**INTRODUCTION TO GROUNDED THEORY – HOW TO LEARN ABOUT THIS METHODOLOGY**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Grounded theory is one of the most pioneering and prevalent methodologies in qualitative research. Indeed, many of the terms and principles that qualitative researchers apply emanated from grounded theory. Yet, despite the prevalence of this methodology, many researchers are wary of grounded theory. In particular

* researchers sometimes perceive grounded theory as confusing
* this confusion can partly be ascribed to the observation that scholars have developed several distinct versions of grounded theory
* the recommended practices in one version often contradict the recommended practices of other versions

This document is designed to address some of these concerns. Specifically, this document

* presents an overview of grounded theory
* briefly delineates the main activities that underpin grounded theory
* demonstrates how the main versions of grounded theory differ from one another

Then, if you want to pursue grounded theory, you will need to read in more detail about a specific variant of grounded theory, such as constructivist grounded theory. You will also need more guidance and mentoring to apply this methodology (initially, to learn more about grounded theory, read Berthelsen et al., 2018; Bryant, 2017; and Timonen et al., 2018).

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| **Overview of grounded theory** |

In 1967, Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory as a reaction to a key problem they had observed in the social sciences. Specifically, according to these scholars, since World War II, few researchers were striving to develop theories, models, and explanations about society. That is, researchers were more inclined to test, rather than develop, theories. Consequently, Glaser and Strauss invented a methodology that enables researchers to propose novel theories. To achieve this goal

* researchers do not attempt to assess existing theories or hypotheses; for example, researchers do not merely ask questions that are intended to evaluate past arguments
* instead, researchers collect data about a topic as expansively as possible—often from interviews
* researchers then start to derive theories from the data rather than apply existing taxonomies, models, or theories
* researchers next ask interview questions, or apply other methods, that are specifically designed to test the theories that emerge from the data
* they continue this sequence of theory development and assessment iteratively

Thus, in contrast to many other qualitative methodologies, proponents of grounded theory derive a theory from the data, rather than from previous literature, and then gradually and iteratively test and refine this theory. Specifically, researchers who apply grounded theory tend to

* identify a broad research question they want to explore—often from a blend of past experience or a brief literature review; an example might be to understand how PhD candidates assist one another
* start to collect data—perhaps from unstructured interviews, observations, focus groups, videos, texts, reports, and so forth
* start to code each line in the transcript or segment of data; that is, convert the actions, event, or change in each line to a set of words, called a code; the sentence “I initially was not sure if I should trust by peers” could be translated to the code “distrusting peers”
* start to collect memos or records of their initial thoughts, assumptions, and hypotheses, such as the categories in which these codes might belong or the relationships between various codes
* start to identify codes that overlap with each other, ultimately to uncover broader categories, such as “competitive mindset”
* start to clarify the relationships or associations between these categories; for example, the researcher might reveal that a “competitive mindset” tends to promote a “sense of isolation”
* gradually update the methods that are applied to collect data, such as modify the questions or seek other participants, to explore and refine these categories and associations between categories
* these categories and associations between categories are, together, called a theory

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| **Insights about each activity** |

The previous section delineated the key phases of grounded theory. This following table presents more details and insights on how to complete these phases. Nevertheless, depending on which version of grounded theory you apply, you might need to adjust these details. That is, how you apply these phases depends on whether you adopt the classical, Strauss and Corbin, constructivist, postmodern, or critical realist approach.

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| Phase | Details or examples |
| Decide on the research topic of interest | **Typical research questions**   * Proponents of grounded theory tend to explore how and why the actions or interactions of people change over time in a specific circumstance, setting, or situation * That is, these researchers examine how key events, incidents, and behaviours are shaped by the context. * For example, researchers might want to explain how cooperation among research candidates evolve during their candidature * In addition, the research should attempt to uncover insights that are useful in practice; that is, proponents of grounded theory tend to adopt a pragmatist theoretical perspective amongst other theoretical perspectives   **Information that guides this decision**   * To a significant extent, your past knowledge and experiences will inform your research question * Most but not all variants of grounded theory also encourage researchers to review the literature, but primarily to clarify which problems need to be explored and the context or circumstances in which this problem has unfolded. * To illustrate, if you were interested in how the future aspirations of PhD candidates evolve during their candidature, you might review the literature on the goals or jobs of these individuals. * But, you would not explore the literature on why these goals change over time * That is, if possible, you need to limit the possibility that your knowledge of the literature biases your interpretations of the data |
| Become as familiar with the circumstances or setting as possible | * Besides a literature review of the circumstances or setting, you might visit a specific community or organization |
| Start to collect data about this topic | To collect data, researchers often conduct interviews. Importantly   * initially, these interviews tend to be largely unstructured or only roughly structured, with broad questions like “How do you feel about your peers?” rather than “Do you trust your peers?” * one example is the narrative interview, in which individuals are prompted to recount their history or experience in some circumstance   Alternatively, to collect data, researchers might   * conduct focus groups * observe a setting * extract information from texts, photos, or videos * examine quantitative data, such as quantitative reports; that is, even some quantitative data can be subjected to grounded theory |
| Conduct initial coding—sometimes called line-by-line or open coding | * Confine attention to one line of data at a time—such as one row in your transcript, often about a sentence long * This practice immerses the researcher in the data and, therefore, diminishes the likelihood that preconceptions will bias the coding * Uncover a tangible action, event, or change in the line * Convert this tangible action, event, or change to a few precise words, such as “feeling uncertain” * You can record these codes on the paper transcript or on an electronic transcript, such as an Excel file * Continue with other lines in the transcript   For more information, first read the document on coding, available on CDU webpage about conducting your research |
| Start to identify concepts and categories, sometimes called focussed coding | * Even before you have completed the initial coding, you might gradually become aware of codes that overlap and could be combined * These blends of overlapping codes are sometimes called concepts * In addition, you might soon uncover overlapping concepts—that is, concepts that might correspond to the same underlying issue * These blends of overlapping codes are sometimes called categories * In short, you should, over time, integrate codes to generate concepts and integrate concepts to generate categories * This division between concepts and categories, however, is arbitrary and not always necessary |
| Start to refine your codes, concepts, and categories, perhaps by applying a procedure called the constant comparison method | * As you proceed, you might experience insights that inspire you to adjust or refine a previous code, concept, or category * The constant comparison method entails comparing the responses of one participant to two similar events or the responses of two participants to the same event, for example * The constant comparison method also entails comparing the concepts or categories to the data * These comparisons are intended to uncover both similarities and differences across the data |
| Begin to explore the associations and relationships between these categories | * Gradually, as you collect and review the data, you might become aware of how the categories may be related to each other * For example, some of the responses of participants might offer insights into these relationships * Or, you might become aware of properties or features of categories that overlap * This notion of deriving theory—that is, concepts, categories, and associations—from the data is called **induction** |
| Perhaps uncover a core, central, or basic category that underpins all the categories | * Sometimes, all the categories can be connected to one underlying theme, such as “strategic collaborations” * This underlying theme—called a core category, central category, or basic social process depend in which variant of grounded theory you apply—is granted a special or elevated status |
| Maintain memos of all your thoughts, assumptions, and hypotheses | From the outset, while you code the data and derive concepts, categories, and associations, record memos on your thoughts, assumptions, and hypotheses. For example, you might record, and later organize, notes on   * doubts or questions you might want to explore or contemplate later * your initial thoughts or intuitions about the broader concepts or categories to which these codes might belong * your initial thoughts or intuitions about how the various codes might be related to each other * your thoughts or intuitions about the properties, antecedents, consequences, variations, or complications about the codes, concepts, or categories * other hypotheses and hunches that infuse your awareness |
| To evaluate and to refine these concepts, categories, and associations, update the methods you use to collect data. This goal is called theoretical sampling | * You might ask more specific questions to participants you have already interviewed or to participants you have yet to interview * You might decide to collect other sources of data, such as observations * You might confine participants to a specific demographic or subset, such as only PhD candidates who are younger than 30 * These changes are designed to clarify the properties and variations of each concept and category as well as to explore how these concept and categories are associated with each other * This continual attempt to update your explanations of the data and circumstances—and thus shifting between developing and testing theory—is called **abduction.**   **Flexibility**   * Thus, to evaluate and to refine your concepts, categories, and associations, you need to remain flexible on how to collect data * You even need to remain flexible as to the research question you are exploring; the focus of this question might evolve over time |
| Continue to collect data, code data, identify concepts and categories, and clarify associations between categories until theoretical saturation is reached—if possible | * Theoretical saturation is defined as the moment in which the researcher feels that further data are not improving the categories and relationships. * Note: the theory is not necessarily assumed to be comprehensive. * That is because of practical implications, your theory might not include all the phases, facets, or consequences of the various concepts and associations * Instead, the theory is often more a conceptual framework than a comprehensive model |
| Write the report | When writing the report, consider some of the following key principles (e.g., Berthelsen et al., 2018)   * Specify the underlying theoretical perspective, such as symbolic interactionalism and social constructivism * Describe and justify the methods you applied to collect data—and how you changed these methods over time to refine your theory * Delineate the coding procedures as explicitly as possible * Present evidence, such as quotes, to justify and illustrate the categories and associations between categories * Apply relevant evaluation criteria—such as fit, relevance, and workability—to evaluate the theory; these criteria depend on which variant of grounded theory you apply |

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| **Deviations across the variants of grounded theory** |

The previous section outlined some of the activities that proponents of grounded theory tend to undertake. Nevertheless, these activities can differ markedly, depending on the precise variant of grounded theory that researchers adopt. Indeed, the practices that proponents of one variant advocates may even conflict with the practices that proponents of another variant advocates. To illustrate

* according to a subset of scholars, researchers should code most if not all lines of data before seeking patterns in the data to identify concepts and categories
* according to other scholars, researchers should seek patterns, such as overlapping codes, as soon as they patterns appear

These conflicts may elicit confusion and diminish confidence. Therefore, the following table outlines the distinct features of each variant.

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| Approach | Distinct features |
| Classical approach, as advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), but now more associated with Glaser | **Philosophy**   * The aim of research is to uncover the true account of some phenomenon, called objectivism * Researchers should apply standardized procedures to observe and measure a phenomenon to uncover the true reality—similar to the theoretical perspective called positivism.   **Literature review**   * The literature should not be reviewed before the researcher develops the theory—quite a strong principle that counteracts how universities tend to operate * But, after the theory is developed, researchers can utilise the literature to discuss the categories and relationships between categories in more detail   **Coding**   * Conduct open coding initially—in which most lines are assigned a code * Next decide on the core category—a common theme or issue that underpins all the codes * Only then conduct what is called selective coding and theoretical coding. * Thus, researchers tend to uncover patterns after coding most of the data initially   **Collection of data**   * Interviews should often be conducted in rapid succession, without recording, to collect extensive data quickly   **Evaluation of theories.** Theories should demonstrate   * fit: the concepts and categories should characterize the events and incidents in the data accurately * relevance: the theory and study should addresse a vital concern of participants and should not be merely of academic interest * workability: the theory should indeed predict and explain behaviours accurately * modifiability: the theory should be modified or qualified as novel data emerges |
| The Strauss and Corbin approach | **Philosophy**   * Recognises that theories are not entirely objective but partly subjective as well * Assumes the professional and personal experience of researchers may affect the conclusions that are reached * Applies symbolic interactionalism in which researchers orient their attention to how people interact with each other—and their interpretations of these interactions   **What is symbolic interactionism**  AssSymbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) is a socio-  logical extension of a pragmatic position that assumes  human beings construct and reconstruct the meaning  of reality in a constant interaction with the self and  others. Due to this assumption, human action and  interaction and the construction and reconstruction  of meaning in everyday life are central phenomena of  interest for theory development. Symbolic interac-  tionism strives, as Blumer states, to acknowledge the  nature of the empirical world by organizing a respect-  ful methodological stance. Symbolic interactionism  rests on three premises: (1) human beings act towards  things on the basis of the meanings that the things  have for them; (2) the meaning of things is derived  from, or arises out of, the social interaction between  people, and (3) as people deal with the things they  encounter, meanings are modiﬁed through an inter-  pretative process (Blumer, 1986). So the dynamic  process of action and interaction constantly changes  situations and contexts  Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) is a socio-  logical extension of a pragmatic position that assumes  human beings construct and reconstruct the meaning  of reality in a constant interaction with the self and  others. 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If one person describes an angry customer with compassion, another person might become more inclined to perceive this customer is an object of pity. * Third, individuals reflect upon these interactions with other people, and these reflections shape how the interactions affect the meaning they attach to objects * Consequently, people repeatedly construct and reconstruct their understanding of their world by interacting with other people and contemplating alone * Therefore, researchers need to study how the setting or context shape these interactions, influence the meaning that people attach to objects, and thus affect behaviour. * The research will thus explore how different groups, such as doctors and nurses, interact with each other—and their interpretations of these interactions   **Literature review**   * The literature can be reviewed before the researcher collects data, but primarily to formulate the research questions   **Methods**   * The classical approach did not articulate a precise sequence of activities * In contrast, Strauss and Corbin were more explicit about the sequence of activities that researchers should complete to collect and to analyse data * For example, according to Strauss and Corbin, researchers should collect data from the people or settings that will generate the most relevant data about the topic of interest, called open sampling. * However, researchers should also shift the data collection across specific demographics and settings to explore specific categories, called relational and variational sampling * Furthermore, researchers should deliberately target the people or settings that are most likely to verify, refute, and refine the relevant categories, called discriminate sampling * Finally, researchers also apply a technique called axial coding, described in another document about coding, available on Learnline or on the website |
| Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) | **Philosophy**   * According to previous versions of grounded theory, the role of researchers is to uncover accurate data to unearth truth about the world * Constructivist grounded theory assumes the interactions between participants and researchers affect which data will be uncovered * That is, another pair of individuals would unearth different sets of data; the data are thus co-constructed * Furthermore, the perspectives, values, privileges, and location of these individuals will bias the co-construction of these data, called social constructivism * Constructivist grounded theory also espouses symbolic interactionism   **Literature review**   * The literature can be reviewed before the researcher collects data, but primarily to understand the context, setting, or circumstances in which the phenomenon of interest unfolds   **Evaluation of theories.** Besides fit, relevance, workability and modifiability, theories should demonstrate   * credibility: the depth and scope of data is sufficient to justify the theory that emerges * originality: the research uncovers novel but significant insights * resonance: participants feel the theory characterizes their experience accurately * usefulness: the theory can be applied by participants |
| Situational analysis: a postmodern variant of grounded theory | See the document on Learnline or on the web about situational analysis |
| Critical realistic variants of grounded theory | See Kempster and Parry 2011 |

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