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Classic Grounded Theory: Common Misunderstandings and Confusions

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Abstract

Grounded Theory continues to be the most widely used methodology in qualitative research. Although it is based on what people do naturally (to act habitually and a tendency to theorise), it can be confusing for those new to the methodology, particularly Classic Grounded Theory. This is usually but not limited to the use of the literature, coding, theoretical sampling, the commonly held view by those using constructivist GT that CGT is objective in nature and theoretical coding.

Keywords: Classic Grounded Theory; Constructivist Grounded Theory; coding, literature review; theoretical sampling; objectivist grounded theory; theoretical coding.

In this short paper, some of the confusions and difficulties experienced by researchers new to classic (Glaserian) grounded theory will be briefly discussed and possible solutions recommended. These issues come out of the numerous GT workshops, discussions and seminars I have attended and participated in over the years. They are by no means the only confusions and difficulties experienced but are brought up time and again. The discussion is necessarily limited but will be the subject of a longer article in a future edition of the GT Journal. The difficulties experienced can have a very demoralising effect on those new to CGT and lead to avoidable difficulties in how the methodology is applied. At its core, it is a

simple methodology based on the idea that people engage in habitualised behaviour and have a natural tendency to theorise. Nonetheless it can be confusing and difficult in practice because it involves rethinking what research is. In methodology classes, it is usual to differentiate between quantitative and qualitative research, without considering that CGT is a general methodology that can be used with any data or philosophical perspective. Common difficulties that those new to CGT experience are centred around line-by-line coding, knowledge of the substantive area, theoretical sampling, justification for using other variants of GT and theoretical coding. These will be discussed in turn.

Line-by-line coding

In classic grounded theory (CGT) a very common issue is to misinterpret what Glaser means by line-by-line coding. It does not mean code each line. This way of coding originally applies to the coding of fieldnotes, at a time when tape recording was rare. It was not designed to apply to data generated through long interviews that are digitally recorded and transcribed. For one thing, there may be a lot of extraneous data generated that may not need to be coded. Code by starting to read the data line by line and comparing the unit of analysis, the incident, all the time looking for patterns (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1998). The incident is found in a phrase, a sentence or two, or even in a paragraph (Glaser, 1998). It is important to identify incidents in the data that indicate the concept, using one or two words per code (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Coding line by line may lead to what Glaser (1998) termed incident tripping, where each incident is coded rather than looking for patterns of behaviour. In one Troubleshooting Seminar, there was a student who generated over 600 codes in three interviews. Another student generated over 900 codes from one interview. This is clearly unsus-

tainable and overwhelming. Both were coding incidents rather than looking for patterns in the data.

Codes are not interpretations of the data but rather names that represent indicators in the data (Simmons, 2022); it is based on a pattern of behaviour that emerges incident after incident and not just based on one incident (Glaser, 1998). Unless an incident is part of a pattern of behaviour then there is no need to code it (Simmons, 2022). For those new to CGT, it is very common to over-code at the beginning of a study. However, as researchers begin to understand CGT more and more, and as conceptualisation develops, many initial codes merge. This happens as the conceptual level increases, and there is a realisation that what seemed like different behaviours are the same once conceptualisation is increased. This happens through constant comparison and by consideration of what varies what people do. Be assured that this works!

Another common issue is that those new to coding the GT way code using the jargon of their profession rather than staying open to generating their own codes. For example, one of my PhD students is a midwife, and her initial codes reflected her profession's jargon. In response to my query about where the women in interviews really used those words, she agreed that they did not. She was coding as a midwife and not as a researcher. Once she re-coded the data, very useful concepts were generated. GT encourages researchers to code as analysts and not as members of a particular profession (Glaser, 1998).

Knowledge of the Literature

This can sometimes be cited as a reason for not using CGT, since Glaser asks that reading literature in the substantive area is avoided until much later in a study. However, researchers and research students are very well read and it is entirely consistent with Glaser

(1998) when he says that researchers should be well read to develop and maintain theoretical sensitivity. Therefore, being well-versed in literature is not a barrier to using the CGT methodology. Glaser (1998) warned that researchers can be influenced by received concepts (in this context, concepts from the extant literature) that may not fit or be relevant or that a preconceived or professional problem will be developed that has no relevance. Again, this is in the interest of staying open, so what is actually going on is allowed to emerge.

When it comes to preconceptions, Gibson and Hartman (2014) noted that there is a world of difference between having preconceptions and being influenced by them. Another way of thinking about preconceptions is bias. Constant comparison is how CGT deals with bias and the issue of forcing concepts or theoretical codes onto the data. Glaser (1998) wrote that when done carefully and honestly, it weeds out many of these biases. If an individual is worried about preconceptions, another way to deal with them is to interview oneself. While reflexivity is unnecessary in CGT, it does not preclude researchers making reflective memos if they feel this is something that will help.

Theoretical Sampling

This is the process where data collection and analysis are done concurrently (Glaser, 1978). It involves going back and forth in a continual inductive-deductive relationship between data collection and analysis (Simmons, 2022). Researchers have to start somewhere, and Glaser advises that this could include talking to people who are knowledgeable to help figure out what is relevant. Also, researchers could go to groups that they believe will maximise the possibility of obtaining data (Glaser, 1978). This could be termed purposive sampling. Once analysis begins and concepts begin to emerge, researchers then begin theoretical sampling, where data collection is based on what is emerging from coding. In interviews,

these generate questions to be asked or topics to be explored further. Concurrent data collection and analysis mitigates against researchers becoming overwhelmed by gathering data first and then beginning the analysis.

Be cautious, however, because an unintended consequence may be that researchers could limit data collection by narrowing the questions asked or topics pursued at the interview. This could lead to the emergence of a thin theory, one that may not be relevant to participants and be of very limited practical application. To avoid this, researchers should continue to keep an open mind as to the issues of importance to participants by collecting data based on broad topics while simultaneously engaging in theoretical sampling and not to delimit data collection prematurely. In other words, like all aspects of CGT, keep an open mind and be theoretically sensitive to all possibilities.

Justification for using other versions of GT

In justifying the use of other versions of GT, particularly Constructionist GT, those new to the methodology often cite the claim by Charmaz (2014) that classic GT is derived from positivism and is therefore objectivist. This contention is supported by a series of statements rather than a cogent discussion. These are mainly focused on the use of language and researcher positionality. Examples of language use are words like variable and discovery. For Charmaz (2014), these are associated with positivism. However, a variable is simply something that varies, while discovery is commonly used in qualitative research (Murphy et al 1996).

The word "discovery" simply means to find something, and this is how Glaser (1998) used the word. It is consistent with not having predefined categories involving the imposition of assumptions (Murphy et al 1996). For these authors, the analytical processes employed in

GT will prompt theory discovery and development rather than the verification of pre-existing theories. Glaser did not believe that there is an external reality out there waiting to be discovered. Interestingly, Charmaz (2014, p234) acknowledged that in practice researchers draw on both objectivist and constructivist positions. She also used the word "discovery" in a way that is consistent with its use by Murphy et al. (1996) and Glaser (1998). These somewhat undermine her statements based on language about the objectivist nature of CGT.

Charmaz (2014) saw researchers using CGT as distant and separate from research participants while assuming a neutral stance; they are distant experts. For Glaser (2003), GT is a perspective-based methodology, and he acknowledged people have multiple perspectives. Consistent with this, Glaser (1978,1998) emphasized time and again that the focus of CGT is on participants, their issues, experiences, and perspectives. When it comes to coding, researchers are not some distant experts but are able to name the patterns of behaviour because they see them over and over again, based on multiple data. Researchers take on the perspectives of participants. It is interesting that Charmaz (2014, p85) viewed the researcher as the final arbitrator of categories and that the methodology (constructivist GT) enables researchers to take successively more analytical control over their data collection and emergent theoretical ideas. Again, this seems a somewhat contradictory perspective, given her criticisms of CGT. In an interview, Charmaz maintained that everything she ever read by Glaser was in objectivist in nature (Puddephatt, 2006). In seminars and his countless interviews and discussions with Glaser, Simmons (2022) never read or heard anything from him or other classic grounded theorists claiming the possibility of complete dispassion or neutrality. For a more in-depth discussion of these issues, see Simmons (2022, p. 31 to 39). In summary, CGT is not an objectivist or interpretivist methodology, but rather is conceptual.

From the above, what Charmaz maintains about CGT is at variance with what Glaser writes. It seems, therefore, that researchers justifying their use of constructivist GT based on the objectivist argument is not justified and does not stand up to a careful reading of what Glaser writes. Also, in reading Charmaz, her position and use of language are arguably closer to Glaser than is commonly acknowledged. It follows that those choosing to use constructivist GT need to provide a more robust justification for its use. Such justification might include wanting to write a sociological story or develop a descriptive theory, or that constructivist GT gives voice to participants and is more consistent with the researcher's own interpretivist stance.

Theoretical Coding

Theoretical codes (TCs) are slippery (Glaser, 1998) and seem to be difficult to understand for those new to CGT. They conceptualise how the substantive codes relate to each other as hypotheses. TCs make it easier for the theory to be written because they make explicit the relationship between concepts, particularly the core and sub-core concepts. However, in writing up the theory they are implicit. Most researchers take methodological classes and are used to the idea of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. They are common to both quantitative and qualitative research. For the latter, they are used by researchers to provide a predetermined theoretical or conceptual framework for guiding the research process. They can be used to guide data collection and/or analysis. The easiest way to understand theoretical codes in CGT is to think about them as conceptual frameworks, that is, their function is to integrate the theory. However, there is one major difference: they are not predetermined, but like everything else in CGT, they emerge; they must earn their way into the theory. While there is one overarching TC organising the theory, which might be a process, a strategy or

more commonly what Glaser (1978) referred to as the 6Cs, there will be many more in a study, which usually integrate the sub-core concepts with other concepts. It is commonly believed that CGT only generates one type of theoretical code, a basic social process, but this is a misunderstanding. There are several TCs that can be used (Glaser, 1998, 2005), and researchers may even discover their own, but they must have earned relevancy.

Conclusion

Hopefully what is written above will be of some use to those using CGT methodology for the first time and those interested in understanding GT in general, irrespective of the variant. It can be difficult, particularly for minus mentees, to understand the writings of Glaser and, therefore, easy to misinterpret the various texts. At times researchers can get bogged down in the mechanical application of the GT methods and may lose sight of the purpose of what they might consider as the rules of CGT. Glaser (1998) himself admits that some of his earlier writings may have been overly prescriptive. Bear in mind that the purpose of these is to encourage researchers to remain open to what is going on in the substantive area, to minimise bias, to trust in emergence, and above all, to trust the methodology. It is only by carefully reading and studying original texts by Glaser, and authors writing about the methodology as originated, that those new to CGT and GT in general can evaluate whether what is being written about classic GT is based on misunderstanding, misinterpretation, bias or is justified. In that way researchers can evaluate the evidence for themselves. Taking account of the discussion in this article may help researchers to avoid some of the confusions and pitfalls common to those new to the methodology, particularly in relation to having too many codes, the use of TCs and encourage those using other variants to provide a more robust justification for their choice.

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