

THE METHODOLOGY OF CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY

Excerpted from: *Navigating Organization Paradox with Polarity Mapping: A Classic Grounded Theory Study* - Brian Emerson, PhD

Grounded theory, formally introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a research method that guides researchers through the systematic collection and analysis of data in order to create a multivariate conceptual theory (Glaser, 2010) aimed at explaining underlying or latent patterns fundamental to the human experience (Simmons, 2011). In its efforts to explain, “what is going on” (Glaser, 2010, p. 2), the method examines the ways in which people experience real-world phenomena, and uses that information “to generate theories that are fully grounded in data rather than speculation or ideology” (Simmons, 2010, p. 15).

[Section omitted for brevity: Criticism of Grounded Theory]

The classic grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978) uses a theoretical sampling technique to collect data—often, but not exclusively, in the form of interviews (Robson, 2002) that help shed light on the phenomenon of interest or on one of its variables. Researcher preconceptions are bracketed and set aside, to the greatest degree humanly possible, so that the research focuses on what is important to the participants. Data are collected and analyzed simultaneously, in a back-and-forth process, so that information gleaned during analysis can guide further data collection. The constant comparison analysis process includes substantive coding—open coding followed by (and often simultaneously alongside) selective coding, as well as theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978). Researchers write memos throughout the process to capture ideas sparked by the coding process. Memos and codes are used to create theoretical concepts that are eventually sorted and linked together to form a theoretical outline from which the theory is written. Concepts must be sufficiently grounded in the data to be included in the final theory, which aims to explain the phenomena of interest, not merely describe it (Simmons, 2010).

At the beginning of a grounded theory study, researchers need to be able to cogently outline how their research will follow the tenets of grounded theory, and not become a descriptive study that uses grounded theory jargon. The research method in classic grounded theory is specific and has clearly delineated steps (Guthrie & Lowe, 2011). As such, grounded theorists maintain that those who do not follow the process should not call their research grounded theory, but instead find a different term—such as “quasi-grounded theory,” suggested by Simmons (2011). To avoid criticism, grounded theorists should demonstrate methodological clarity (Guthrie & Lowe, 2011) within their proposals and final studies “because it establishes as routine the need to be clear about how [grounded theory] research processes are conducted and acts as an indicator of intellectual competence” (p. 56). To that end, the following sections describe in detail the process of conducting a classic grounded theory study.

PREPARATION—MINIMIZE PRECONCEPTIONS

Like other research methods, grounded theory begins in the preparation phase. While there are similarities between preparing for a classic grounded theory study and readying for other types of research studies, a key difference is the need to minimize preconceptions. This distinction is critical if one’s research is to be considered classic grounded theory and not a constructivist form of the methodology. Several ways of achieving this are discussed

below—including the practice of refraining from conducting a literature review prior to beginning the study.

AVOIDING THE QUESTION. At the outset of a grounded theory study, the researcher does not identify research objectives (Guthrie & Lowe, 2011), hypotheses (Simmons, 2010), or other logically deduced, predetermined ideas (Glaser, 1978). This is because grounded theory is interested in exploring what is relevant to participants, not what is relevant to the researcher (Simmons, 2011), and it helps the investigator “remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through...pre-existing hypotheses and biases” (Glaser, 1978, p. 3). In this way, researchers are not tempted to force data into preconceived theoretical frameworks, and the researcher sets the stage for one of the methodology’s most important tenets—making sure that everything in the final theory is grounded in data (Glaser, 1978; Simmons, 2011).

AVOIDING THE LITERATURE. As one way to minimize preconceptions, grounded theory studies do not begin with a literature review (Guthrie & Lowe, 2011). In deductive research methods, researchers begin by conducting an extensive review of the literature in order to deduce a conceptual framework through which to approach the study. Grounded theorists, on the other hand, wait until later in the process to thoroughly review the literature because they have a “mandate...to remain open to what is actually happening” (Glaser, 1978, p. 3) with the participants. It is typically not until after the “the theory seems sufficiently grounded and developed” (p.31) that researchers using the classic grounded theory methodology do an extensive literature review as a way to “relate the theory to [the literature] through the integration of ideas” (p. 31). It is important to note that neither Glaser, nor any other classic grounded theorists, suggest that researchers can enter research completely free of any preconceived ideas or biases, but “a critical tenet of grounded theory is to minimize, not encourage, preconceptions” (Simmons, 2011, p. 26).

DATA COLLECTION

In classic grounded theory, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, in a back-and-forth process (Glaser, 1978), but for the sake of simplicity, they will be discussed separately. Grounded theory is a general method, which means it can be used on any data—quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of both (Glaser, 2010). Most grounded theory studies use participant interviews as a main source of data (Robson, 2002)—primarily because well-conducted open-ended interviews are one of the most indicator-rich data sources available to researchers (Simmons, 2010).

THEORETICAL SAMPLING. Classic grounded theory uses a type of purposive sampling known as theoretical sampling (Patton, 1990; Robson, 2002). In theoretical sampling, “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” (Glaser, 1978, p. 36). Unlike selective samples, which are chosen in advance of the study, theoretical sampling “cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead” (p. 37). Therefore, initial decisions about data collection in grounded theory studies are based on how to gain entrée into an area that will shed light on the phenomenon of interest, not a specific population. This is not to say that researchers may not choose a certain population to study because they think it will maximize their chances of gaining insight into a specific area of interest (Glaser, 1978); however, classic grounded theorists must be comfortable not knowing exactly where their theoretical sampling will lead.



Theoretical sampling is important to classic grounded theory on a number of levels, the most important of which is, it allows data collection to be controlled by the concepts that are emerging out of the actual data, and not a preconceived framework or hypothesis (Glaser, 1978). Secondly, theoretical sampling in grounded theory allows for comparison between different subgroups because “non-comparability is irrelevant, if the variable to be compared has a value in each group” (Glaser, 1978, p. 42). For this reason, when a grounded theorist does choose a population as a place to begin data collection, it “need not be clearly defined or membered,” because “we are not comparing populations, we are comparing ideational characteristics of groups that in turn delineate behavioral and attitudinal patterns” (p. 44). Finally, the constant comparisons in theoretical sampling ensure that no matter where grounded theorists start their data collection, if they continue to follow the emerging concepts, they will get the data they need, for “the emergence of concepts never fails, as it cannot, since social organization of life is always in process of resolving relevant problems for the participants in an action scene” (p. 45).

OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS. To minimize constructivism, interviews in classic grounded theory data collection are open-ended and focus on what is important to the participant, not what is important to the researcher (Glaser, 2002; Simmons, 2011). As such, interview guides are not constructed beforehand. Instead, interviews typically begin with a “grand tour” question, which is an open-ended, non-leading query “designed to convey to the respondent that they are being invited to discuss what is relevant to them (not the researcher) about the general topic area” (Simmons, 2011, p. 23). Because of this, grounded theorists need to possess keen skills in interviewing, listening, and observing—which makes interview-based classic grounded theory a skill-based methodology (Simmons, 2010).

As a grounded theory study progresses and the core variable and the theory begins to emerge, data collection becomes continuously more selective in order to reach theoretical saturation (to be discussed in the following section on analysis), but questions continue to be as non-leading as possible so that what is relevant to the participants remains the central focal point of the research (Simmons, 2011). Due to the nature of theoretical sampling, “the grounded theorist is likely to be in the field longer but collect less data [than other types of researchers] since collection is controlled and directed to relevance and workability” (Glaser, 1978, p. 47). Sample size, therefore, is typically not predetermined because data must be collected until the constant comparative data analysis leads to categories and concepts that are theoretically saturated (Glaser, 1978)—all of which is discussed in the following section on analysis.

ANALYSIS

Classic grounded theory uses the constant comparative method to analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At a high level, this requires researchers to dissect data and identify patterns, give names to the patterns to create concepts, compare emerging concepts to identify how they relate to one another, and then tie the relationships together and write them into a theory—all while ensuring that everything stays grounded in the data of the study (Simmons, 2011). All of this relies on the ability to code data, write memos, and sort and conceptualize (all described below).

CODING. Codes are conceptualizations of “the underlying patterns of a set of empirical indicators within the data” (Glaser, 1978, p. 55) and are used to elevate patterns to an abstract level in a way that keeps them grounded in the data. The key is for codes to be abstractions

and not merely description, which then allows researchers to name and discuss patterns in the data without having to constantly redescribe them, and makes it possible to transcend description and enter the theoretical realm which relies on being able to identify the relationships that exist in the data (Simmons, 2010). The centrality of coding to grounded theory analysis is why Glaser (2010) contends that the ability to conceptualize is central to being able to use the methodology.

The constant comparative method uses two types of coding, substantive and theoretical. Analysis begins with substantive coding, which has two foci, open coding and selective coding (Glaser, 1978). In open coding, researchers typically go line by line through the data, coding the data in all the ways that “seem relevant and work” (p. 46). There is no codebook, because initially, researchers do not know what they are coding for, which illuminates an important point—researchers typically code their own data because they cannot tell others how to code or what to look for (Glaser, 1978). Researchers create codes by establishing what the data are a study of, what is happening in the data, and what category an incident in the data might indicate (Glaser, 1978). For example a code that emerged in this study was, “Seeing My Downside” which represented times when a participant described a realization that their pole of the paradox had a downside, such as “I looked and was sorta like, ‘dang, maybe my side’s not as good as I thought [laughter].” During sorting, described in detail below, the coded data are placed with similar codes to create categories of codes. In this study, “Seeing My Downside” was sorted with similar codes like “Insight to Preference” and “Understand My Resistance” into an initial category called “More Self-Awareness.”

THE CORE VARIABLE. Once clear categories emerge, the grounded theorist begins to look for the core variable, which is the “variable that accounts for the most variation in the data, the thing to which most everything in the data relates, the issue or problem [participants] are processing, or in more vernacular terms, ‘what people are working on’” (Simmons, 2010, p. 28). Although there may be more than one potential core variable, “usually one will stand out more than others...in that particular data” (p. 28), and only one should be pursued as the core variable for which to selectively code. The core variable in this study was identified as “Rectifying Paradox.” However, also evident in the data was a potential core variable of “Embedding a Learning” which had to do with how to embed the learning of a group (in this case, about polarity maps) into the culture of an organization.

When the core variable has been identified, “the analyst delimits his coding to only those variables that relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways” (Glaser, 1978, p. 61). The process of selective coding and focusing on the core variable is what guides researchers in determining where to go next for data as part of the theoretical sampling process. Again, all codes must be grounded in data, and constantly compared back to other codes and data throughout the analysis.

The degree to which the name of a code captures the essence of the pattern it represents is critical to the success of a grounded theory study. There are two ways to label codes—either as sociological constructs, or as in vivo codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Sociological constructs are labels created by the researcher (Simmons, 2010). In vivo codes, on the other hand, are “those that have been abstracted from the language of the research situation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 107). An in vivo code in this study was “Seeing Fuller Picture” which was a natural extrapolation from quotes such as, “you could see the whole picture at once...our entire situation was right there.”

In either case, codes need both analytic ability—the capacity to easily move into the theory, and imagery—which ensures that the researcher will not have to continuously re-describe their meaning (Glaser, 1978). It is also critical for codes to have fit, which Simmons



(2011) contends is important since readers will not have access to the complete data set, and therefore, the words selected to represent the pattern, in essence, become the data. Consequently, if there is poor fit between the pattern and the concept used to describe it, the theory will be partially ungrounded in the data. This is also a reason to use original terms to label concepts, because readers will come with their own interpretations of pre-established concepts and “import their understandings of these concepts into the theory” (p. 19). For example, in this study, “Othering” was chosen as the label for a concept. It codifies part of the process in which participants describe making another person “wrong” because they prefer the opposite pole. It includes a tendency to stop listening and make assumptions about “the other.”

As more substantive codes and concepts are created, and as theoretical saturation is approached, researchers begin to “conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 55). This is the beginning of theoretical coding. Like substantive codes, all theoretical codes must earn their way into the theory, which means researchers must be patient and remain open as they let the codes emerge (Simmons, 2010). It is easy at this point in the research for analysts to begin logically elaborating on the patterns they see; however, it is critical to “let the concepts and theory emerge” (p. 19) for like the other codes, theoretical codes must be grounded in data to make their way into the final theory (Glaser, 1978). If it has not already started to happen, one of the benefits of theoretical coding is that it forces researchers to analyze on the conceptual level and “from dropping and bogging down in data” (p. 73). Thus, theoretical coding helps to ensure that the study produces an explanatory theory and not a thick description. Another component of the methodology that helps in this regard is writing memos.

MEMO WRITING. Writing memos is central to the grounded theory process, and involves writing up “ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). The process of writing memos begins when first analyzing data and continues through the completion of the final paper. It is so central to the methodology that Glaser (1978) asserts those who skip it and go directly from coding to sorting “[are] not doing grounded theory” (p. 83). This sentiment, in combination with his conviction that memo writing in grounded theory is different than in other qualitative methods because it goes beyond description, led Glaser to lay out fairly specific ideas about memos and what they mean to grounded theory.

The goal of writing memos is four-fold—to “theoretically develop ideas (codes), with complete freedom into a memo fund, that is highly sortable [sic]” (italics in original; Glaser, 1978, p. 83). The first of these objectives, “writing memos to theoretically develop ideas,” creates the distinction between grounded theory memos and those of other qualitative research methods. While memos may initially start out as descriptive, they should soon move to the level of conceptual analysis, for they are not merely narrative, they “are about concepts and the relationships between them, particularly their relationship to the core variable” (Simmons, 2010, p. 32). To a certain degree, this requires memos to follow the type of coding in which the researcher is involved, that is, when analysis switches to selective coding, memos should become more selective. In absence of this step, when it comes time to develop and write the theory, researchers do not have any theoretical ideas to build on, and as such end up with a thick description instead of an explanatory theory.

The second goal of “memo writing with complete freedom” has several meanings. First, analysts should stop what they are doing whenever an idea strikes and begin writing. Glaser’s work (1978) is filled with advice to “always interrupt coding or data recording for writing a memo when an idea occurs” (p. 90). Third, analysts should experience freedom in



how they write their memos, “the point...is to record ideas, get them out (italics in original)...in any kind of language...sentence construction and punctuation are irrelevant” (p. 85). What is important, is that after they are written, memos need to be filed in a systematic way that makes them easy to access and utilize when necessary—for they are meaningless if the researcher cannot get to and use them when constructing the theory. To that end, to be highly sortable—the fourth goal, memos should be labeled and categorized by category and should ideally deal with only one category or property—unless it discusses the relationship between two or more categories, in which case, it may become its own, unique category.

In addition to these four goals, Glaser (1978) offers more points of advice to grounded theorists about using memos. Several of the key ones are to “keep data and memos separate” (p. 89) while making sure to reference all memos back to the data so that it is possible to show from exactly where in the data pieces of the theory developed. In this vein, data should be treated as sacred, but memos should not—analysts should feel free to revisit memos to edit, expand, and further conceptualize their points. Researchers should also “keep a list of the emerging codes handy” (p. 90) so as they memo they can refer to it and reflect on any other relationships between the topic at hand and other codes in the data. In all, Glaser is most concerned that analysts “always be flexible with memoing techniques” (p. 91) and do what is necessary to capture their conceptual musings, for it is the richness of their memos that grounded theorists draw upon during the sorting process to generate “dense and complex theory” (p. 117).

SORTING AND THEORETICAL OUTLINE. Sorting is the process by which the data, fractured during coding, is put back together in a coherent set of connections and relationships that outline an explanatory theory. Although it “is the most commonly skipped step in the grounded theory process” (Simmons, 2010, p. 34), sorting is crucial in creating a “rich multi-relation, multi-variate theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 116). This is achieved by using theoretical, or conceptual, sorting (Glaser, 1978), which focuses on sorting the ideas grounded in the data, not the actual data, and thus ensures the research will generate an explanatory theory and not just a thick description. Because of its criticality to the success of a grounded theory study, there are several clear guidelines to assist researchers in the process.

The first sorting principle is the notion that only one sort can be thoroughly pursued during any single study. Usually, data and memos from a study can be sorted in many different ways, however, analysts must inevitably choose and focus on just one sorting at a time, and remember that “one particular sorting does not exhaust the potential use of each memo” (Glaser, 1978, p. 117). Sorting is a creative process in which analysts mix and match their codes and memos in order to find new relationships and connections (Charmaz, 2006). This makes it possible for the same data and analysis to yield information for multiple studies.

Glaser (1978) suggests a number of analytic rules to help guide grounded theorists, although he is clear that they are only suggestions. His first advice is to start. He encourages researchers to avoid spending time wondering where to start, but instead, to just start sorting and let the theory emerge from the data. Secondly, as noted above, studies should focus on just one core variable. If there are two that seem equally important, one must be demoted because the “goal is not to cover all possible theoretical possibilities nor explain all variations” (p. 122). A second core variable can be made the primary core variable in future studies. For example, in this study, a second potential core variable emerged and was set aside for future exploration. The variable dealt with embedding a new skill into the culture of an organization. While interesting, it was less of a fit for the purpose of this study. After it is chosen, if categories or memos do not relate to the primary core variable, they do not get included in the sort or make their way into the theory. Additionally, memo writing continues throughout the sorting process. As researchers are struck by new relationships, they should



create additional memos that are then incorporated into the sort and potentially into the theoretical outline.

In essence, when grounded theorists have completed their sorting, they are left with sorted categories and memos that link together into a theoretical outline from which the theory can be written. Assuming the researcher has followed the steps outlined for a classic grounded theory study, writing the theory and the accompanying paper or presentation should be a straightforward and relatively simple process that varies in direction based on whether the report is an article, presentation, or book (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser 1978). Most importantly, researchers that follow these outlined steps can be reasonably certain the theory they develop is explanatory, grounded in data, and suitable for action.

This piece has been excerpted and modified from *Navigating Organization Paradox with Polarity Mapping: A Classic Grounded Theory Study* - Brian Emerson, PhD.

For a copy of the full study, please contact connect@andiron.com.

For a summary of the study, [click here](#).



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