose is not simply to identify or describe topics in the data. Glaser (1978, 1992) describes open coding as part of substantive coding through which concepts are generated from the data. The researcher remains open to what emerges rather than

organizing the data by topic or theme.

For example, a participant might describe repeatedly changing a research plan because a supervisor, committee member, or institutional requirement introduces a new expectation. A descriptive code might be "changing research plans." A grounded theorist instead remains open to what the participant may be doing conceptually: perhaps *accommodating expectations, managing competing demands, protecting progress*, or another concept that emerges through comparison.

The point is not to select the "best" label immediately. The researcher compares incidents and develops concepts that have relevance across incidents. Glaser's discussion of theoretical sensitivity emphasizes this movement toward conceptualization rather than forcing data into preconceived categories (Glaser, 1978).

Constant comparative method of analysis: Developing concepts and categories

The constant comparative method of analysis is not a single step that occurs after coding; it is integral to the whole analytic process from initial open coding through sorting and writing up the theory (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher continually compares incidents to incidents, incidents to concepts, concepts to concepts, and eventually categories to categories (Glaser, 1978). These comparisons help reveal similarities and differences and contribute to the development of properties and dimensions of the concepts. As concepts develop, some become sufficiently significant and related to other concepts to develop into categories. Categories, therefore, do not result simply from grouping similar codes under a broader heading. Their development depends upon conceptualization and constant comparison.

This is a critical distinction between a category in grounded theory and a theme in thematic analysis. A theme organizes a pattern of shared meaning. A grounded theory category is developed conceptually and has theoretical relevance within the emerging theory. Thus, it is critical to understand that a category is not a theme with a different name, and a theme is not a category at a lower level of abstraction.

Selective coding: Focusing on theoretical development

As a grounded theory develops, a core category emerges that accounts for a central pattern of behavior in the substantive area. Selective coding then focuses on developing the core category and the concepts and categories related to it (Glaser, 1978, 1992). Selective coding is not about selecting the most important or prominent codes or themes; rather, it is part of the ongoing analytic process through which the emerging theory becomes focused. The researcher continues comparing incidents and concepts while determining what is relevant to the emerging theory. Categories are developed in relation to the core category, and theoretical sampling can be used to obtain data needed to develop emerging concepts and theory (Glaser, 1967; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The objective remains theoretical development rather than thematic organization.

Theoretical coding: Conceptualizing relationships

Theoretical coding is particularly

important for understanding why grounded theory cannot be equated with a collection of themes or categories. Developing individual categories does not, by itself, produce a theory. Theory requires integration of concepts and categories through their theoretical relationships (Glaser, 1978, 1998). This is often one of the most challenging steps in the GCGT process, especially for novice researchers. When skipped, the study's outcome is often presented as themes or a list of conceptual categories rather than an integrated theory.

In GCGT, theoretical coding provides a means of conceptualizing relationships among categories. Rather than simply presenting several categories side by side, the researcher seeks to understand how they relate within the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 2005). For example, identifying categories concerning how people respond to uncertainty, manage expectations, and maintain progress would not, by itself, constitute a theory. Theoretical analysis asks how these categories relate and what patterns of behavior they collectively explain. The resulting theory, therefore, provides an integrated conceptual account rather than a list of concepts or themes.

Practice Translation

For grounded theorists, especially novice grounded theorists, the most useful question is not simply, "Have I coded my data?" It is: "What is my analysis producing?" If the analysis produces statements such as:

- "Participants frequently discussed stress."
- "A major theme was lack of support."
- "Participants experienced challenges balancing competing demands."
- "The five themes describe participants' experiences."

The researcher may have developed a thematic account that focuses more on what the participants talked about. If the researcher focused on the patterns of meaning that characterize participants' accounts, the researcher may be developing an interpretive thematic account. These findings can be valuable and meaningful, but they do not align with the outcome of a grounded theory study.

In contrast, grounded theorists focus on developing a theory that identifies the main concern of the people within the substantive area and explains the patterns of behavior they use to address that concern. The theory is produced through an analytic progression where:

- incidents were conceptualized through open coding;
- concepts were developed through constant comparison;
- concepts were developed into categories with relevant properties and dimensions;
- selective coding focused analysis on theoretically relevant categories;
- theoretical coding examined relationships among categories;
- the categories were integrated into an emerging theory that explains what is happening in the substantive area.

Novice researchers can therefore ask several questions while reviewing their analysis:

1. Am I labeling a topic, or am I conceptualizing an incident?
2. What does this code tell me about what is happening?

3. How does this concept compare with other incidents?
4. What properties and dimensions of the emerging category are becoming apparent?
5. Why is this category theoretically relevant?
6. How does this category relate to other categories?
7. Does the emerging relationship help explain the main concern or process?

These questions help prevent a common methodological drift whereby the researcher begins with grounded theory and gradually converts the analysis into thematic categorization.

Conclusion

The issue is not that themes are inappropriate or inferior. If a researcher's purpose is to develop an interpretive account of patterned meaning, thematic analysis may be an appropriate methodological choice. The problem arises when a researcher claims to be conducting grounded theory but produces themes or a list of concepts rather than an integrated theory.

Themes and grounded theory are different analytic products generated through different forms of analysis. A thematic analysis can produce a rigorous, nuanced, and interpretive account of patterns of shared meaning. That is an appropriate outcome when thematic analysis is the chosen methodology.

Grounded theory has a different methodological purpose. Its intended outcome is theory, and its form of analysis is the constant comparative method of analysis. In GCGT, open coding supports conceptualization of incidents; constant comparison develops concepts and categories; selective coding focuses the emerging theoretical development around the core category; and theoretical coding conceptualizes relationships among categories. Through these interconnected processes, the researcher develops and integrates a theory grounded in the data.

The distinction is therefore more than a matter of terminology. Themes do not become categories, categories do not automatically become theory, and increasing abstraction does not by itself constitute theoretical development. Theory requires conceptual integration and theoretically relevant relationships among categories. Researchers claiming grounded theory should consequently evaluate their analytic work by asking whether they have generated an integrated theory, not whether they have identified compelling themes.

For the novice classic grounded theorist, the practical takeaway is straightforward: do not mistake the identification and consolidation of themes for the development of grounded theory. Developing theory requires continued conceptualization, constant comparison, category development, and theoretical integration. A collection of themes may tell us what is meaningful in a dataset; an integrated grounded theory seeks to explain a pattern of behavior that addresses a main concern emerging from the data. Themes organize patterns of meaning. The constant comparative method of analysis generates grounded theory.

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