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Is That a Real Theory or Did You Just Make It Up? Teaching Classic Grounded Theory

Odis E. Simmons, Ph.D.

Abstract

The title of this paper was derived from an incident I observed some years ago while accompanying a highly talented musician-songwriter friend to a performance. During a break, an audience member approached him to compliment the last song he had performed. He had written both the music and the lyrics to the song, one of many he had written. The audience member queried, "Is that a real song, or did you just make it up?" A touch amused, and not knowing whether he should be flattered or insulted, he politely replied, "It is a real song and I made it up."

This episode puts in mind a similar attitude in the social sciences that Glaser and Strauss (1967) noted, in which a small number of 'theoretical capitalists' originate what are considered to be "real" theories and others are relegated to the role of "proletariat" testers. The means by which these theorists derived their theories remained largely mysterious. Unleashing proletariat testers was one of the chief rationales behind Glaser and Strauss' development of grounded theory. It brought a democratic option into the social sciences that enabled anyone who learned the methodology to generate theory. The democratic ethos of the methodology may also have inadvertently unleashed an abundance of aspiring remodelers of the methodology, who unfortunately have eroded its primary purpose—to generate theories that are fully grounded in data rather than speculation or ideology.

Introduction

Since Glaser and Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, the methodology they originally conceived[1] has been subjected to numerous forms of methodological torturing. It has been misrepresented,

[1] Constant comparative analysis, the seminal component of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) later dubbed grounded theory, was devised and published several years earlier by Glaser in the sociology journal, *Social Problems* (Glaser, 1965). This article was reprinted as Chapter 5 in Glaser and Strauss (1967).

misconstrued, distorted, and "remodeled" (Glaser, 2003) into varieties of "constructivist grounded theory" (Charmaz, 2000, 2006) and/or standard qualitative data analysis (Glaser, 2002, 2003, 2004) which has been "jargonized" (Glaser, 2009) with grounded theory terminology. Grounded theory, or at least what many secondary authors attempt to pass as grounded theory, has been "slurred" (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Raffanti , 2006), "eroded" (Stern, 1994; Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005), "reconstructed" (Haig, 1995), "broadened" (Kools, McCarthy, Durham, & Robrecht, 1996), "diffused, diluted or distilled" (May, 1996), and "evolved" (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006) to the point that much of what is called grounded theory has become a bit alien to classic grounded theorists who still honor its primary purpose, intent, and origins. Through all of these methodological machinations its original purpose has seemingly been forgotten. Before his passing, even Strauss (1987) and his co-author Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Corbin 1998) diverged from the original articulation of the methodology that he and Glaser laid out in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967).[2]

Although Glaser has continued to write books about grounded theory as he and Strauss originally conceived it[3] (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005a, 2006, 2008, 2009) the runaway perverting of the methodology continues largely unabated.[4] In my view, the primary reason for this is that the bulk of those who consider themselves to be grounded theorists gained their understanding of grounded theory through what Stern (1994) termed "minus mentoring" and I termed "bootstrapping" (Simmons, 1995).

Although the number of researchers doing what has come to be called grounded theory has increased exponentially since 1995, the situation regarding systematic training in grounded theory has changed little. However, for the last decade or so Glaser has

[2] For example, nothing resembling "axial coding" existed in the original conception of grounded theory.

[3] In Glaser's account of the early history of grounded theory (1998, p. 22) he reported, "I wrote 90% of the book [*Discovery*] while he [Strauss] was in Europe and gave it to him as a surprise present when he returned." This may account for why Glaser has remained resolutely consistent with the original methodology.

[4] Despite this, Glaser in his usual transcending manner is optimistic that many researcher/analysts who do this will get beyond jargonizing and begin doing classic grounded theory, as it was originally intended.

been teaching the nuances of grounded theory in periodic two day 'troubleshooting' seminars in multiple locations within the U.S. and internationally. Additionally, several Grounded Theory Institute Fellows and scattered others teach individual courses in classic grounded theory and supervise or serve on doctoral committees of students doing grounded theory studies.

As Glaser reminds participants in his seminars, "grounded theory is an experiential method." One implication of this is that to learn grounded theory well in all of its nuances, it is important to learn by doing. The jargon can be learned through reading but can only be deeply understood through the process of doing. Another implication is that grounded theory is skill based. When teaching grounded theory, you are teaching a set of high level skills. This cannot be done well with a singular approach. In addition to teacher, you also must serve the roles of coach, cheerleader, and occasionally even therapist.

Yet another implication is that it is best taught by people who have themselves done it. Teaching grounded theory at a deep level from scratch is a demanding undertaking that requires a deep understanding of the method in all of its nuances. It is unlikely that those who have not actually done grounded theory will be able to take students to a place they have never themselves been, although some try.

I have taught GT with individuals (one at a time), in full-sized classes, and in small groups.[5] In my experience, teaching it in small groups is preferable to teaching it in full-sized classes or individually. I learned early on that when teaching it in full-sized classes it is best to break the students into smaller working groups; learning occurs more efficiently, more quickly, and more deeply in working groups. For the teacher it is less time consuming and labor intensive because it alleviates the need for constantly repeating the same lessons; in working groups, learners support and learn from each other.

The Learning Process[6]

In my experience, there are two general considerations

[5] I have been teaching classic grounded theory for almost four decades, most recently (since 1998) in the Grounded Theory/Grounded Action program in the School of Educational Leadership and Change (ELC) at Fielding Graduate University.

[6] In the interest of straightforward clarity and sufficient detail, I have chosen to take a descriptive "how to do it" rather than a conceptual approach in this article.

that you need to factor into your teaching approach. The first is that teaching grounded theory is an incremental, recursive process. The second is that at times you must attend to emotions such as fear and motivation as well as pedagogical concerns. For some learners, learning grounded theory can be a daunting process.

Learners gain the multiplicity of skills related to doing grounded theory incrementally. The learning of each skill is generally contingent upon the learning of prerequisite skills. It is important to devise a process and curriculum that accommodates this natural sequence. Where to begin and how fast to move are of course related to the starting point and natural pacing of the learner(s). Most of the graduate level learners I have taught over the years have been working professionals with little to no knowledge and sometimes even awareness of the existence of grounded theory, let alone the difference between classic and remodeled/constructivist forms of grounded theory. Although a few had considerable research knowledge and experience, most had moderate and sometimes even no research knowledge or experience. So, by necessity I have usually found it necessary to teach the method from scratch. Of course, if your learners are farther along in their experience and understanding, you can jump into the process at the appropriate point.

Preliminaries

For many newcomers, learning grounded theory can be a daunting, intimidating adventure. They are being asked to think in ways that up to this point in their academic and professional careers is inside out and upside down from the ways in which they have been trained and are accustomed to thinking. And, they are being asked to do something that most of them never imagined themselves being able to do—develop an epistemologically sound theory of their own. Even in the academic professions, this is a rare skill. Before beginning the learning process it is important to take care of certain preliminaries. To help relax and prepare them for the learning process it is beneficial for learners to know from the outset what in general to expect of the teacher and process as well as what the process will expect and require of them.

Cultivating skill-traits[7]

As one preliminary, I inform learners that to be successful grounded theorists it is important that they cultivate several general skill-traits. One important skill-trait set is the ability to be patient and deal with and even relish ambiguity and "not knowing." I convey to them that a grounded theory study requires the researcher/analyst to minimize preconceptions, remain "honest to the data," and let concepts and theory emerge from the data. I advise them of this to encourage them to be cognizant of and begin cultivating these traits and reflect on the types of preconceptions in both their professional and personal domains that they might even innocently let slip into the process.

Preconceptions that have their origins in the professional domain are such things as pre-selecting the type and range of data to fit an existing theory or pre-established hypothesis, notions about what is or isn't acceptable as data, assuming that particular questions, categories, concepts, ideas, hypotheses, or theories are relevant to or can explain a subject matter before data is collected or analyzed. These types of preconceptions are often very strong because of the social support they receive in their respective professions, often reinforced by professional training.

Preconceptions from the personal domain are those in which a researcher has a personal investment in a particular outcome or finding. These originate in personal experience and favored ideologies (religious, political, cultural). I emphasize that everything in a grounded theory study must be derived from data, not imported into the theory from these outside sources. I provide examples of the types of preconceptions and encourage a group discussion of the issue.

Some learners have difficulty with my asking them to suspend preconceptions. I recall one learner expressing strong indignation that I was asking her to "throw out everything I've learned in twenty years as an educator!!" I calmed her in my characteristic way by reminding her that I wasn't asking her to throw it out, I was merely asking her to suspend it and that if it had veracity she wouldn't need to force it because she would

[7] I combine these two words because the phenomena to which I am referring are not fixed psychological traits. Although they are commonly seen as personality traits, they can be enhanced, cultivated, and learned.

discover it anyway—so what's the risk?

Learners who are ideologically driven usually also have difficulty suspending preconceptions that are related to their preferred ideology. They tend to have difficulty differentiating and separating their view of "what-is" from their beliefs about "what-ought-to-be." This may stem from the fact that with many, particularly political, ideologies the boundary is fuzzy. I remind such learners that I'm not asking them to abandon their beliefs only to bring them in at the appropriate time. I tell them, "You'll never achieve your what-ought-to-be if you don't start with a clear, accurate understanding of what really is. I add, "What's the risk in being sure that what is really is?" I also tell them that they can bring in their what-ought-to-be at the appropriate time, after they have developed a solid, explanatory grounded theory. But, in the mean time it is important to remain open to what is really going on. This usually satisfies all but the most ideologically driven learners who tend to be firmly convinced that their epistemologically untested ideological views "are" reality. However, even the thinking of intransigent learners is usually transformed when they discover their first grounded concept, particularly if it is at odds with their preconceived ideological view. I recall one student expressing a common sentiment when he said, "I fought hard because I didn't want to go there, but I finally went where the data led me."

Dealing with fear

Many learners begin wrapped in a cloud of fear—fear that they aren't up to the task of being able to learn and do what at first glance appears to be such a complicated, sophisticated method, fear that their "inadequacies" may be displayed to other group members, fear that they aren't smart enough, fear that they will say and do things that others may see as foolish, fear that they won't be able to maintain the pace of other group members, and the standard fear about grades. These fears may follow some learners all the way through the process. Although rare in my experience, fear may occasionally compel learners to abandon their efforts to learn grounded theory. I have worked with very, very few learners who were simply unable to grasp and make use of the method or work through their fears.

Unless skillfully addressed, fear can slow down and even undermine the learning process. So, it is important to deal with it up front and whenever it seems to be getting in the way of

individual or group progress. The subtlest and most general way of curtailing fear is to set up an atmosphere of enthusiasm and confidence about the academic, personal, and professional payoffs of learning grounded theory. It helps if you example enthusiasm and confidence yourself.

During the initial session, I address common fears that have the potential to impede the learning process. Being a standard fear in academic settings, I address assessment and grading at the outset. Most learners are accustomed to having their work reviewed and judged for grading purposes. I let them know that we are using an entirely different model. I emphasize to group members that the assignments are meant "only to let us know where you are at so we can move you up to the next step." I reassure them that we are not interested in judging them personally or judging their work for grading purposes; their final and only grade will be based upon their commitment to the process as indicated by their faithful, consistent presence at group sessions, their progress, completing assignments on time, supporting their group colleagues and helping them if asked, and doing the best work of which they are personally capable. This isn't to let them off the hook; it is to help them get rid of fears related to assessment and grading. Even if you are teaching learners in a non-grading context, the fear of judgment may still be present. Because it can be such a strong impediment to learning, it should be addressed.

A second fear that occurs early on comes when learners begin reading the first set of assigned books, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978), *Doing Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1998), and *The Grounded Theory Perspective* (Glaser, 2001), in that order. These readings make some students' heads spin. For them, the academic writing style, ideas and ways of thinking are so foreign to their experience that they sometimes begin to question that they will ever be able to understand, much less do, grounded theory. I reassure them that if they keep revisiting the readings, ask questions of their group colleagues and me, and trust the learning process, what they are reading will enter into their preconscious and eventually begin to jell and burst forth into their conscious understanding.

Later on, when they have a few skill development assignments under their belt, they begin to experience what they

read in Glaser's books. This enables them to go back and forth between experience, reading, and reflection. Glaser's words come alive for them. This significantly deepens their understanding.

Fear also commonly arises when learners begin working on skill development assignments such as interviewing, coding, conceptualizing and memoing. When this occurs, as I am explaining each assignment I encourage them to "let fear go" and just do the assignment as best they can. I remind them that the purpose of the assignment is "only to let us know where you are at so we can move you up to the next step." Throughout the learning process, whenever I sense that any type of fear may be creating an impediment to learning I reiterate this encouragement. If an individual student continues to struggle with fear, I meet with them separately with the aim of understanding and alleviating their doubts and fears. This helps to keep fear from inhibiting or blocking their learning.

The value of asking questions

Another preliminary matter I cover is the importance of asking questions. I inform learners that learning grounded theory is a cumulative process so if they don't understand one step they may have difficulty understanding subsequent steps. I emphasize that it is important that they not let something go by until they feel like they have a reasonable grasp on it. If a learner asks a question that is premature in the process (one that requires complicated understandings that they don't yet have), I ask them to hold onto it for awhile but not to forget it.

I add that "there is no such thing as a stupid question and there is no such thing as a smart question;[8] there are only questions." I assure them that any question they have someone else will have and they'll be pleased that someone asked it. I do this to hopefully head off any fears that learners may have about not wanting to appear to be uninformed, stupid, or foolish. I usually joke with them that, "I'm an expert at making a fool of myself and it has served me well." In general I find light, gentle humor to be a useful tool. It helps to put learners at ease, provides brief breaks, and makes the process more enjoyable. It is

[8] Although I had always reminded learners that there is no such thing as a stupid question, I learned from Glaser at his Troubleshooting Seminars to also remind them that there is no such thing as a good question. This helps to head off attempts to "impress the teacher."

important to follow through and treat all questions with respect. Credibility and trust are crucial to the learning process.

The importance of participation

Another issue I emphasize is the importance of participation. Group members will be sharing all work they do as part of a single, group project. If an individual falls behind, submits assignments late, or misses group sessions, all group members will be affected. The smaller the group, the greater the impact will be. I ordinarily keep group size at four to eight participants. In my experience six is ideal. At six, if one or two group members lag or drop, there will still be enough shared work for the process to work. More than six can be a bit difficult because group sessions can become excessively long in order to provide sufficient feedback to all participants. If you begin a group with three or four, all it takes is one member to drop or lag behind to cause problems.

Theoretical sensitivity

One last preliminary involves theoretical sensitivity. At the outset, theoretical sensitivity amongst the beginning grounded theory students I have taught varies from minimal to moderate, depending upon their academic and professional backgrounds. Because it was not part of their professional training, many learners with backgrounds in the practicing professions have little familiarity with what a real theory looks like, let alone a grounded theory. The professional literature often contains what are essentially op-ed pieces that are regarded as theories, what I refer to as "high-level opinionizing". In these sorts of works, explanation and advocacy are often mixed together with little discernment between them. I point out to learners that grounded theories are about explanation, not advocacy, although a properly done explanatory grounded theory is quite suitable as a basis for advocacy or action by taking a next step and doing grounded action (Simmons & Gregory, 2003).

To help familiarize learners with what grounded theories look like, I assign them Glaser's (1993) reader, *Examples of Grounded Theory*. They are also encouraged to read other examples of grounded theory[9] and theory in general, particularly

[9] I particularly encourage them to read the many examples of grounded theory in Glaser (1994 & 1995) and Glaser & Holton (2007).

sociological theory.

Once learners remember and have a general understanding of the jargon and process of grounded theory, they have a common language with which to communicate and move forward with their learning. At this point they are ready to begin actually doing grounded theory, in the form of exercises, each designed to teach a particular skill and/or stage of the grounded theory process.

Learning by Doing

As I said at the outset, learning the nuances of grounded theory requires the experience of doing it. Many, if not most, people who conduct grounded theory research learn it largely on their own during the process of carrying out their first grounded theory study, usually their dissertation. They are usually supervised by people who may be well experienced at qualitative research, but who often have little to no operational experience with classic or any other form of grounded theory. Many have to fight committee members who, because of their lack of knowledge and experience of grounded theory insist they incorporate needless "immaculate description" (Glaser, 1978, p.3), irrelevant elements such as face sheet variables, and/or verification elements into their research. These factors can make doing one's first grounded theory study a frustrating, even distressing experience. And, they often result in a not-so-grounded theory, despite the student's efforts.[10]

Another important word of advice I have to offer is, rather than allowing students in a working-group to work on individual projects, it is more efficient and effective to have them all working on the same project. I learned many years ago when teaching mostly undergraduates in a classroom setting[11] that having learners working on individual projects entails several problems. This is particularly true when you are working with

[10] It is this type of circumstance that the Fielding/ELC grounded theory program is designed to alleviate. In this program learners are provided with the opportunity to learn grounded theory in an efficient step-by-step process, *before* they begin their dissertation research. Of course, they learn more as they conduct their research, but the program gets them to the starting line with reasonable confidence, some experience under their belts, and a strong support network of faculty and student colleagues, which continues throughout their dissertation research.

[11] See Glaser (1998, pp. 228-230) for a brief description of my approach to this.

doctoral students doing dissertation research. As they get farther and farther into their projects, they begin to focus more and more on completing their personal work and lose focus and incentive towards achieving deep, lasting learning of the method. They become task-oriented. Some become impatient and even begin skipping sessions when other learners' projects are being discussed because they incorrectly think that it won't help them progress with their own work. In short, they center on themselves.

It also complicates the group process because group members are working on different projects at different stages. They pace differently, some working more quickly than others. Groups often begin to fragment. For the teacher, all of this can become a logistical nightmare. And, of course, when they begin to struggle because they have derailed their own learning, they begin to demand more and more individual time. In general, it undermines the strengths inherent in working in groups, for both learners and teachers.

As I suggested above, to prevent these difficulties and to ensure deep, lasting learning, for years I have elected to have all participants working on the same thing at the same time. I highly recommend this approach, when possible. When I have taught in classroom situations I have divided the class into groups of four to six members, with everyone working on the same general topic area and discovered core variable. During class sessions, I floated from group to group, trying to balance my time so that each group received generally equal amounts of attention.

Even more importantly, having all group or class members working on the same project has decided advantages. It allows for efficiency, speed, and shared learning. It also enables the teacher to manage the process much more easily. It is also time and labor efficient, considering the number of learners you can work with simultaneously.

Data collection

Because the vast majority of grounded theory students I have taught over the years have used open-ended interviews as the primary data source for their dissertation or other grounded theory study, I focus primarily on interviewing skills. Furthermore, well done open-ended interviews are indicator rich, probably more so than any other type of data. This makes them

particularly suitable for grounded theory.

At the initial session, before I begin the first exercise I briefly discuss the notion of "all is data" and refer learners to Glaser's discussion of this in *The Grounded Theory Perspective* (pp.145-164). I also include brief discussions about taking field notes and conducting unstructured observations. But, for time efficiency I don't give exercises related to these skills. However, I have at times offered face-to-face workshops in which I have participants conduct brief observations and write them up in field notes after which I discuss them and offer suggestions for improving these skills.

To expedite the learning process, in advance of the first session I provide (by e-mail attachment) an initial transcribed interview. I provide the interview in a format which allows for coding directly into a word processor so that it can be simultaneously worked and easily shared during group sessions.[12] I select a good but imperfect interview that has high potential conceptual yield and a fairly easy to discover core variable. I use this interview as a springboard for discussion and practice. Using the interview, I work simultaneously on interviewing, coding, and conceptualizing skills. I go back and forth from one to the other, as teaching and learning opportunities emerge, with more weight being given to coding and conceptualizing.

When working on interviewing skills, I relate to learners the importance of keeping preconceptions out of the interviews right from the beginning so that they can discover what is relevant to the respondents. I emphasize that grounded theory is about what is relevant to the people being studied, not what is relevant to the researcher. I tell them, "It is not your interview; it is the respondent's interview." I introduce them to the idea of opening interviews with a general, non-leading "grand tour" question to begin to get at what is relevant to the respondent. I also let them know that it isn't necessary or desirable to reuse the same grand tour question more than once or twice. I point out that as a theory

[12] I format it by creating a two column table into a Word document, then adjusting the width of the columns so that the left column is about 30% or so of the table width. This column can be used independently of the other, for coding. Data can be typed or cut and pasted into the right column and codes can be entered into the right column in relevant locations. Using table columns enables you to work either column without affecting the other.

begins to emerge theoretical sampling engenders more and more selectivity in data collection, so grand tour questions become "less and less grand."

Coding, conceptualizing, and core variables

Prior to our first coding session, I instruct learners to make an attempt on their own at coding the interview I have provided, using what they learned from reading the substantive coding material in Glaser's *Theoretical Sensitivity* and *Doing Grounded Theory*. I instruct them to "code fearlessly," to "just do it the best you can, and don't worry about it," reminding them once again that it is not about judging them, it is "only to let us know where you are at so we can move you up to the next step." I also instruct them to share their coded interviews with each other by e-mail attachment and to look them over before the upcoming session.

At the session we recode the interview, together. As a learning tool, I have them read the interview line by line and, using color highlighting to identify words, phrases, and patterns in the data that they think appear to be of potential theoretical relevance. Not only does this help them learn how to identify and relate indicators to codes and concepts, in the process, they gain theoretical sensitivity. In addition to line by line coding, I also emphasize coding for patterns that appear across the data, and particularly for potential core variables.

As we begin to code the interview, I refer them back to what they read in Glaser's discussions of substantive coding and remind them that the purpose of coding is to elevate data to an abstract level, while remaining grounded in the data. I do this because their initial codes tend to be mere summaries of data. Conceptual coding being new to them, they tend to remain on a descriptive level. I point this out and remind them that codes are abstractions of the data, particularly patterns in the data, not mere summaries. I encourage them to fearlessly keep at it and assure them that they will eventually get it. For some it comes easily, for others not so easy. We stay at it until everyone has a basic grasp of conceptual coding. At times this requires an individual session or two with learners who haven't yet made the cognitive breakthrough. As we code, as soon as someone offers a genuine abstract code, I identify it and discuss how it is different from a mere summary of data and therefore useful for building theory. Learning to conceptualize is usually the first big hurdle to overcome, for most learners.

Much to the consternation of some learners, I don't provide illustrations or examples in advance of their attempts to code and conceptualize. My experience shows that it is best to allow them to struggle with it a bit so that they have the opportunity to discover the best fit between their unique mind and the task, as well as to experience the satisfaction of their own personal "aha" moments of understanding. As we code together, I select useful examples and continue to demonstrate the differences between mere summaries of data and abstract codes and concepts and show how codes and concepts enable you to transcend description and build theory. This approach engenders experiential learning, which is usually deeper learning. Also, "aha" moments of this sort generate excitement and a feeling of satisfaction that provides motivation and propels learners to keep moving forward in the learning process, particularly when a core variable is discovered and named. Over time, it also helps to build confidence and patience with ambiguity and "not knowing," which as I said earlier are important skill-traits for grounded theorists.

Once they get their feet wet with some coding and conceptualizing, I refer them back to what they have read about core variables (categories) in Glaser's books. I remind them that a core variable is the variable that accounts for the most variation in the data, the thing to which most everything in the data relates, the issue or problem that research subjects are processing, or in more vernacular terms, "what people are working on." I then discuss a few brief examples, usually from *Examples of Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1993), which by then they should have read. I also remind them that a grounded theory is a theory that explains a discovered core variable and that you don't know what your research is specifically about, beyond your general topic area, until you discover and settle on a core variable.

As we continue coding the interview, the questions, "Can there be more than one core variable?" and if so "How do you choose between them?" virtually always come up. My response is that of course more than one potential core variable may be represented in a given set of data, but usually one will stand out more than others because it accounts for the most variation in that particular data. However, if the data suggests other core variables that for whatever reason you find more appealing, you can begin to collect data more selectively around that core variable. But, you should pursue only one as a core now and, if

they are related, downgrade the others to properties (or whatever) of your currently chosen core. They can always be studied and worked up as core variables later. So, if more than one core variable is indicated in a set of data how does one choose? There is no set formula for choosing. You choose the one that is the most interesting to you, the one that has the most potential professional payoff, the one that you think may have the most grab to others, or whatever.

Once all learners confirm that they grasp what a core variable is and the role it plays in grounded theory, I encourage them to look for potential core variables in the interview we are analyzing. I point out that sometimes you "sense" the core variable before you can articulate it because as you read and code the data it is forming in your preconscious. I advise them to keep looking for and pondering indicators in the data that point to "what people are working on." This phrase serves as a nice, easy reminder for them to stay tuned into discovering potential core variables.

At first, it is common for learners to "see" concepts they have read in the literature related to their particular professional practice or ubiquitous popular psychology concepts such as "self-esteem," "separation anxiety," and such.[13] To this I usually have two responses. The first is I ask them to identify the major indicators they see in the data for the concept. The indicators they identify are usually vaguely connected or require large inferential leaps. This enables me to introduce the idea that in grounded theory, you want to minimize inferential leaps because a concept is simply a "name" for a pattern indicated in the data. I caution them that they should also avoid already established terms/concepts because they will burden their theory with extant conceptual baggage because readers will import their understandings of these concepts into the theory. This may prompt readers to view the work in a verification rather than discovery frame, seeing it as being grounded more in existing literature than having been systematically derived from data. This will diminish its unique value and contribution to the literature.

At this point, I add that good grounded theory concepts

[13] This may be an indicator of the extent to which psychology concepts have worked their way into common language.

should have imagery, grab, and fit. With a few examples, learners tend easily to understand imagery and grab. Fit doesn't appear to be as easy for them to grasp. To help them understand the meaning of fit, I begin by telling them that the closest to it in conventional research is the concept of "validity," with which they are usually familiar. I emphasize that in grounded theory a concept serves only as a name for a pattern or phenomenon indicated in the data and, similar to validity, it must fit the pattern as closely as possible. I remind them that their readers will not have access to their data, so the word that has been selected to represent a pattern in the data effectively is the data. Poor fit between the pattern and the concept will at least partially un-ground the theory. This is why it is important to avoid inferential leaps that introduce extraneous meanings between indicators and concepts. The data should be allowed to speak for itself. I also point out that the fundamental purposes of elevating data to a conceptual level is that it prevents you from having to continually describe and re-describe patterns in the data and it allows you to transcend description and move to the theoretical level by enabling you to discover and articulate relationships in the data.

I often see first draft theories in which word choice is a problem in several ways. The first is that the selected words conjure up a different imagery than what they purport to represent. The second is that they are awkward or clumsy, making the conceptualization seem affected. The most common version of this comes from over gerunding, particularly applying gerunds to properties, conditions, and such that aren't actions, i.e. portraying phenomena in verb form that should remain in noun form. When I see this, I remind the learner that only actions should be portrayed in gerund form and even then, not necessarily, because too many gerunds in a theory make it feel forced, unnatural, and "cute." So, only higher level action concepts should be portrayed in gerund form.

Because I see so many first draft theories in which word selection is problematic, I developed an assignment for use early in the learning process to address the problem. The assignment is designed to get learners to think more deeply about nuances of meaning in words that they might otherwise use interchangeably. It also serves as an exercise in comparative analysis. It has helped. The assignment consists of having learners do a comparison of similarities and differences between matched pairs

of words that are generally synonymous, such as "purpose/function," "strategy/technique," "safety/security," "justification/excuse," and so forth. A few learners have initially objected to the assignment because, as one person put it, "It's "kindergartenish." However, after completing it, learners invariably comment on how "eye-opening" it is. Even the person who uttered the kindergartenish remark said afterward, "I never realized that I use the language so loosely."

At this point, I also introduce learners to the value of in vivo concepts. I point out to them that people name and jargonize experiences and phenomena that are of importance to them in the contexts of their daily lives. This is particularly common in occupational contexts. These in vivo concepts are good clues as to what people are working on. If they aren't actually the core variable, they will likely point to the core variable, so paying attention to them is worthwhile.

When I am satisfied that all group members have a basic grasp of the difference between description and abstraction, the rudiments of how to code, and the function of core variables in grounded theory, I give them their next assignment, which is to conduct, transcribe, and code an open-ended interview to further develop the core variable that emerged from the interview we have been coding. Although Glaser (1998) makes a case against recording interviews, for learning purposes, I find that it is beneficial to have learners record and transcribe their first several interviews. The interviews that result from this assignment serve as a basis for a discussion of interviewing techniques at the next group session. This enables me to take a close look at their interviewing techniques and skills and discuss ways in which they can be improved. They also provide comprehensive data in which every theoretically relevant indicator can be coded, for coding practice and to enhance theoretical sensitivity. I let learners know that "We are overdoing it, for learning purposes."

Depending upon the size of the group, as we move through the sequence, I have them conduct and code two or three interviews related to the core variable discovered in the first (provided) interview. So, for example, if a group is comprised of six learners and they each conduct three interviews, we will have eighteen interviews as a data bank.

Memoing and theoretical sampling

When learners conduct open coding of the first (provided) interview and discover the core variable, I have them re-code the interview and code selectively for things that they think might be related to the core variable. In the course of doing this, ideas for theoretical sampling begin to emerge. I seize this opportunity to discuss the purpose of theoretical sampling and give examples of how it promotes the discovery of new variables and concepts and therefore engenders the emergence of a deeper, richer theory.[14] As we code, I encourage learners to generate ideas for theoretical sampling around our discovered core variable and incorporate them into their interviewing assignments.

When learners begin to acquire a reasonable grasp of open and selective coding, conceptualizing, core variables, and theoretical sampling, I introduce the topic of memoing and give them their first memoing assignment. I emphasize that grounded theory memos are about concepts and the relationships between them, particularly their relationship to the core variable. They are not mere descriptive summaries of the data. I instruct them to write some memos about the concepts that we have generated from our coding exercises. I tell them to "just do it" and write fearlessly, using my usual mantra about moving them to the next level. Their first attempts at memoing tend to be more descriptive than conceptual/ideational. Often they are entirely descriptive. But, whichever, having something in writing allows me to example the difference between descriptive and conceptual/ideational memos by using excerpts with which I can transform a few descriptive memos into conceptual memos. Once they grasp this, I instruct them to go through their memos and sort out the descriptive memos from the conceptual memos and when possible transform them into conceptual memos. I instruct them to identify (interview, page, and line numbers, or some such thing) good examples in the data of each concept or concept-related idea, so that they can recover them for use in their final write-up. This also helps them keep their memos grounded in data. If they write a memo for which they don't have relevant examples this cues them that they may be logically elaborating. If

[14] I have found that an excellent example for helping learners understand theoretical sampling is the way in which Glaser and Strauss, in their dying study (Glaser & Strauss, 1965 & 1968), discovered their "social loss" concept by observing different reactions in hospital staff in relation to different categories of patients.

they think not, I suggest that they selectively code or theoretically sample around the idea. This also enhances their understanding of the difference between conceptual and descriptive memos so they become more skilled at writing purely conceptual memos. I review their results at the next session. Sometimes we need to do another round or two of this before everyone gains a reasonable grasp of how to think and write conceptually and theoretically. This is usually the second big hurdle for them to overcome.

We continue interviewing, coding, theoretical sampling, and memoing until we have sufficient data and memo banks to move on. By then learners understand and have achieved at least base line proficiency with these skills. At this point, we are ready to move on.

Theoretical codes, sorting, and theoretical outline

When I give learners this assignment, I reiterate that the purpose of theoretical codes is to relate substantive codes together in a way that explains the main concern of the research subjects. I also remind them that the purpose of a theory is to explain something, not just describe it. I instruct them to pay particular attention to potential hypothetical probability statements that capture and explain variations around the core variable because they transform a write-up from a conceptual description into an explanatory theory.

To initiate the assignment, I instruct learners to read carefully through the memo bank that we have compiled and attempt to sort it into categories, paying special attention to Glaser's theoretical coding families. I emphasize that, in grounded theory, sorting involves conceptual/idea sorting, not descriptive (data) sorting. I point out that if their memos are truly ideas about concepts and their relationships and they sort openly and patiently, their memos will naturally sort into a grounded theory. If they have difficulty with the sort because the memos contain excessive description, I suggest that they go back through the memo bank and separate out descriptive material then sort the conceptual material, identifying related examples from the data in the manner I mentioned above.

I have observed sorting to be particularly difficult for many learners. It is usually the third big hurdle for them to overcome. It is common for them to succumb to the temptation to logically

elaborate an outline and then sort into it, rather than the reverse. In my experience, with novices, sorting is the most commonly skipped step in the grounded theory process. And, it usually shows because the outline used for the write-up has an unconvincing fit with the memos.[15] To help head this off, I emphasize that theoretical codes must earn their way into a theory, just like substantive codes, and that it is important to be patient, remain open, and let the sort emerge.[16]

As a theoretical scheme begins to emerge from the sorting process, more ideas emerge for memoing. Although in an actual grounded theory study ideas for more theoretical sampling and therefore more data collection may occur, because we are doing a study as a learning exercise we must remain within reasonable time limits. As a final exercise, I have learners write up just a portion of a theory or a theoretical overview. This is enough to give them the experience of a proper write-up. I instruct them to use the outline that emerged from their sorted memos (the portion relevant to what they choose to write-up) as the organizing scheme for their write-up.[17]

This completes the grounded theory coursework assignments, but it is only the first stage in the learning process because there is much yet to be learned from actually conducting one's own grounded theory project.[18]

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[15] This is probably because of academic backgrounds that emphasized descriptive and advocacy literature, neither one of which are helpful in building theoretical sensitivity, as well as having been instructed in other academic contexts to first create and outline, then write into it.

[16] For a succinct discussion of this, see Glaser (205b).

[17] I share with learners an ever-growing list of do's and don'ts about writing up a theory that is much too long to replicate here.

[18] The learning process for students in the Fielding/ELC grounded theory program continues through grounded action exercises (not discussed here) after which they move into dissertation groups which meet regularly and in which they receive faculty and peer support all the way through their research and write-up. The initial learning process and assignments give them sufficient experience, skills, and confidence to begin their research. It puts them at the starting line for the real thing. For readers who are teaching grounded theory to doctoral students and supervising grounded theory dissertations I recommend a similar support system.

Closing Thoughts

Over the years I have observed that most students who want to learn and do grounded theory are doctoral students working on dissertations, albeit from a wide variety of disciplines. So my suggestions have been aimed towards doctoral level training. Doctoral programs are often very internally competitive. This can create learning barriers between faculty and students and students and students. As I suggested earlier, for many learners achieving the myriad skills and new ways of thinking required to learn grounded theory can be daunting. In my view it is important to avoid the "weeding out" atmosphere that is prevalent in many doctoral programs and create an atmosphere of collegial support and encouragement, with the aim of helping all students succeed. If learners fear grading and being judged, they are likely to proceed cautiously rather than fearlessly. Furthermore, if learners are reluctant to share ideas with one another because they fear having them "stolen" learning is inhibited, particularly in grounded theory. In teaching classic grounded theory, it helps to have students who are willing to stick their necks out and try new things. As Glaser suggests in the introductory remarks to his seminars, "atmosphering" is important. Failing to create and sustain the proper atmosphere can undermine even the best, most informed teaching content.

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