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Grounded action: Achieving optimal and sustainable change

By Odis E. Simmons, Ph.D. & Toni A. Gregory, Ed. D.

Abstract

Grounded action is the application and extension of grounded theory for the purpose of designing and implementing practical actions such as interventions, program designs, action models, social and organizational policies, and change initiatives. Grounded action is grounded theory with an added action component in which actions are systematically derived from a systematically derived explanatory grounded theory. Actions are grounded in the grounded theory in the same way that grounded theories are grounded in data. Grounded action was designed by the authors to address complex, multi-dimensional organizational and social problems and issues.

The Roots of Grounded Action: The Real World Context of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a primarily inductive research method that was developed in the mid-1960's, by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). As they pointed out, before their discovery of grounded theory, methods of social research focused mainly on how to deductively verify logically elaborated theories. They suggested it was equally important to have a method by which theories could be systematically generated, or "discovered," directly from data. After their original collaboration, Glaser's and Strauss' views of what constituted grounded theory diverged. Because Glaser's developments in grounded theory are more suitable for practical applications, grounded action is rooted in grounded theory as articulated by Glaser.

A rigorous, inductive approach to theory development that provides a "controllable theoretical foothold" (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, p. 268) and gets at what is really going on in action scenes and contexts is a crucial tool for developing effective, sustainable solutions to social and organizational problems. Grounded theory fits this bill. As Glaser (1998) notes:

> *…fields with high impact dependent variables, variables that deal with learning, pain or profit, began looking for a methodology that gave them answers that fit, worked were relevant and easily modifiable to constantly changing situations…A methodology was needed that could get through and beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the*

> *underlying process of what is going on so that professionals and laymen alike could intervene with confidence to help resolve the participants' main concerns.* (pp. 4-5).

In grounded theory, getting at what is really going on in an action scene/context is ensured by continually asking:

What is actually happening in the data? What is the basic social psychological problem(s) faced by the participants in the action scene? What is the basic social psychological process or social structural process that processes the problem to make life viable in the action scene? (Glaser 1978, p.57)

In contrast, actions deduced from logically elaborated theories that are not grounded in what is really going on in context are unlikely to fit the needs of the context for which they were designed. Many years of experience show that actions based on ungrounded ideas more often than not fail to provide meaningful long-term outcomes.

The power of grounded theories in real world contexts has been apparent since the method evolved out of a study of death and dying in hospitals, conducted by Glaser and Strauss in the mid 1960's. Their grounded theories of "awareness contexts" (Glaser and Strauss, 1964) and the "death trajectory" process (Glaser and Strauss, 1968, 1970) that emerged from this study had important implications for improving the way in which health care professionals manage the personal care and organizational aspects of dying patients and their families.

One of the earliest grounded studies is Pape's (1964) study of high job turnover amongst young nurses. Pape discovered that, although it was a serious problem for them, health services administrators had failed to understand the source of low retention rates among young nurses. They incorrectly attributed it to factors within the work situation—what would ordinarily be viewed as "job dissatisfaction"—which as Pape discovered were irrelevant to the nurses' decisions to quit their jobs. As a result the administrators' retention efforts were ineffective. Using grounded theory, Pape discovered what was relevant to the nurses. She conceptualized her discovery as "touring," which was related to personal rather than professional factors. As Pape portrayed it:

> *What makes them different from workers migrating in search of greener job pastures is that, for them, a job is merely the way to support themselves decently while they see the sights, sample the social life, have a bit of fun and then move on. These nurses do not follow any orientation to work as a central focus of living; their attention is directed to values outside the job environment and they use their work as a means to other, unrelated ends.* (p. 37)

The nurses were able to indulge themselves in this manner because the high demand for their services provided them with the opportunity. Pape's discovery framed the issue in such a way that high turnover of nurses could be seen as an opportunity rather than as a problem, increasing the potential for addressing the issue in creative ways.

Another example of a grounded theory study that provides highly useful, practical understandings is Lee's (1993) study of "doing time" in prison. Lee studied how new prisoners adjust to the personally problematic aspects of prison life and how they manage the difficulties presented by having an excessive amount of time on their hands, with little control over how they manage it. Lee's theory shows how "doing time" relates to almost every aspect of prisoners' lives (adjusting to incarceration, managing excess time, managing the subjective slowness of time, lack of meaningful activity, lack of privacy, lack of proprietorship, emotions, relationships within the prison, relationships outside prison, and so forth). Lee's theory is highly useful for anyone working with inmates (correctional professionals, organizations dedicated to helping prisoners and their families, social workers, counselors). Furthermore, Lee's theory could (and has been) easily be modified to fit other situations in which "doing time" has problematic consequences, such as classrooms.

A further example of a grounded theory theory study that has high value in an applied context can be found in Charmaz's (1994) study of men who are suddenly confronted with the onset of a serious chronic illness. Charmaz's grounded theory depicts the process by which men in this situation adjust to the new reality presented by their health predicament. Her study has important implications for health care workers, including M.D.'s, nurses, social workers, and therapists (psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, counselors). Understanding the various stages that such men progress through, and how they move from one stage to another, will enable professionals who work with them to more carefully and accurately shape patient care. Careful, accurate care is literally of critical importance in the care of chronically ill patients.

Simmons' (1994) grounded action, participant observation study of the counseling/psychotherapy field holds significant potential for improving the practice of working professionals in that field. The primary product of this study is a novel approach to counseling/psychotherapy that Simmons refers to as "grounded therapy." Grounded therapy is a methodological rather than preconceived theoretical approach to counseling/therapy that, as a form of grounded action, incorporates many of the methodological features of the grounded theory research method. Rather than applying extraneous, preconceived therapeutic interpretations, diagnoses, labels, and such to clients, the grounded therapy approach treats each counseling/therapy case on its own terms. Grounded therapy systematically generates explanations and

interventions out of information (data) collected in an open-ended fashion. It is designed to discover what is really going on in each case. In this manner, interventions are derived that closely meet the requirements of individual circumstances, rather than being based in general clinical categories that are applied, often force fitted (Glaser, 1978), to individual clients.

Research by Gregory (1996, 1999; Kleiner, Roth, Thomas, Gregory & Hamell, 2000) and Gregory and Lewis (1996), in the technology and oil industries, are excellent examples of studies in which grounded theory provides greater insight into the dynamics of organizations as they specifically relate to managing diversity. As a result of her work in organizations, Gregory has discovered that the common denominator in all diversity issues is that they involve a process of learning that occurs at different levels for different individuals. She has also discovered that the degree to which this process is understood and can be used to produce positive outcomes of “diversity tension" (Thomas & Gregory, 1994, 1995), the conflict that arises between people of diverse backgrounds, appears to be related to aspects of human development and the capacity of the individual for transformative learning (learning that moves an individual to a higher level of understanding and action). Gregory (1996, 1999) was the first to discuss the relationship between organizational learning and diversity and the possibility of resolving diversity conflict through applying the principals of transformative learning.

Grounded Action: Addressing Complex Issues in Context

Grounded action was designed specifically for the purposes of investigating and addressing complex organizational and social problems and issues. We maintain that the key to understanding and addressing such issues is to systematically discover the basic social processes (Glaser, 1978) underlying and driving them. Grounded action

> *…is a tool that allows a researcher to get at the essence of the core issues or problems [from the perspective of the people involved in the problem]. In this way the core issues generated…are [as close as possible] to the main issues of the participants because they generated them. This makes the 'action' generated by the research more likely to penetrate the nucleus of the problem and bring forth more lucrative solutions for all concerned.* (Morris, 2000, p. 18)

Grounded action is effective at addressing complex, multidimensional social and organizational problems and issues because it addresses the complexity of the contexts within which they exist. Many attempts to solve organizational and social problems fall short because they are not systematically derived from data

nor theoretically sophisticated enough to address the multidimensional complexities inherent in the problems. Practitioners acting as change agents often fail to understand the importance of systematically generating an explanatory theory grounded in context, prior to action planning. However, the development of a theory that explains and clarifies the underlying, usually complex, sources of a problem is critical. Actions that are not directly and systematically related to what is really going on in the relevant action scene/context are destined to fail at producing and sustaining the desired change.

Uniqueness of Grounded Action

Grounded action is unique and distinguishable from other problem solving approaches in that:

1. Grounded action contains an important distinction between the social or organizational problem or issue for which a solution/intervention is being sought and the research problem. When designing their research practitioner-researchers often confuse the two, focusing more on what they think “ought to be" than discovering and explaining “what is." This derails the discovery process right from the beginning and leads to a disconnect between actions and what is really going on. In grounded action we characterize the initial identified practical problem or issue as the “action problem." As discussed below, the first step in the grounded theory/action process is to suspend the action problem. This prevents preconceptions inherent in the action problem from tainting the explanatory portion of the research. Consistent with grounded theory, the research problem is the discovered core variable.

2. Another important distinction made in grounded action is between the explanatory theory and the “operational theory." The explanatory theory is the core variable grounded theory, as it would be in any grounded theory project. The operational theory is systematically generated from and grounded in the explanatory grounded theory. The operational theory provides a grounded theoretical foothold for action planning and implementation (see below).

3. Grounded action involves a systematic, rigorous, empirically grounded procedure that addresses and systematically links explanation with action. Thus, actions can be directly tied to all significant properties and dimensions (and their interrelationships) of complex problems in need of complex solutions. It provides a sequenced action package that is grounded all the way through.

4. Like grounded theory, grounded action is designed to maximize the number of discovered variables and their interrelationships in a given set of data. Proposed solutions to complex problems must directly address the full complexity of the social systems and organizations within which they exist, including the likely

consequences of actions. And importantly, they must include an understanding of the factors that *promote, inhibit, and prohibit change*.

The failure to consider and understand the complex systems nature of a problem can result in problems of greater magnitude than the original problem of concern, often because of unforeseen and unintended consequences. For example, the policy makers who used the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) as a basis for public school busing did not foresee “white flight" and all of it’s many consequences for American cities and surrounding countryside as they were transformed into suburbs. Nor were the difficulties experienced by (particularly low-income) families of bussed children in maintaining involvement in their children’s schools anticipated. In hindsight, it is easier to see that Coleman’s research was far too narrow in scope to serve as a basis for an action of such great magnitude.

Grounded action is by its very nature a systems approach because it attempts to discover all (limited primarily by skills, time, and resources) relevant variables, including those that might undermine the intervention (they are part of what is really going on in the setting). In the course of doing a grounded action project the researcher/practitioner invariably discovers multiple problems and issues, each with multiple properties and dimensions, being processed by participants in an action scene, all related to one or two core variables (categories). The core variable approach to theory development, which grounded action borrows from grounded theory, provides for a multi level, well integrated, easy to understand theory that fits and is relevant to the full range of issues and problems being processed in the system being studied.

It is notable that seldom are these issues and problems the ones commonly identified. Participants usually understand the practical problems and issues they deal with on a day to day basis. But, because they experience them individually, they seldom are aware of or understand the latent patterns that underlie them, unless or until they are conceptually identified. For example, it is highly unlikely that the nurses in Pape’s (1964) study were aware that they were “touring," because each was making individual decisions that contributed to the latent pattern. However, had they been introduced to the concept, they would likely have gained new insights into their own choices and behavior, as well as the choices and behavior of their peers.

5. Grounded action gets at what is really going on because, consistent with grounded theory, it uses a process of discovery that begins with as few preconceptions as possible. There are no a priori formulations of problems, issues, hypotheses, or theories. There are no a priori categories, concepts, ideas, etc. to make sense of a subject matter *before* data are collected or analyzed. There is no presumption of the relevance of a particular type of information, category, variable, etc. Nor is there either intentional or, if properly

conducted, unintentional personal “investment" in a particular outcome or finding. Research questions are not identified in advance. Instead, in grounded theory/action the research process leads to the discovery of relevant questions in the data. To avoid theoretical preconceptions, consistent with grounded theory, grounded action integrates existing literature and research only after the generation of a theory is essentially complete.

6. Like grounded theory, grounded action can use qualitative and/or quantitative data. The nature and type of data to be used at various phases of a grounded action project is itself open to discovery. A project may begin with open-ended interviews, progress to observations, quantitative archival data, surveys, evaluation research, or whatever is indicated through the evolving analysis.

7. Although grounded action is generated in a particular context for use in that context, because it is about understanding and discovering generic variables, it remains open to modification, application, and transformation in new settings. Grounded action is modifiable and cumulative, through meta-analysis. A grounded action meta-analysis involves the integration of multiple substantive theories useful for generating a wider understanding of the multi-dimensional, systems nature of social and organizational problems. Although you may never be able to cover and understand all aspects of a particular problem, you will come much closer with a grounded action meta-analysis. It will provide sufficient understanding to formulate creative, workable, doable, effective actions without having to “start from scratch." Applications in new contexts would require only verification of the extent to which the existing grounded action theory is relevant and useful in the new context, as well as the discovery of variations unique to that context so that actions can be modified, if necessary. Ideally, the grounded action process will become an integral part of an organization or change effort. As actions are implemented changes occur in an ever-evolving process. It would be wise to keep pace with these changes.

8. As with grounded theory, a theoretical advantage made possible by grounded action is the potential integration of micro (social psychological) and macro (social structural) dimensions of a problem. For example, Bigus’ (Simmons) (1972) study of milkmen cultivating relationships with customers shows how changing social structural (macro) factors (economic, technological and cultural) in American society transformed the retail milk industry from one involving mere delivery of a product to one centered around the need to “cultivate" relationships with customers (micro).

9. In both traditional applied research and action research, the question of who conducts and participates in the research is usually predetermined. Applied research is ordinarily conducted by professional, usually university based, researchers. Action research is customarily conducted by participants in the action scene, in the case of participatory action research many participants.

From the perspective of grounded action, before a project begins decisions about participation simply involve too many yet to be discovered variables (organizational politics and power, skill levels, training needs, managing research resources and time, etc.) to make predetermined judgments and decisions. In grounded action, who or who doesn't participate is secondary to ensuring that the research and the actions are *grounded and theoretically rich.* Decisions about who participates and at what levels and in what ways are open to discovery.

For example, Morris (2000) began her grounded action dissertation research on the general topic of

education professions because of a personal curiosity about why so many members of her extended family had historically become professional educators. She began by interviewing family members. From this data she discovered a core category which she termed "fitting in." As a middle-school teacher, she decided to share the concept with her students. They became very excited because they recognized that fitting in was a central problem in their lives. At this point, Morris' realized the potential of including student participation in her emerging project. She enlisted students to help her fine tune the topic and to interview each other. They formulated the action problem as "how to fit in and still be yourself." Through their participation in the research, the students gained understanding about a problem central to their social lives. They wrote a booklet about what they discovered, for distribution to other classes and schools in their district. In all, they gained a unique, valuable educational experience. Morris gained a unique grounded action dissertation. Through her initial data collection and analysis, Morris's *discovered* an important research role for the students—one that the students could do, with minimal training.

Doing Grounded Action

Generating the explanatory theory

The explanatory theory provides a theoretical explanation, grounded in the reality of the people in the action scene/context. The explanatory theory captures and explains the behavior relevant to the problems or issues at hand. As we suggested above, this is critical for grounded action because programs, policies, and such, will work as intended only if they are grounded in the realities that are relevant to and experienced by participants in the action scene/context.

Generating the explanatory grounded theory involves the following steps:

1. Minimizing Preconceptions

Starting with as few preconceptions as possible is important to any grounded theory/action project. Although preconception is too large a topic to cover fully

here, we will mention several important measures that should be taken from the outset.

Suspend the action problem.

The action problem is the social or organizational problem or issue for which a solution/intervention is being sought, such as why women and minorities do not pursue information technology careers, or why students perform poorly. It is the "purpose" for conducting the research. Action problems usually come from participants in the action scene/context, often from persons in positions of power or high status. Because it is natural and ordinary for participants in a research context or action scene to have strong preconceived (to the research) understandings, explanations, interpretations, perspectives, beliefs, ideologies, and so forth, as well as imagined solutions to problems they are processing, it is important to begin the grounded action process by *suspending the action problem.* It is important to treat all of this purely as data for constant comparison—not as a problem but as an opportunity. This is critical because of the need to start the research process with as few preconceptions as possible. As Glaser (1978, p. 22) states, "…*the grounded theory researcher whether in qualitative or quantitative data, moves into an area of interest with no problem*."

At this point, the action problem functions only as a broad topic area, a general entry point into the research. For example, if one were interested in understanding and addressing the problem of poor student performance in middle schools, it would make sense to begin collecting data from that action scene. Certainly, it is important to remain open to the possibility of collecting data from other locations and sources, as informed by theoretical sampling and the ongoing grounded action process. However, you do not begin the study by "working" the action problem. You begin with open-ended observations and interviews of participants in the action scene/context, as is customary in grounded theory studies (other types of data such as archival documents, official statistics may be useful supplementary data).

Glaser (1978, p. 8) states, "*Good ideas must earn their way into the theory through emergence or emergent fit.*" Eventually, before it is inserted back into the process, possibly in modified form, the action problem will be required to "earn its way" like any other element of a grounded theory. Notably, it may be discovered that the action problem as originally conceived is *the wrong problem*! To focus on the action problem will likely be misleading because it may be found to be of minimal relevance or merely a property of the discovered core variable, not the core variable itself. For example one of the authors (Simmons) was asked to develop an "anger management" program for a social services agency. Using grounded action, he discovered that the relevant core variables were respect and power, not anger. Anger was a consequence, not the core category. With this discovery, the program was designed around helping clients to

understand and develop skills related to respect and power. In contrast, conventional anger management programs focus on anger by taking a pathologing, psychologizing, blaming approach that stems from the assumption that “anger problems" are usually, if not always, a psychological property of the individual, rather than a response to relationships or other types of life circumstances.

Discovering the research problem

Rather than beginning with a clearly articulated research problem or question, grounded theory/action studies begin with only a general topic area. This general topic provides hunches about where and how to begin data collection, but does not lead the research. It is only a jumping off point.

The research problem in grounded theory/action is *necessarily* emergent, not preconceived. As Glaser (1992) notes:

> *…the research question in a grounded theory study is not a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. The problem emerges and questions regarding the problem emerge by which to guide theoretical sampling. Out of open coding, collection by theoretical sampling, and analyzing by constant comparison emerge a focus for the research.* (p. 25)

Above all, the research problem in grounded theory/action must be about the main concerns of participants in the action scene/context. As Glaser (1998) argues:

> *It is about time that researchers study the problem that exists for the participants in the area, not what is supposed to exist or what a professional says is important. “Whose relevance" drives the focus of a research project. Grounded theory requires that it is the relevance of the people in the substantive area under study. It is their main concern and their continual process of it that is the focus of grounded theory…* (p. 116)

The research problem in grounded theory/action is the discovered core variable. The core variable is the variable that accounts for the most variation around the main issues and problems being processed in the action scene/context. As Glaser (1998) says:

> *Always keep in mind, that grounded theory is an inductive approach that calls for emphasis on the experience of the participants. The goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory that accounts for the patterns of their behavior which are relevant and problematic for the participants.*

> *The core category is that pattern of behavior which is most related to all the other categories and their properties in the theory which explain how the participants resolve their main concern."* (p. 117)

For example, in Pape's (1964) study of high job turnover amongst nurses, the discovered core category is "touring." In Lee's (1993) study of prison life, the discovered core category is "doing time."

No preliminary literature review.

In grounded theory/action, you do not conduct a preliminary literature review, as is commonly done in other types of research. As Glaser (1998) states:

> *The traditional approach is to study the literature in a substantive area before one starts the research. Grounded theory's very strong dicta are a) do not do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is to be done, and (emphasis in original) b) when the grounded theory is nearly completed during sorting and writing up, then the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison. To state the point bluntly, these dicta have the purpose of keeping the grounded theory researcher as free and as open as possible to discovery and to emergence of concepts, problems and interpretations from the data. (*p. 67)

2. Data Collection

When conducting a typical grounded action project, you enter the field somewhere in the action scene/context and begin data collection (usually but not necessarily open-ended intensive interviews and/or unstructured observations), in the same manner you would begin any grounded theory study. The problems and issues being processed by the participants will lead to one or two core variables. By the nature of core variables, these core variables will be related to the action problem. Often they will not be of the nature that those who are concerned with the action problem preconceived them to be. They may modify the action problem as originally conceived, or even identify a new one. Because they are about what is relevant and how it is being processed by participants not only on a conscious but on a latent level they will better address the action problem. They will theoretically capture the full spectrum of what is really going on.

Because grounded action projects are usually conducted in specific action scenes, they will involve some level of participant observation. It is important to take field notes of observations so that they can be analyzed as data. However, open-ended intensive interviews usually yield the richest, densest data. But, of course, any type of data can be subjected to constant comparative analysis.

To ensure that you begin as openly as possible, it is beneficial to begin your initial interviews with a general “grand tour" type question. A grand tour question is a non-leading, open-ended question (not necessarily stated in question form) formulated so as not to indicate a preferred response, such as “Tell me about a day in your life" or “Tell me something about what it’s like to work here." From there, it is important that you follow the lead of the respondent. Later in the research, data collection, including what questions to ask, will be informed by the analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this process as “theoretical sampling."

> *Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges.* (p. 45)

It is important to note that there is no point during the grounded action process when data collection ceases by prior design. After actions have been planned and invoked they must be assessed and possibly modified. Theoretical sampling continues to guide decisions about data collection until the very end.

All participants in an action scene who may be relevant to the core variable are potential sources of data. For example, if the action scene were an elementary school, in addition to teachers, administrators, and students, who are usually included in education research, potential respondents would include janitors, secretaries and other clerical personnel, interns, volunteers, parents, or anyone else who has potential relevance.

3. Analysis

The analytical technique used in grounded theory/action is what (Glaser, 1965) refers to as constant comparative analysis. Constant comparative analysis begins immediately, as the first data is collected. This not only serves as a beginning for the emergence of a theory, but also provides informed hunches for theoretical sampling.

Constant comparative analysis involves relating data to ideas, then ideas to other ideas. This is done through “coding" the data. As Glaser (1978) puts it,

> *The essential relationship between data and theory is a conceptual code. The code conceptualizes the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators within the data. Thus, in generating a theory by developing the hypothetical relationships between conceptual codes (categories and their properties) which have been generated from the data as indicators, we 'discover' a grounded theory.* (p. 55)

Coding is conducted at two levels, substantive and theoretical. “Substantive codes summarize the empirical substance of the area of research. Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory" *(Glaser, 1978, p. 55).*

Substantive coding

The first phase in substantive coding is “*open coding*." In open coding, you code freely for as many categories as possible. You code for anything and everything that might fit. In open coding you ask three questions of the data (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). The first question is “*What is this data a study of?*" This question is about discovering the core variable, which becomes what the study is about. The second question is “*What category does this incident indicate?*" The long form of this question is “*What category or property of a category, of what part of the emerging theory, does this incident indicate?*" This question spurs you to think conceptually and theoretically. The third question is “What is actually happening in the data?" This question is designed to get at the social psychological or social structural issues and problems being addressed by participants in the action scene—what participants are “working on."

Once visible patterns emerge and induce the discovery of a core variable you begin “*selective coding*." At this point, you code selectively for matters materially related to the core variable.

Theoretical coding.

Theoretical codes are more abstract than substantive codes. They provide a theoretical frame that helps you organize and integrate substantive codes into theoretically meaningful relationships. Glaser (1978 & 1998) presents numerous “coding families," from which single theoretical codes can be drawn and tested for usefulness and fit. One example of a theoretical coding family is what Glaser refers to as “The six C's," which are “causes," “contexts," “contingencies," “consequences," “covariances," and “conditions." Glaser characterizes the six C’s as the “bread and butter" theoretical codes of sociology.

4. Memoing

"*Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding*" (Glaser, 1978, p.83). When writing memos, you should think and write theoretically, in a “stream of consciousness" fashion, with little consideration for grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and organization. You should write down ideas, even if they are hunches or don’t make immediate sense. You may make something of them later by using them for theoretical sampling or returning to the data for more selective coding. Some ideas may fall by the wayside; others may prove to be valuable to the emerging theory. Memos can always be cleaned up, modified, clarified, elaborated, reorganized and integrated with other ideas, at a later time.

Memoing takes precedence, because it provides the bridge between data and the emergent theory. Data are always available for analysis at any time. Ideas are fragile, so they should be written down at the *earliest possible moment*. Although memoing should take precedence, data collection, analysis and memoing are ongoing and overlap in a back-and-forth process, until “theoretical saturation" (Glaser 1978) is reached. However, memoing prevails throughout the *entire* grounded theory/action process. Ideas should always be written down, whenever they occur to you.

5. Integrating the Literature

Once you achieve confidence in the richness, depth, elaboration, and integration of your theory, it is time to begin reading literature. Any literature that you incorporate into your theory must be relevant and earn its way like any other aspect of a grounded theory/action study. Theoretical material from the literature is subjected to constant comparison as if it were data. Theoretical literature is used to reinforce, illustrate, example, or add something to your theory. You may find variations in the literature that weren’t in your particular data set. Literature may also generate ideas for theoretical sampling or additional selective coding of existing data.

6. Sorting and Theoretical Outline

Sorting refers not to data sorting, but to *conceptual* sorting of memos. The sorting process entails integrating and organizing memos into conceptual relationships, from which an outline of the theory emerges. A theoretical outline depicts all the major properties, dimensions, concepts, theoretical codes (which sometimes remain latent) and their relationships. In grounded theory/action the theoretical outline is emergent rather than pre-constructed. As Glaser (1978) says:

> *The analyst does not need a “ready made" outline to sort into. Rather the reverse is required in grounded theory…He should simply start sorting the categories and properties in his memos by similarities, connections, and conceptual orderings. This forces patterns which become the outline.* (p. 117)

The actual sorting process consists of cutting and pasting memos and sections of memos into the emerging theoretical outline. Sorting will likely stimulate more memos, more analysis, and even more data collection.

Generating the Operational Theory

The operational theory is where explanatory grounded theory leaves off and grounded action begins. The operational theory serves as a rationale and model for action. In grounded action, the operational theory is systematically grounded

in a well integrated, multi-dimensional explanatory theory that is grounded in data. In turn, this keeps the operational theory grounded in what is really going on in the action scene. And, it enables the operational theory to cover all relevant, important aspects of the action problem, as it is currently understood.

The operational theory can take the form of program designs, policies, calculated procedures, and such—whatever is indicated. It is a theoretical prediction about outcomes—what will happen if you take certain actions. In order for an operational theory to produce optimal and sustainable change, to the extent that it is practicable, *it must incorporate all important properties and dimensions of the explanatory theory.* If this is achieved, it will address the multivariate, systemic nature of the action problem.

The first step in generating an operational theory is to revisit the action problem in light of what has been discovered while generating the explanatory theory. The explanatory theory will be about what is really going on in the action scene/context—the issues and problems being processed by participants. This will likely cast new light on the action problem, which may consequently need to be dimensionalized, elaborated, clarified, and/or revised. The operational theory is generated using a process similar to that used for generating an explanatory theory. This ensures that the operational theory will be systematically grounded.

7. Analysis

Analysis for generating an operational theory consists of constantly comparing all major components of the explanatory theory to all relevant properties and dimensions of the action problem, looking for indicators in the explanatory theory as to possibilities for optimal and sustainable actions toward mitigating the action problem. Of course, each aspect of the operational theory must earn its way. Because the action problem and explanatory theory have now been fully grounded and developed, analysis is selective around such questions as:

• What does the explanatory theory indicate the real action problem is?

• What are the desired outcomes of the action? This is a values-based question that cannot be fully answered by the explanatory theory. The answer may also vary from the perspectives of different participants in the action scene, which may present the grounded action researcher with ethical dilemmas (see below).

• What does the explanatory theory inform us about assigning priorities to these outcomes? For example, priorities may be determined by which outcome(s) need to be accomplished before others can be addressed, they may be determined by currently available resources, they may be determined by political considerations within an organization, and so forth.

• What does the explanatory theory indicate about aspects of the action problem that need to be successfully addressed to bring about the desired change?

• What does this particular component of the explanatory theory indicate needs to be done in order to mitigate this particular aspect of the action problem?

• What capacity does each person or role in the action scene/context play and how would they need to change to bring about the desired results? How could this change actually be achieved? What are the "pushes and pulls" (Regalado-Rodriguez 2001) in the action scene/context towards or against these changes?

• What is possible, given the current circumstances (available time and resources, skills of participants, internal politics, etc.)?

• What are likely outcomes of implementing the operational theory? What are potential worst case outcomes? How can they be prevented? If possible, fallback and recovery plans should be devised.

From the frame of the action problem, each of these questions must be asked in relation to each relevant property and dimension of the explanatory theory. This will produce a grounded blueprint for action. You may also discover a need to double back in the process to clarify or fill in portions of the explanatory theory, by doing more analysis, memoing and/or data collection.

8. Memoing

As with an explanatory theory, the primary purpose of constant comparison in generating an operational theory is to induce ideas for theoretical memos. In this case, the ideas are about connections between the explanatory theory and actions that address the action problem. Not only is it important to generate ideas for action that are indicated by relevant components of the explanatory theory, but it is important to generate ideas for integrating them into an overall action plan that includes priorities, sequences, and given resources, politics, and such in the action scene, practical possibilities. The memo fund should also include memos on the action problem, as currently understood, considering the roles and stakes of all participants.

9. Sorting and Theoretical Outline

Once you have a sufficient fund of operational memos, you can begin sorting them into an outline for an operational theory—an action plan—which as we suggested above should include relevant components of the explanatory theory, priorities, sequences, and practical possibilities, as they relate to all relevant dimensions of the current action problem. As with an explanatory theory, the theoretical outline of the operational theory should be emergent rather than pre-constructed.

10. The Write-up

Grounded action projects may involve multiple write-ups, for different audiences, at different stages in the process. Once you have completed your explanatory

theory, you may choose to write it up as a scholarly piece, for publication. Or, you may delay the scholarly write-up until later in the project, so you can include discussions of the operational theory, actions, and results. Even if you don't do a write-up for a scholarly audience, you will likely be required to do one or more write-ups for stakeholders and/or funding sources. Each type of write-up will have different purposes with different audiences. It is important to keep this in mind when composing the write-ups. Whatever your audience or purpose, the relevance, fit, grab, conceptual clarity, theoretical integration, workability, and such of grounded/grounded action theories provides you with the opportunity for compelling write-ups.

Regardless of the write-up's purpose, the first draft is achieved through the memo sort. The structure of the theory (explanatory or operational) will provide the organizing structure for the theory portion of any type of write-up.

11. Implementing the Action

The action is the application of the operational theory towards solving the action problem. Like all other aspects of a grounded theory/action project, all actions taken must earn their way; they must be ultimately traceable back to and supported by data. The calculated actions constitute an empirical test of the explanatory and/or operational theory. If actions are fully grounded in dense, rich explanatory and operational theories they should significantly mitigate the action problem. Although it would be tempting to end the process at this point, it is not advisable, because without relevant measures how are you to know if specific actions have worked?

12. Transformative Learning

Grounded action is transformative. It involves a process of continually discovering, learning, rediscovering, and relearning. During the action stage there is ongoing reflection on the efficacy of the action plans. Did they work? What is the status of the problem, issue, context or environment after implementation of the actions? What modifications and improvements can and need to be made for solutions to be optimized and sustained? Have the actions resulted in unforeseen and/or unintended consequences? How can what was learned be transformed into a process of continuous organizational learning?

Because organizations and systems continually change and evolve, even in the absence of change initiatives, it is sometimes difficult to know exactly when to close a grounded action project. As we suggested above, ideally, the grounded action process will become an integral part of the organization or system. However, practicalities external to the grounded action research (e.g. resources, managerial decisions, etc.) may preclude this. In the absence of external requirements, the data and analysis will indicate when it is time to close a project.

The evaluation phase of the grounded action process is a measure and reflection on the efficacy of the explanatory and operational theories and the subsequent action(s) taken to mitigate the action problem. Because it is often expected or required by managers, funding sources, and such, traditional quantitative or qualitative evaluation measures may need to be included. If these types of evaluation measures are taken, they should be treated as fresh data and incorporated into the double-back process and subjected to constant comparison. Expectations, requests or demands for conventional evaluation measures is itself data, also worth of constant comparison.

Whether or not conventional evaluation measures are taken, it is important to continue doing interviews, observations, and constant comparative analysis, to measure the process of change, not just outcomes. There is seldom a point at which outcomes crystallize. The full grounded action process does not end when initial actions are implemented and outcomes are evaluated. The unfolding consequences of actions must be studied in process, both in terms of the effectiveness of the actions and the responses of participants.

The easy modifiability of grounded theory/action makes them ideal for this task. As the consequences of actions unfold they must be assessed in relation to the action problem, so you must continue data collection and analysis, memo writing, and modification of the explanatory and operational theories, as indicated, to theoretically keep up with changes brought about by the original action.

Modification also involves reformulating and adjusting actions as indicated. Solutions cannot be static. They must evolve as the problem, solutions, and context evolve. Undiscovered conditions and unforeseen effects may surface. The action problem itself may have morphed into a different set of issues or problems.

Participants in action scenes/contexts are usually also stakeholders in the action problem and how it is addressed. Thus, when actions are introduced, stakeholders will assess their relationship to the action and act accordingly. Because the purpose of grounded action is action, which always involves some sort of change, no matter how righteous the action problem may be and no matter how well grounded and rich the explanatory and operational theories may be, they will likely be cast in a competitive frame by some participants. There is no way around the fact that when you introduce change into an organization or social system, fear, resistance, and opposition will likely occur from some parties and support from others. Regalado-Rodriguez (2001) refers to this as the “push-pull dynamic." It is important to view this as data to be analyzed—as an opportunity not a problem. However, if you have done a thorough job of devising actions that are based upon a grounded understanding and consideration of the roles of all participants, these types of issues will be minimized.

If, as will likely be the case, the data and analysis indicate that involving stakeholders in developing ideas about how to implement and test actions would be useful and advisable, they should be incorporated into the process. This may even be done from the beginning, as part of the data collection process. For example when Simmons developed his “anger management" program (mentioned above), he began by pushing preconceptions aside and asking the first group of participants, “If you were me, how would you do this?" The core categories and design of the program emerged from this initial grand tour question.

13. Ethics

In addition to the ethical considerations of any form of research, because of the action orientation of grounded action, skilled grounded action researchers will be presented with unique ethical considerations. The two most likely ones are:

• Grounded action researchers need to consider the ethics of the original action problem, particularly when the research is commissioned by individuals in powerful positions who appear to have minimal consideration for the consequences of their actions on those over whom they have power. Grounded theory and grounded action are powerful. Skilled grounded action researchers should continually be aware of this in making decisions about how, where, and when to hire out their skills, and in some cases even to re-contract or terminate a project if discomforting ethical situations emerge.

• Desired outcomes may vary between different participants in the action scene; they may even be contradictory or mutually exclusive. This presents ethical dilemmas to the grounded action researcher who may, if only by default, be placed in the position of having to effectively “take sides" when planning actions. One option is to do what Glaser (in personal conversation) urges, “make your problem your topic" and treat this as data to be processed for a solution.

Why Do Grounded Action?

If any two words exemplify modern society, they might be “problem" and “solution." Everyone has ideas about what problems are or aren’t and how we should or shouldn’t go about attempting to solve them. We devote endless time, attention, and resources in our efforts to identify, define, prevent, and fix them. In one way or another, virtually all professions are engaged in this endeavor.

In our combined professional experience, as educators, consultants, researchers, and practitioners, we have closely observed and participated in a wide range of professional problem identifying and solving efforts, including, therapy/counseling, social work, organizational management and administration, diversity, public health, program development, anger management, parent education, alcohol education, K-12, undergraduate, and graduate education. We

have seen many interventions, programs, action models, change initiatives and such come and go, mostly with disappointing results. New actions are often met with excitement about their potential. Staff are trained. The intervention is put into play. Results are disappointing. Another intervention comes along. Results are the same. As this process repeats itself, eventually participants become jaded, cynical, pessimistic, and return to “normal," going about their work as they see fit. In our conversations and interviews with practitioners and those they serve, discussions about this process, and the frustrations that it entails, frequently emerge. Reluctant participants go through the motions, or even subvert the intervention, while maintaining a façade of support, compliance, and productivity. Evaluations are done, measurements are taken. They are often carefully crafted to ensure that funding continues, rather than to be true measures of efficacy. Things are made to “look good," but in reality the problem endures.

Oftentimes when new actions are introduced, fear and loathing rush through an organization. Changes in job responsibilities and organizational structure, the requirement that individuals acquire new knowledge and skills, cynicism about past actions, the elimination of jobs, and such, lead people to focus on their immediate needs and fears. An intervention can represent positive opportunities for some, negative for others (Gregory, 1996).

The above sorts of circumstances may serve to undermine an intervention, even if it’s a promising one. If these circumstances become chronic in an organization, rather than activities achieving their purpose, they can become the functional equivalent of digging holes and refilling them, reducing the effectiveness and productivity of the organization. The organizations may survive, but their goals and purposes remain elusive targets.

Despite the enormous resources public and private organizations and agencies put into solving social and organizational problems, the results have usually been disappointing. Perhaps as a society we are too optimistic in our belief that social and organizational problems can actually be substantially mitigated or solved. Be this as it may, we maintain that applying grounded action to social and organizational problems will produce optimal, sustainable, positive results in relation to previous approaches.

For example, most research and actions on the issue of diversity in organizations has suffered from a one-dimensional perspective, that of responding to and correcting perceived discrimination and inequity in company hiring patterns and workplace practices. Racial and gender discrimination has been preconceived as the primary motivating variable in studies and programs related to diversity (Cox, 1990; Gregory, 1996, 1999; Thomas, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2000).

Thomas (1991 & 1996) attempted to expand the understanding and study of diversity to include dimensions other than race and gender and variables other than discrimination. His work called attention to an extensive number and combination of diversity dimensions and an equally extensive number and combination of variables. He recognized diversity as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which could best be understood by developing a cohesive and comprehensive theory about the nature of diversity and its related dynamics. However, because of the continued focus on racial and gender discrimination and inequity, in spite of Thomas' work, the study of diversity has not advanced far from its roots in the civil rights movement forty years ago.

Gregory (1996, 1999) asserts that a more complete understanding of the dynamics of diversity is still open to discovery. We maintain that the most effective means of doing this is to take a fresh grounded theory/action approach by starting at the beginning. Like all grounded action research, this would involve suspending the issue of diversity as it is currently understood as an action problem, collecting and analyzing data, generating a grounded explanatory theory, more clearly articulating the action problem, then generating an operational theory from which optimal, sustainable actions can be derived. This may be a big undertaking, but we think a grounded action approach would be a productive way to address the issue.

Common approaches to problem solving are in-house actions designed by employees, actions designed by “expert" consultants, those designed by university-based applied researchers, and those designed as action research. None of these approaches have been as effective as we think they could and should be. The first two are often unsystematic in nature, subject to the predilections, preferences, interpretations, self-interest, knowledge, skills, experience, and so forth, of those who design and implement them. These factors can vary widely. Given the variable nature of these approaches to problem solving, it is impossible to address their strengths and weaknesses in the abstract.

University based, applied research is systematic, usually using commonly accepted research methods and scholarly theories, applied by highly educated, knowledgeable, trained, skilled, experienced research professionals. This allows for a critical assessment of strengths and weaknesses. However, applied researchers seldom have the quality and quantity of day-to-day experience in particular action scenes that participants have. Nor do they have the investments in actions and outcomes that participant-stakeholders have.

Action research is also systematic usually using commonly accepted research methods. But, the levels of education, knowledge, theoretical sensitivity, research training, skills and experience of its practitioners vary considerably. Because they are often practitioners not professional researchers, their

qualifications as researchers seldom match those of university-based applied researchers. Furthermore, in participatory action research they turn over major aspects of the research to participants with little or no research skills, experience, or theoretical sensitivity. Unless this is done carefully and mindfully weighing all potential negatives and positives and matching participants to tasks for which they are properly suited and trained the epistemological veracity of the research may suffer considerably. Enlisting participants in the research design and process may satisfy an otherwise commendable central philosophical preference of action research, but it raises serious potential for problems with the research itself.

The question of who's preconceptions (prior understandings and interpretations brought to the research) are more potentially damaging to the conceptual/theoretical results of action-oriented research, participant-stakeholders or professional university-based researchers, is an empirical one individual to each separate project, not a philosophical one. Likewise, the question of whether the high level of day-to-day experience in the action scene and the personal stake in the outcome of participant-stakeholders present fewer threats to the veracity of the research than the lower level of day-to-day experience and minimal personal stake of university based researchers is difficult to ascertain. Who is most or least apt to be objective?

Regardless, you cannot design effective actions unless they are grounded in what is really going on, not what you think, hope, or wish is going on. Thus the critical question is "Is it grounded?" not who carries out the research. Anything that prevents, breaks or derails the grounding of explanations in data will diminish the opportunity to devise truly optimal and sustainable change.

Grounded action is an innovative approach to understanding and solving complex social and organizational problems, which systematically grounds and integrates data, analysis, theory, and action. As such, in the hands of well-trained researcher change agents, it is a powerful tool for producing effective, sustainable solutions.

Endnotes

[1]We are assuming that the reader has a general familiarity with grounded theory. Those who want to do grounded action will certainly need to read Glaser's grounded theory related books. Training in grounded theory is of course preferable, but hard to come by. The authors teach a sequence in grounded theory and grounded action at the Fielding Graduate Institute [osimmons@fielding.edu, tagregory@fielding.edu].

[2]Rather than presenting the complexities of our reasoning here, please refer to Strauss and Corbin (1990) for Strauss' post *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* conception of grounded theory. Glaser (1992) took strong issue with Strauss' depiction of the method, asserting that Strauss' and Corbin's book "distorts and misconceives grounded theory, while engaging in a gross neglect of 90% of its important ideas" Glaser asks of Strauss, "You wrote a whole different method, so why call it 'grounded theory'?" (p.2). Glaser's reasoning is consistent with the fundamental role grounded theory plays in grounded action. Since Discovery, Glaser has clarified and refined grounded theory in a number of books. See Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998, 2001).

[3]These are but a few examples of grounded theory studies that have obvious practical implications. For other examples, see Glaser (1993, 1994, 1995, 1996).

[4]We use the term "action scene/context" because data are not always collected from specific action scenes. For example, in her study of curriculum changes in accounting higher education, Thiru (2002) collected data from the broader context of accounting higher education, not just from one or several action scenes. Her interviews were conducted mostly by telephone.

[5]Glaser uses the terms "core variable" and "core category" interchangeably.

[6]For more detailed discussions of the issue of preconception in grounded theory research see Glaser (2001), particularly Chapter 6, and Simmons (1995).

[7]Many discussions of how to enter a research setting are available in the literature, so we won't cover the topic here.

[8]Many discussions of how to conduct open-ended intensive interviews are available in the literature, so we won't cover the topic here.

[9]Because of its complexity, we will provide only a cursory description of constant comparative analysis. For thorough depictions of the process, see Glaser (1965, 1978, 1992, 1998 & 2001).

[10]For detailed discussions of sorting, rules for sorting and generating theoretical outlines, see Glaser (1978, 1992 & 2001).

[11]For grounded action professionals who are hired from outside the organization or system, this means training participants in the minimal skills required to carry on.

[12]There is no doubt, however, that these types of situations present ethical dilemmas, as we discussed earlier.

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