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Blocking Conceptualization[1]

Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D., Hon. Ph.D.

My purpose in this chapter is to go into some detail on the various blocks to conceptualization that the reader can and should be wary of so he/she can either avoid them, deal with them adequately to do a GT study, or submit to them humbly for greater gains for the moment. They are authoritative blocks, preconceptions, inability to adequately conceptualize, the initial confusion and regression, multi-version view of GT, QDA requirement blocks, data collection overload, data coding overload, peer reviews, dealing with jargonizing GT, and being a novice both in experience and in scholarship with GT. Obviously these are related in many ways and I have dealt with them a bit in above chapters on helping coding. My goal here is to put them into relief for focused attention and thought so they can be avoided or handled.

Generating good GT conceptual ideas requires the researcher to be a non citizen for the moments of research so he can come closer to letting the data speak for itself. He/she needs to be free for the research of the normal issue orientations of everyday life so he/she must limit normal citizen bias. Suspending issues of gender, age, color, religion, nationality etc. are important. Therefore to avoid this kind of block the researcher should not get into a study when he/she cannot handle the issue as data impartially; not handle as neither right nor wrong. Gender studies are particularly sensitive and hard to avoid strong bias orientations. Face sheet data has to emerge as relevant, and often none do. They cannot be assumed as in QDA. So many GT studies have nothing to do with face sheet data.

Authoritative guidance is a major block to conceptualization. Authoritative guidance comes in all forms -- companies, committees, supervisors, senior colleagues, academic department, IRB requirements etc. And

[1] This paper is Chapter 10 of Dr. Glaser's new book, *Getting Out of the Data: Grounded Theory Conceptualization,* (Sociology Press, 2011)

if they do not know GT with an adequate level of experience they are likely to block coding in favor of looking for preconceived concepts and problems and demanding conformity to bureaucratic requirements which block emergent coding and herald QDA descriptive requirements. We all know this.

Evert Gummeson, a professor of business, writes: "Although most companies confess to the marketing concept claiming they are customer –centered with customer needs and customer satisfaction as their prime goal which is compatible with GT they still want to see research descriptions on preconceived practices of marketing, textbook theory, short term profits or long term goals or quick fixes and demand for facts on preconceived issues." In sum, in this research situation there is no room for momentarily disregarding existing demands while conceptually coding for the emergent.

The business conceptual jargon leaves little room for letting GT tell its theory. This goes on in many academic fields of intense jargon, such as psychology, political science, psychiatry, economics, to name a few that leave little or no room for new concepts in the authorities view. Their jargon is supported by taken for granted assumptions that influence what is attended to by extant theory which blocks attending to coding for what is really going on. Often the local jargon codes are wrong or miss the gist of what is going on, yet are assumed to have validity. So be careful of using in vivo codes that have no grounding, even if they are descriptively captivating, and they will likely block coding using the cc method. The in vivo code must have interchangeable indicators. If local jargon emphasizes an in vivo code that names a pattern with relevance, fit and grab imagery, and passes the indicator requirements of validity the researcher is fortunate. It does happen but not often. And when it does, the participants usually see the pattern descriptively by its indicators, not conceptually though they did conceptualize. For example a few hospital doctors may say they are acting supernormal when on duty, and then describe what they mean. It is only a quick thought for the researcher to conceptual the pattern as supernormalizing as he sees and

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hears others acting supernormal. Open conversations without structured interviews will tap whatever in vivo concepts respondents may have.

Coding overload blocking happens two ways. One incident coding produces too many codes that are not allowed in GT as they are not patterns. They are extraordinary, particularistic and probably not relevant. Coding beyond saturation of many categories, that is, each category has too many indicators, and then not stopping generating more codes easily ends in too many codes. Both sources of coding overload result from not choosing a core category. And can be stopped by choosing a core category and doing selective coding on the core and then doing a substantive theory about it. One only discovers at any one time a piece or slice of the data for a core category. Other possible cores are another study of the same data, The researcher should be aware of this occurrence as the second project grows in his head due to his knowledge of the data. The second possible study should be held in abeyance, certainly not included in the first study. In short, cut the theory down to a single size. Unless fatigue has set in, the second study awaits with partial coding already done. Do not let two studies block each.

Having no personal compatible schedule, plan and/or a series of deadlines can subtly block a study. Johnben Loy wrote me "without a deadline I found myself dragging on the research for months. I had a deadline imposed which galvanized me into action." Johnben finished on schedule then and received his PhD. A schedule with a deadline challenges blocks and removes many of them. So the researcher, should if needed, set himself a comfortable schedule that he can stick to based on his personal pacing as he/she knows he can comply with and keep up. This stimulates the delayed action learning of GT by regular experience. It also keeps up preconscious processing and develops confidence in autonomous decisions. I always advise, for example, the plan of coding a bit every night to keep the constant experiencing of positive effects flowing.

I have seen the advice "try to see action in each segment of data. Attempt to code using words that reflect action." This

could be a preconceptive block on coding if taken too seriously. Let whatever emerges emerge, just not looking for patterns to code and name which reflect action or processes. Many are static like types, dimensions, cutting points etc.

I have suggested line by line coding as a way of screening and interviews or field notes for emergent interchangeable indices. One should move fast looking for indicators, and then skip and dip in the data once a code has been saturated. Thus line by line is merely the beginning. It can get out of hand and block theory if an authority suggests to a researcher to code each line indefinitely and independently, which leads into single indicator concepts, then concept overload with a loss of formulation of core substantive theory. Single indicator codes lead to a range of non valid, particularistic codes that never gain groundedness. One indicator does not make a code.

I have mentioned many times about over coding, but the same caution goes to caution against under coding. An exciting code like supplanting or like desisting residual selves can block further coding for the joy of explaining at length by description what it entails. The conceptual grab of the code can feel thrillingly theoretical with great general implication and feel that all that's necessary for a theory. Then the study become one of conceptual description, not GT. Keep up the coding for the sub core codes and their properties until you reach theoretical completeness; keep up selective coding. Do not let making sense speculatively take over, as it can easily as sense making comes easily to many. Sense making can easily lead to speculative theory on one code that is exciting.

Many people are meaning finders, irrespective of data and can conjecture a potpourri of eclectic, at will codes with no grounding on a exciting core They quickly sense make data to stop chaos or not knowing while following the "grab" of the category. The result being speculative theory. One has to point out to them that this is not GT which requires cc method coding.

Ruth Naylor coined the term "fear zone" to write about the confusion and doubts that occur and block the novice when starting the initial coding for a GT. She sees fear as the

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main concern for the majority of novice PhD candidates who are not completely brimming with autonomy and self confidence. They need to be ok'd with experienced guidance. As Ruth said "I have been writing to Marko and also wrote to Annette and both of them sent great advice which helped me get unstuck (out of the fear zone and into the do it anyway zone)" Thus the fear zone that comes with starting a GT blocks coding, which block can be relieved by good authoritative guidance. But it can be a solidified block brought on by inexperienced in GT QDA advisors, both informal and more emphatically formal PhD advisors, who cannot tolerate the students confusion and wish to see extensive QDA description and coverage to feel themselves comfortable.

The uncomfortable, inexperienced supervisor will form up the novice student with preconceived categories, committee and school requirements to undo the confusion and rescue him from fear. The experienced supervisors and colleagues will themselves learn from their help to handle unclear coding and confusion, which redounds to the confidence of the novice. Thus the inexperienced GT researcher questing for help, usually a PhD candidate, must chose their authoritative advisor help wisely or they can be derailed and blocked from coding easily. Joining computer networks of GT researchers on the PhD is great for encouragement, support, specific helpful ideas and relieving blocks.

Also the inexperienced GT researcher must avoid or learn how to handle the inexperienced supervisor, who wants periodic work checks and then imposes QDA requirements. Fears cannot be successfully handled when taken to senior advisors who do not do or understand GT from reading and especially from experience. The novice must know his "outs" or he will find he must compromise with the performing requirements of committees and advisors. If the novice cannot find help then he can be lost two ways, both in doing the GT alone as a minus mentoree and in being at odds with his department's socially structured vested fictions yielding schedule and content requirements activated by a conforming supervisor.

The fellows of the GT Institute are all experienced authoritative helpers and, of course, my and Judith Holton"s seminars rescue many novices quiet successfully. And as GT spreads throughout the world the availability by internet grows of experienced colleagues who can help support the novice and support the GT conceptual thinking style. Asking questions of these colleagues will help handle personal impasses starting with proper conceptual coding using the cc method

The fear zone of inexperience is expressed by many. One wrote Judith Holton who is a highly experienced GT researcher: "I am a little bit struggling with my GT analysis as I have reached the conception theoretical level enough and instead tend to go back to the descriptive out of anxiety (arising from not knowing where my analysis is going)" Judith replied wisely "As to staying conceptual, yes it is easy to slip back into description when we are worried about where our analysis is going and whether what we are is going to be good enough. The important thing is to recognize that this regression is a natural part of the GT process and that the antidote is to stay open and trust in emergence. It works." Yes, keep going and trust to preconscious processing of interchangeable indices and that the eureka moment is not far away.

Another student wrote: "had supervisor meeting with my two supervisors only yesterday… I am in a lot of difficulty with supervisors understanding of classical GT and descriptive writing. In final analysis I have tried to hold on to principles of GT in my write up style, but I am under a lot pressure to complete second drafts of chapters and I lack support from my supervisors." The concern is clear: being supervised by authoritarian professors conforming to the school, department and QDA requirements can easily block the novice GT researcher from the very start or even midway into his research. The novice should be careful of the program and supervisors he chooses. Taking on the QDA formal approach to the Ph.D. with a GT analysis may not work, the block maybe too hard to overcome for the novice. The novice should be humble. Initial fear of doing GT correctly cannot be successfully allayed when taken to supervisors or colleagues

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who do not understand GT from the "having done it" experience. The GT jargon can be learned by reading my books but requires experience of doing a full GT research study, to not let the jargon slip into QDA description.

In spite of what Tony Bryant says "by late 1990's GT was far and away the most widely claimed method for social research, eclipsing all other methods put together," many researchers engaging in GT still have little or no awareness of conceptualization, conceptual level and therefore the integration of conceptual levels. Because of the multi-version view of GT they still can do QDA description as GT and not know the difference or simply know of QDA's legitimacy as supposed GT. This, of course, accounts for the volume of jargonizing GT advocates supposedly legitimating GT.

The draw of QDA is clear. Most people see description as a natural way of seeing life. Many researchers find it hard, if aware at all, to give up time, place and people in favor going on the conceptual abstract. Changing to a conceptual level requires an ability many QDA researchers may not have to develop or barely have Furthermore, many QDA researchers have an annoyed aversion to being categorized by or within a pattern, preferring to remain particularistic and descriptive. In sum, there is a general block among researchers to lifting data to a conceptual level since most people are descriptive. I am always surprised and delighted when an individual emerges from the group that NEEDs the conceptual level, in spite of all the descriptive research. The reason is that they have conceptual ability, however latent, so description seems repetitive and often almost boring by saying the same thing over and over in different ways, when they have automatically conceptualized the pattern. GT then becomes just what they want to do for research. Choosing to do a GT starts their autonomy from fellow QDA students and QDA supervisors. The drift back to the descriptive level at times occurs as natural, but not by choice, as they code and learn the skill to maintain the conceptual level and a new way of thinking.

Keep in mind that suspending QDA rules of data collection and analysis, as well as the literature so as not to block a GT study, does not mean throwing out all one has

learned. The cc method is after conceptualizations of "what is" not what ought to be. Suspending and remaining open to what is really going on will soon transform the beginning novice researcher to simply going where the data leads. Most will go through the eureka effect (finding a core category with grab) fairly soon and then suspending becomes routine. But keep in mind that for the novice and his supervisor (s) they must be able to tolerate a period of ambiguity and not knowing to suspend extant, preconceived knowledge. One must stop overlaying what is going on by what should go on.

This is particularly hard for ideologically driven people or people with considerable research experience in other methodologies. They have some unlearning or new learning to do to supervise a GT research. Competitive department teachers add one more possible block to coding with full departmental support. I have seen that even though a PhD committee delivers the usual QDA rhetoric of worrisome accuracy, immaculate descriptive capture and conforming to a particular theoretical perspective rhetoric, they can still be overwhelmed by the richness of a GT, once the core and some sub core categories are discovered. Blocks are then lifted.

However if the worrisome accuracy concern persists in a committee by wanting many illustrations of codes like they are evidencing findings as valid and wanting the researcher to show how he/she got to the code, that can block coding. One comment on Anna Sandgren's dissertation "She did not give example of how she got to the concepts i.e. she should have illustrated the theses with field notes" Ana had to explain that illustrations are just that. They are not evidencing, and that codes are not findings requiring backup data. They are conceptual abstractions which can be varied by conceptual properties. Anna was not blocked, but a novice could very easily be blocked by such derailment to the descriptive level.

To be sure, the novice GT researchers using classical GT exhibit as best they can method loyalty to GT. But supervisors with method a loyalty demand to a QDA style will block the novice's coding from the very start. The supervisor will need to rescue the novice from "not knowing" and confusion by suggesting the loyal using of QDA frameworks

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and preconceptions to coding. Under this condition staying open will be closed down for the GT novice and the evolving learning curve of GT will be shut down as apparent ineptitude. Data overwhelm is likely to result. What the novice has to offer in being open to the emergent patterns is lost to the QDA description orientation and worse yet to descriptive redundancy of keeping the citing of interchangeable indices as if a generalization not a pattern. The novice's inexperience with GT is not a confusion block, it is an open benefit to fostering getting out of the data, but this is hard for the QDA supervisor to grasp.

It very difficult to understand and develop method loyalty to GT prior to using it. But if the novice has the courage to let the problem concepts emerge in the face of QDA demands, once the main concern and core category emerge, it provides an armor very hard for the QDA supervisor to pierce and tell the novice something different. Especially hard, even if the /QDA supervisor wants to see pet codes or what he feels should be going on. QDA descriptive capture will soon be forgotten in favor of the emergent patterns of main concern and core category and further into the memoing for a theory. I cannot say it often enough: it is vital for the novice to find supervisors who enhance the openness of coding. That is, find a supervisor with open enhancer strategies.

Some schools through their departments and then committees require lock step planning for the dissertation. This kind of planning does not suit a GT. It blocks the experiential growth that comes with the flexibility of abstract coding. The implied plans are typical for QDA descriptive work and descriptive generalizations and not intended for GT abstraction which requires a variable action like everything is going on at once as the theory grows, at whatever pace. The pace is usually faster than a preconceived plan predicts which is often recited in heavily jargonized terms.

Here is an example of a plan written on Jan 2011 that goes on too long: "I am currently reading Theoretical Sensitivity and Doing GT as preparation. Thereafter, I hope to secure an on-line support as I prepare my proposal. My faculty is comfortable with my choice of GT, but I still have to

succeed with my proposal. I hope to have the proposal ready for June 2011 and ethical approval for access to the hospital also by June 2011. Then I will probably need a year of being a big ear with observation and interviewing before the main concern and its continual resolution should emerge. That would leave me with six to nine months to integrate the relevant literature into the emerging GT. Then, six months to do final writing up, editing and defense of the PhD. Then, hopefully I would write the book/paper either in 2013 or 2014. I hope to finish my PhD in about 24 to 30 months."

Obviously this plan is based on inexperience with actually doing GT as she will soon learn. It is bare of the immediate disciplines that arise when doing coding, such as coded every night, constantly stop to memo, trusting to the emergent using the cc method, selective coding and theoretical sampling as to what is next, etc. Staying open to the fours S's of GT is important. GT goes on simultaneously, sequentially, serendipitously and short range schedules. So much goes on all at once as it sequences, no preconceived plan fits.

The distinction between QDA and GT requires that the dominant QDA community gets the difference between conceptual and descriptive research and that coding to conceptualize based on the cc method procedure is the only way to really know GT. The QDA continued jargonizing of GT suppresses coding in favor of data worries, lofty talk and worrisome accuracy. As I said in my book "Jargonizing" (Sociology Press, 2009), the GT vocabulary is way ahead of the GT method and GT product. Jargonizing GT is usually without proper GT meaning. It does not require procedural talk. It just remodels GT to a QDA with no clear procedures, folksy idioms, rhetorical musings and lofty talk. To conceptualize is ignored by QDA writers in favor of description, so implied is why should they care about the careful procedural emergence of codes. All this blocks the need to get out of the data abstractly by starting the real work of GT: conceptually code. The novice will feel blocked until he finds an experienced GT guide. And as the volume of GT researchers increase with the jargoning popularity so does the blocking of conceptualization increase. However this also

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increases the many who run aground in the QDA confusion and then find and come to conceptual GT as true believers who have at last found their way.

One student writes: "I would like to come down and spend some time talking to Barney regarding my GT progress. I do not have any advisors who speak GT and the ones I do have continue to have suggestions that I leave GT and use QDA. I have a deadline for a pre-reading on 12/9 10 and I submitted a bit of conjecture to satisfy the college and it was a total waste of time." So I met with her and afterwards she wrote: "Thanks so much for yesterday. I am so excited at the theory that is writing itself right before my very eyes."

Here is more testimony examples to the exhilaration from coding: Another student wrote me, Linda Poiseroux, "Honestly, using GT is the best choice I ever made. It was amazing to see the data emerge and form into categories/ properties allowing the main concern and core category to appear. What a thrill", Phyllis Stern wrote me, "Well the theory does rise up off the page as the terms implies, but after painstaking coding, when you finally get it, it seems like a second coming" Another student wrote me "also I want to tell you that when you go back to data you see things you never anticipated."

Bashing GT coding by QDA researchers can severely block coding. A student writes, "GT studies have been criticized for possessing some mystical quality where by a slight of hand produces a list of "themes" and we are invited to take them on trust that they somehow emerged from the data without being offered step by step explanation of how they have been built up." It is difficult to ascertain the credibility of research if the product cannot be linked explicitly with the process... The way in which the process is actually executed remains largely elusive with inconsistent and therefore no way to ensure credible and trustworthy research." This researcher has absolutely no conceptual ability or vision and does not study my books. He just jargonizes wanting QDA evidential proof. How codes are discovered is a simple a set of procedures in print since 1965. His bashing however naive and unwarranted and unscholarly

could easily block novice researcher who is in the fear zone.

Suddaby, in his paper "What is Wrong with GT" bashes GT too. He says, "A common characteristic of most efforts to use GT is a neurotic overemphasis on coding. That is the ridged application of GT techniques might produced passable results but such mechanical approach usually lacks the spark of creative insights upon which exemplary research is based." This statement would block the coding joy of any novice GT researcher with its doubtful implications of coding. Again, he has a very "QDA view of conceptual research and a lack of knowing GT procedures. Suddaby complains, "The process of data analysis including techniques and category creation should be made apparent to the reader." The cc method paper has been published everywhere and first in 1965, So much for his poor scholarship which leads to bashing GT.

There is excessive concern of ethic committees and IRB boards for the privacy of respondents when doing GT. There is no notion that their concern may apply to QDA description but not to GT abstraction, where time, place and people are left out. They do not know the description/conception difference. As a result they require consent forms and usually approved interview guides, and specific data collection populations, all of which block flexible data collection, flexible coding and theoretical sampling. IRB requirements can strangle the open, not preconceived nature of GT. GT cannot legitimately follow the theory quest as it emerges from coding and changes relevancy of topics, populations, locale, etc. Open conversations, so useful to emerging codes, as a byproduct of strict interview guides are forbidden by consent forms. They go on anyway, but their forbidden nature is blocking of full collection and use in order to keep them non-revealed.

Some professors of QDA research say that "doing good research demands some form of linkage between the philosophical, theoretical perspective and methodological consideration that together constitute a coherent approach to knowledge. This stops coding in its tracks. It is rhetorical with no meaning for GT. How to solve this is not the researcher's

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problem. Trying to link GT with a philosophical, theoretical perspective blocks it use to a particular data. It privileges one data type over another, like specializing in constructionism or symbolic interaction or systems theory. It does not address the notion that GT is a general methodology using any data. This lofty talk demands that the data used be with the theoretical perspective chosen All this detracts from the "all is data" and all data has patterns, general approach of GT.

Coding as soon as possible shortens this fear zone period by the experiencing the exhilaration and joy of the "drugless trip" ending in the "eureka, I've found it" feeling of discovery. The reader can see from this chapter that I could go on endlessly to show that there are countless blocks to coding conceptually coming from many quarters. They are, to cite a few: school PhD requirement structures, PhD formats, department structures and perspectives, inexperienced GT professors as supervisors or external critics, preconceptions from many sources, IRB requirements', journal peer reviewers, QDA bashers of GT, novice fears, general and authoritative inexperience with GT, inability to conceptualize, multi-version view of GT, tape recording, computer management of concepts etc., etc. most which follow the standard QDA description model. There are more.

I can only hope that the researcher using GT will be aware and wary of these blocks, and more unmentioned here, by knowing many indicators of them, for himself and his GT'er friends, and overcoming them to take a chance on conceptual coding and the ensuing exhilaration of the drugless trip to the eureka moment of discovery.

In closing this chapter, here are my comments on several data worries quotes from social constructivists with no realization of GT abstraction. These quotes are a sure block to coding what is going on:

Quote: "With much of emphasis placed on coding procedures, theoretical saturation and theorization, little reflexive attention appears to have been placed on the construction of interview data and possible statements for a reflexive approach to GT to handle criticism of ways of using data collected via traditional GT methods."

My comment: There is no traditional data collecting methods in GT. "All is data" and it is up to the researcher to figure out what data he/she has and code its patterns. What reflexive means here is not detailed! It is just lofty talk to engender data worries which in turn blocks coding for the abstract level. Use of data is the emphasis in the quote, whatever that means in constructionism, but it sure blocks GT coding by the cc method.

Quote: "Constructivist grounded theorists acknowledge that categories, concepts and theorization do not merely emerge from data but rather are defined by the researcher. The constructionists list several limitations of GT data: 1.GT researcher bases his data on his own conception of respondent. 2. He treats the respondent as a vessel of facts. 3. He ignores the inscription devices in the construction of the interview and 4. He treats the data collected as reports that are reality."

My comment: These are descriptive data worries of QDA researchers. "All is data" for the GT researcher. Whatever the data is it is coded by the cc method for patterns, which are not preconceived. If anything the constructionist says is relevant, it will emerge in the coding. The abstract level of GT leaves the constructionist concerns behind to wallow and wrestle on the descriptive level. What is real for the GT researcher is exactly what is going on in his "whatever" data and data mix.

Quote: "Constructionists acknowledge the mediating role of how categories and concepts are constructed by interviewer and respondents as coproducers of knowledge."

My comment: Thinking about this statement would block anyone from coding. It sews doubts about codes using the cc method for abstraction in favor of accurate description, if ever achieved without argument doubts. It puts more block on abstract coding by emphasizing coverage of descriptive data and worse yet, by emphasizing the particularism of each individual respondent, so impossible to generalize. If a bias exists in anyone interview, it is just another variable to be conceptualized. It is hard to jump into GT conceptual coding thinking about all this, which has a series of descriptive

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concerns with no realization that GT coding follows a pure, variable conceptual track.

Quote: "From the outset of a study the lived experience of the participant is assumed to be accurate and then is mediated by the researchers' various technologies and inscription devises he employs. As the interview travels though these technologies less of the respondents experiences are captured. Yet, paradoxically the constructivist researcher provides the participants with more responsibility and more voice in categorizing themselves as much as possible."

My comment: All this is absolute NO for GT. The GT researcher just codes the data, over many respondents, for patterns of what is going on as "all is data". Very few respondents know their abstract latent patterns, and if one does seem to that is just more data to code. The goal of constructionism is descriptive coverage and coproduction of accurate knowledge. This not the goal of GT abstraction. In GT, respondents are not the passive vessel of objective knowledge as constructionists accuse GT of treating them. They are the data, whatever it may be, and the data is coded conceptually in abstraction of their lived experiences. Respondents' participation to a level of collaborative research is totally irrelevant for GT.

The constructionist block on conceptual coding, however unintentional, is clear. Their needs have no place in GT research. Nor do constructionist views on data collection make for an out dated classical GT that needs renewed legitimacy. Constructionism is just a different methodology trying to take over classical GT using the multi-version view of GT to accuse GT of failing descriptive objectivity. For GT their arguments are not relevant. The novice GT researcher would find it hard to code if he/she joins in this discussion, which can easily be ignored.