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**Pressing the Reset Button:**

**Celebrating the Unlearning of Grounded Theory in the People's Republic of China**

F. Fei, Grounded Theory Institute

**Abstract**

This round of the “giant leap forward,” principally involving grounded theory in the People’s Republic of China, has been replete with the notion of three-level coding, which arose from the coding procedure alone of the Strauss and Corbin variant. Given the efforts of many colleagues and students both in this country and elsewhere, we are beginning to witness the gradual dissociation of it from and the return to the original methodology intended by Glaser and Strauss and reiterated by Glaser. In addition, academic misconduct in this field has been, and will definitely continue to be, the very focal point of this methodological debate simply because it has reached epidemic proportions in this part of the world. It has also emerged over the past few years that there is now a new generation of grounded theory researchers that remain faithful and yet critical in their adoption of this methodology.

**Keywords:** grounded theory, Glaser, China

Amid the widespread misuse and abuse of the grounded theory (GT) methodology in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over the past two decades or so, some encouraging signs have now emerged which mark the return to the original methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) and the dissociation of any deviations from it including the

Strauss and Corbin (1990) variant in particular. This essay traces the journey of unlearning GT by covering the gradual dissociation of the notion of three-level coding in the PRC from GT, academic misconduct at the epidemic level in this field, and the emergence of a new generation of GT researchers from multiple subject areas.

### **Dissociating the notion of three-level coding from GT**

Like many novices in other parts of the world who came across the Strauss and Corbin (1990) variant first, a vast majority of students in the PRC used to believe that the GT methodology was all about the coding regime per se. Thus, the Strauss and Corbin (1990) variant has been labeled conveniently as “three-level coding”, the latter of which was coined by the mainlander (Chen, 2000) and has been used either in studies claiming the adoption of the GT methodology, including its variants or in non-GT studies (e.g. case study) merely as a set of tools for qualitative data analysis, often with the use of qualitative data analysis software. The Strauss and Corbin (1990) variant has been confronted fiercely in the mainland over an extended period of time, focusing on academic fields such as education and sport science. As a result, an increasing number of studies (with the use of either the three-level coding or other forms of coding) have now been consciously dissociated from GT.

For those who chose to adopt the Strauss and Corbin (1990) variant, they (e.g. Yang & Lin, 2023; Ma et al., 2023) all have failed to examine this variant in-depth, given there exist numerous changes, inconsistencies and contradictions within itself over the years, without even realising the fact Strauss (1987) himself made it absolutely clear in explicating his style of research that “[f]or more detailed statement of these technical aspects of the grounded theory mode of analysis, readers are advised to consult [Glaser’s (1978)] *Theoretical Sensitivity*” (p.22, italics in original). I am also particularly intrigued by the fact that the very phrase,

“grounded theory” has been distorted and replaced by “rootedness theory” and “rooting theory” in Ma et al.’s (2023) paper. This is indeed very telling when it comes to the overall GT picture in the PRC.

The efforts to dissociate the notion of three-level coding from GT have undoubtedly annoyed many in the PRC who have spent nearly all their careers in the three-level coding and the multi-version business, including those who profit financially from the qualitative data analysis software and the qualitative methods training programmes amid the marketing strategies in which coding per se is often misleadingly dictated by the commercial software. Andy Lowe, with whom Barney Glaser established the Grounded Theory Institute (Glaser, 1999) has certainly been targeted in nasty attempts to silence him for sharing some of the details as follows surrounding his meetings with Strauss on several occasions, which novices like Shi Zixin (personal communication, 9 June 2023) find utterly shocking:

Sometime during the early 1990s I made direct contact with Anslem Strauss by asking his wife permission to meet him at their San Francisco home. It was necessary to seek prior permission because Anslem Strauss was elderly frail and not at all well. Reluctantly she allowed me to see him just for one hour. I began our conversation by asking him about the book authored by Julie Corbin and Anslem Strauss called *The Basics of Grounded Theory* published by Sage. Anslem Strauss told me that he was somewhat embarrassed to have his name attached to this book as co-author because he did not actually write the book. He told me that Julie Corbin was [one] of his students and as a favour to her he agreed to write the for[eword for] the book. Later Julie Corbin persuaded Anslem Strauss to have his name as co-author because it would help her academic career. Since Anslem Strauss had a very close relationship with Julie Corbin he

agreed under pressure. When I asked him more about his role as co-author of the book, Anslem told me that not only did he not co-author the book, he had not even read the book from cover to cover. (Andy Lowe, personal communication, 15 May 2023)

### **Tackling academic misconduct in GT research**

Following Glaser's (1992) account of intellectual property infringement in this methodology, it has emerged unsurprisingly that there, too, exists widespread academic misconduct in the PRC. And it is not uncommon to discover that the universal rules and regulations governing academic conduct are often disregarded. It might be helpful to know that the PRC, together with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Russia, are indeed among the countries with the highest retraction rates over the past two decades (Van Noorden, 2023, p.480). Even the Consulate General of the PRC in Los Angeles (2024) has recently had to issue a reminder, overtly alerting the PRC nationals of the consequences of academic misconduct.

In pursuit of the agenda for localising GT, in other words, to come up with a self-styled, PRC version of this methodology (e.g. Jia & Heng, 2020) which in itself is a non-academic business (Shao Zhouren, personal communication, 30 October 2024), the original GT texts have been falsified to substantiate their claim (Jia & Heng, 2020) that primary data must be collected through interviews and/or observations in GT research. A classic example of this is the fact that the notion of "quality surveys" in quantitative GT (Glaser, 2008, p.34) has been deliberately falsified and substituted by "qualitative investigation" in Jia and Heng's (2020, p.160) desperate bid for the localisation of GT. This characteristically PRC-style propaganda has now been countered in full force by the very first orthodox GT research in the PRC which is based entirely on a novel with no interviews and/or observations whatsoever (Feng, 2021).

Other forms of academic misconduct in this “giant leap forward” include containing books that haven’t been actually read in the reference list (e.g. Xie & Lin, 2023; Mao & Pan, 2024) and the fact that someone else’s work in pain management has been plagiarised by Wu and Li (2020) (The editorial office of Sociological Studies, personal communication, 7 April 2020), all of which are indeed in an attempt to further develop, expand and ultimately, modify the original GT methodology. It is also sheer madness that in the case of Mao and Pan (2024), nearly the entire set of key texts of Barney Glaser’s in English were put in the reference list despite their own admission in the final paragraph of the paper that only materials from other sources had been referred to. And the explicit mention of the joint collection and analysis of data per se in the very first paper on the GT methodology in the PRC (Fei, 2008, p.34) has been distorted as if it were the case otherwise, thus legitimising the “new perspective” of Mao and Pan’s (2024). This sort of dirty, legitimising-by-falsifying trick is indeed a common occurrence on this land. Needless to say, the classic GT methodology has been typically remodelled, becoming Mao and Pan’s (2024) own variant of this methodology in which the sampling techniques, the timing of literature review and the estimation itself of the size of the sample, to name a few, are utterly contrary to the classic GT methodology.

### **Nurturing a new generation of GT researchers**

Given the successful completion of studies adopting the GT methodology at both master’s and doctoral levels (Feng, 2021; Wang, 2022), more novices have continued to remain faithful in their learning of this methodology. New sources of secondary data have now been exploited in their GT endeavours, e.g. policy documents in researching into data governance at the local legislative level in the PRC (Shao Zhuoren, work-in-progress), online forums concerning the incorporation of physical education into the nationwide unified exam-

ination for admissions to general universities and colleges (Guo Yuncheng, work-in-progress). They, too, have been constantly reminded of the common misbelief that the GT methodology is merely about coding the data. Among the students (e.g. Zeng Xiaoqing, work-in-progress) that have been overseen closely in the PRC, it is now part of the standard procedure of reading Glaser's core texts in English critically to begin with in any given GT study. In so doing, it is intended to avoid the situation reaching this point whereby GT has been adapted and modified globally, thus becoming "the grounded theory they teach and do, however recognizable as grounded theory" (Glaser, 1999, p. 838).

Most recently, a proposed GT study of the volunteers at the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games has been given the go-ahead (Chen, 2024). In the proposal itself, there is neither a research problem nor specific literature review, which nearly all of the committee members at the oral defence stage were not at all familiar with and thus, concerned about naturally. She was even challenged by the un-GT practices in studies claiming the adoption of this methodology otherwise. Given Chen's (2024) thorough preparedness both during the proposal writing and prior to the oral defence, she has managed to convince the gatekeepers successfully the feasibility of an authentic GT study.

## Summary

As far as the PRC is concerned, an incredibly huge amount of effort has been put into the dissociation of the Strauss and Corbin (1990) variant or the notion of three-level coding from GT over the past two decades or so, toppling it ruthlessly from being in any part of this methodology. It is indeed dreadful that many haven't actually read any text on the variant of their choosing, let alone the original methodology intended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Instead, previous studies adopting the three-level coding have just been replicated without any

knowledge of this methodology whatsoever. It is also discovered in this rat race that academic misconduct is literally all over the place in the PRC. The rules and regulations governing academic conduct both at home and abroad are generally disregarded, whether knowingly or not.

The disruptive work in the PRC has unquestionably paid off, as there are now a growing number of novices that have chosen to adopt the original GT methodology in their dissertations and theses, and heightened levels of awareness of academic misconduct, especially in the subsequent workplaces of theirs, the latter of which according to Chen Yin (personal communication, 15 July 2024). And quite extraordinarily, their characters and attitudes toward academic research have been reshaped, having been inspired profoundly by the whole GT experience. As nicely put by Wang Yin, a then doctoral candidate in Nursing (Wang, 2022) and now a lecturer, her journey of learning GT is also one of re-discovering the meaning of scholarship (personal communication, 7 October 2024). Having said that, I am certainly mindful of the fact that losing no momentum is absolutely crucial in this mission, as suggested by Wang Jun, who has been seriously let down by what is happening in sport science and, thus, has been fighting against it (personal communication, 13 October 2024). Last but not least, those lacking critical thinking skills in the collectivist, PRC-style, “giant leap forward” circus which needs no further elaboration may find it unthinkable that I am even critical of my own colleagues, let alone those elsewhere, and wish that I were more open-minded towards “all versions” of this methodology and less obsessed with academic misconduct in this enterprise. It is indeed worth stressing that as far as the original GT methodology is concerned, any existing deviations from it in the methods literature must not be used as a pretext by anyone, whether from the PRC or not, for misuse and abuse of GT fur-

ther. I have also firmly rejected their “kind advice,” particularly those concerning academic misconduct, feeling anxious that colleagues and students who play by the book will be disadvantaged as it is already the case in the PRC.

### **Acknowledgement**

Colleagues and students, particularly those from education and sport science (e.g. Ouyang Wuchong, Wang Jun) and in the case of Mao and Pan (2024), Wang Chunfeng, Jiang P. and Guo Langrui, have taken part in debates and critiques in which there is clearly lots of heat. Many prefer to remain anonymous or semi-anonymous in this seemingly harmonious culture, fearing that there is every possibility that they might be retaliated along their academic career paths for simply speaking up. My mission, including the completion and publication of this essay in the series, would not have been possible without their considerable contributions, including those in the WeChat discussion groups.

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**Disclosures:**

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** 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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