

The Grounded Theory Review: An international journal

The Novice GT Researcher

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

Selection of Grounded Theory as an Appropriate Research Methodology for a Dissertation: One student's perspective

James W. Jones, Ed.D.

Striking a Balance between Program Requirements and GT Principles: Writing a compromised GT proposal

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Demystifying Theoretical Sampling in Grounded theory Research

*Jenna Breckenridge, Ph.D. Candidate & Derek Jones,
Ph.D.*

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Special Call for Papers

November, 2009. This issue will focus on writing and publishing CGT. The numerous remodeled versions of GT have resulted in many misunderstandings of the classic methodology, most particularly, the misconception that GT is a qualitative research method. The resultant confusion of CGT with qualitative methods is a frequent frustration – and sometimes obstacle – for CGT scholars seeking to publish in mainstream academic journals where the criteria for publication may be inconsistent with CGT methodology and where reviewers will often assess a CGT paper against established criteria for qualitative research. We welcome papers that address these issues and offer advice to others in successfully overcoming the obstacles to publication in mainstream journals. **Deadline for submissions is August 31.**

In addition to this special call for papers, we continue to welcome papers presenting substantive and formal grounded theories from a broad range of disciplines.

Submissions

All papers submitted are peer reviewed and comments provided back to the authors. Papers accepted for publication will be good examples or practical applications of classic grounded theory methodology. Comments on papers published are also welcomed, will be shared with the authors and may be published in subsequent issues of the Review. See our website www.groundedtheoryreview.com for full submission guidelines. Forward submissions as Word documents to Judith Holton at judith@groundedtheoryreview.com

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From the Editor

This issue focuses specifically on the adventure of learning and doing that first GT study – the trepidation, challenge, inevitable confusion, eureka excitement and energizing satisfaction that each of us has experienced as a novice GT researcher. Barney Glaser holds that GT is best done in the hands of the novice researcher and has written extensively on the novice experience. In this issue, we are pleased to reprint Chapter 5 of **The GT Perspective II: Description's Remodeling of Grounded Theory Methodology** (Glaser, 2003, pp.61-79) in which he expounds his confidence in the novice advantage with its quest for relevance, openness to learning, ability to tolerate not knowing and ability to trust in the method's time-tested and product-proven outcomes.

The other papers in this issue are the result of a special call for papers on the novice experience of learning and doing classic grounded theory (CGT). I am very pleased to say that the papers we include here, in true GT fashion, encompass a range of disciplines and levels of experience. The papers offer us first-hand accounts of the novice experience at various stages in the GT process.

Novice classic grounded theorists often find that they are breaking new territory at their institutions where, not only are they undertaking the mastery of a methodology that is new to them, but one that is unfamiliar to their supervisors and indeed their institutions; a methodology that is most often conflated with qualitative research and therefore mistakenly required to meet the proposal formats of qualitative research. Both Jones (pp.23-34) and Xie (pp.35-47) discuss the challenges of crafting a PhD research proposal that can stay true to CGT while also meeting institutional and supervisory requirements. Xie's study of Dr. Glaser's work provided her with a level of confidence and knowledge that enabled her to take on the proposal process. Jones used his knowledge of various methodologies to persuade

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his committee that CGT was not only the appropriate but possibly also the only feasible methodology to achieve his research objectives. Both offer honest accounts of the proposal process; setting out the challenges encountered and describing how they addressed committee concerns.

Roderick (pp.49-63) and Pergert (pp. 65-75) have successfully achieved their PhDs within the last year. Their papers recount their experiences of learning and doing GT. Roderick describes her initial reluctance to accept some of GT's procedures; she shares with us her attempts to use interview protocols, taping and transcribing and how she came to see the wisdom in coding and memoing from field notes. Pergert shares her experience in learning how GT differs from other research methods in regards to sampling, delimiting and saturation. She also shares another challenge experienced by many GT novices – that of coding and conceptualizing in a second language. Both authors attest to the wisdom in Glaser's insistence that the only way to really learn GT is to "just do it!" Both offer as well valuable advice in ways to foster and support the experiential learning curve that is foundational to GT skill development.

Rindell (pp.77-87) describes for us how she wrestled with two key issues in her first GT research study: how to situate her study within her disciplinary field, particularly as her emergent theory did not appear to align with extant theory, and how to decide whether to do a substantive or a formal GT; or, in other words, how to distinguish between substantive and formal GT. Her 'lessons learned' remind novices of the importance of letting go of preconceptions and discipline boundaries to trust in the data and the GT process and of memoing as the ideational foundation of any GT.

Scott's (pp.89-111) forthright account of her GT learning journey illustrates beautifully Glaser's contention of GT as an experiential learning process where letting go of preconceptions, resting in confusion and trusting in the preconscious processing of GT's delayed action learning curve enables conceptual emergence. Her journey illustrates the importance of being open to learning, to acknowledging 'not knowing' and to unlearning before realization is possible. Scott's use of memos to illustrate her learning along the way should remind all of the power in memoing. Her theory demonstrates the elegance of a good

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grounded theory in explaining a complex pattern of social behaviour. Those who wish to read a full account of her theory are referred to [Scott \(2007\)](#), "The Temporal Integration of Connected Study into a Structured Life", *The Grounded Theory Review*, vol.6, no.2, pp. 95-116.

Breckenridge (p113-126) focuses her paper on theoretical sampling – one of the foundational pillars of CGT - and offers her understanding of the process, its distinction from sampling procedures in other methodologies and its fundamental role in CGT. Her references to GT as interpretive (rather than conceptual), to its having "evolved" (what a classic grounded theorist would describe as remodelled) and to her concerns regarding the need for 'evidence' of the credibility of a GT study through detailed description of sampling procedures (rather than using Glaser's four criteria of fit, works, relevance and modifiability) suggest that she is still in the process of 'unlearning' the remodelling impact of qualitative research's 'embrace' of GT procedures. Like many new to GT, Breckenridge may continue to cling to the fundamentals of good research in other paradigms until she has experienced the full GT learning curve. Perhaps only then can the trust in emergence be fully expressed and appreciated. Certainly, her scholarly engagement with this essential element of the methodology holds promise of another budding classic grounded theorist and a successful PhD.

All of the papers in this issue offer much encouragement to those who are also engaged in their first study or are contemplating the same. Whether you are a novice or more experienced grounded theorist, I trust that you will find something of interest and value in this issue – something that inspires you to "Just do it!"

- Judith A. Holton, Ph.D.

The Novice GT Researcher

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

Make no mistake, as I said in my article, “The Future of Grounded Theory” (*Qualitative Health Research*, Nov, 1999) is in the hands of the beginning PhD researcher. I said “Unformed researchers embrace grounded theory for dissertation or master’s theses when, in their view, the more preconceived methods do not give relevant answers. Unformed researchers who can choose their own methods do so at the discretion of their advisers. The principal GT users today, mostly students who are doing MA and PhD theses or dissertations, are well into their academic careers and looking for methodologies that will result in data and theories relevant to what is going on in their research area of interest. This makes grounded theory very appealing on that one point alone — relevance.”

GT is done best in the hands of the novice PhD and MA candidates because not only of their quest for relevancy, in the face of extant literature that does not fit, work or is not relevant, they are still open to “whatever”, still enthusiastically learning, still unformed in other QDA methods, lack QDA method identity protection, and their skill development fledgling status is uniquely suited to skill development required in the GT process. Also they have big stakes in doing original research — hence high motivation — and have the modest amounts of time and money to finish in a timely way. Also the novice is more likely to see fresh new patterns in the face of experienced forcing of professional interest patterns. Thus the category build-up in memos seems very original as they fit and are relevant — sensitive and intelligent.

Also the novice is not shy of the preconscious processing of the input-depression-output procedurally produced by following grounded theory procedures. In spite of the confusion and depression, they tend to tolerate, understand and trust to the soon to come creativity and originality that comes with the memoing output. It may take time, but never as much as it feels it will and it always works. With novices it usually comes too fast and they have to be slowed a bit to be sure of grounding and ward off impressionism. This essential tolerance and trust to

emergence tends to be skeptical and doubtful among the formed in favor of forcing. (See: John Lofland, "Student's Case Studies of Social Movements: Experiences with an Undergraduate Seminar" **Teaching Sociology**, 1996 vol 24, page 389–394).

I know and work with many, many of these beginners, quite often as their external examiner for the dissertation. They are all over the world in many diverse departments, but usually business, nursing, education, social work and sociology. Make no mistake about it, the best GT is done in the hands of beginners.

GT was written for beginners as it emerged FROM beginners' research, myself included, when we did *Awareness of Dying*, a resounding success. GT was not thought up based on research maxims from positivism or symbolic interaction. IT WAS WRITTEN FROM METHODOLOGICAL NOTES I did during the research for *Awareness of Dying* and the methodological notes taken during several years of my analysis seminar at Univ of Calif, San Francisco. During each seminar, each week, a student was assigned the task of doing methodological notes on what was going on. Thus, GT is itself a grounded theory of methodology of what went on in my seminars as we all painstakingly did our GT of GT while doing GT, fitting names to patterns, being relevant to participants and making sure it all worked.

In generating a GT methodology using this method, it was clear that the question of not sufficient competence or the beginning skill of the novice was not an issue. Using GT methodology carefully brought its own skill development, and brought it faster and better without previous training in qualitative research. The novice need only have an ability to conceptualize, to organize, to tolerate confusion with some incident depression, to make abstract connections, to remain open, to be a bit visual, to thinking multivariately and most of all to trust to preconscious processing and to emergence. Many do have these abilities at the advanced degree level. For many novices these abilities come naturally.

Ingrid Hylander says regarding this natural bent: "I recognize the main strategies of grounded theory as something I unsophisticatedly, although not knowing it, had been doing for years." (**Turning Processes: the Change of Representations in Consultee-Centered Case Consultation**, Linkoping Press, 2000, page 67.) Phyllis Stern also talks of this natural bent:

"Students often find it hard to believe, as they begin the research process, that they will develop a credible conceptual framework. And yet students manage to learn to perform the magic of creativity. Having transcended the creative process, the neophyte becomes sufficiently proficient to conduct subsequent studies independently and to teach other neophytes." ("Eroding GT", page 218 in **Critical Issues In Qualitative Methods**, Janice Morse, editor.)

Miles and Huberman (p. 309, **Qualitative Data Analysis**, Sage, 1994) talk of the essential requisites for qualitative analysis which fit the novice. "You don't need prolonged socialization or arcane technologies. The core requisites for qualitative analysis seem to be a little creativity, systematic doggedness, some good conceptual sensibilities, and cognitive flexibility — the capacity to rapidly undo your way of construing or transforming the data and to try another more promising tack." These requisites fit the novice GT researcher perfectly. They conclude, "We also don't think that good qualitative analysis necessarily calls for formal prerequisites." Miles and Huberman make these statements to help the novice offset the feeling of data overwhelm. They are right. GT, of course, helps allay this feeling with the knowledge that the GT methodology provides constant delimiting of data collection thus reducing data overwhelm immensely.

Please reread this section to reaffirm my contention that the future of GT is in the hands of the novice high level degree researcher who is still open. Soon after the dissertation the experienced researcher will likely (for many) erode GT along QDA lines as becoming formed increases. The blocking of good GT increases as becoming formed takes on QDA requirements.

The Experienced View

The experienced have many views of the novice GT researcher. All these views tend to block the novice researcher by taking GT out of his/her hands by talking of his/her inexperience. The formed will try to force this conclusion on the unformed, new novices to try to form them in their image. They will impose QDA procedures of data collection and analysis which will preconceive the novice's research, hence block good GT. They will give a misread of normal GT, as they say, in order to rescue the novice from confusion, not knowing, depression, fear of not doing it, or

data overwhelm, by saying these are ineptitudes that will be solved by forcing preconceived interests and frameworks. They do not advise the novice that their confusion and overwhelm is part of the GT process which are to be tolerated for a short while. Nor do they advise that these so called problems mean that they are doing GT correctly. and should keep asking “what do I have in this data, what is this a study of, etc”.

Mentoring

This misread comes from method loyalty. The formed are unbendingly loyal to a QDA method, based on their experience and build up of identity as a certified QDA researcher. Method loyalty is impossible to give up and leads to competitive training of novices. So when seeing the novice GT researcher going through the confusing initial problems of doing GT, the QDA trained supervisor will see a need to rescue the novice “from not knowing” by suggesting and training in QDA preconceived frameworks, categories and questionnaires etc. This block on the novice and GT is great. The novice who happens to find a mentor who is experienced in GT and has GT method loyalty is fortunate. But most method loyalty is to a QDA method. Thus minus mentoring is advisable if the mentor will, in effect, advise or even force QDA requirements.

On the GT mentor, the right mentor, Rita Schreiber writes: “One of the struggles in teaching and learning grounded theory is that it is difficult to capture fully and in writing the ‘how to’ of the method without sacrificing its more intuitive aspects. Part of the difficulty is that getting a handle on the method involves process learning: you learn as you do. The ‘doing’ however, goes much more smoothly and is likely to have better results when the novice is able to work with an experienced mentor who can guide the way. In many programs mentors are in short supply.” (“The GT Club,” in **Using Grounded Theory in Nursing**, Springer, 2001, page 109) Rita is quite correct, and in “the short supply” bargain a mentor who professes GT experience many in fact bring in QDA training such as in interview guides, sampling, taping and preconceived analysis. Then GT blocking occurs. Mentored novices should always maintain their autonomy in mentored relationships, however confusing their initial foray may be. They should trust to emergence and the eureka syndrome. I have seen “eureka” happen so often.

Listen to this student email (Hans Thulesius, Jan 02) at the other end of the mentor continuum. “The other point that I would like to discuss is the “minus mentor” issue. How did you deal with it, if you had to. My supervisor is excellent and I have great respect for him, however he is a 100% positivist of quantitative background and thinks GT is “bullshit”. He is changing slowly and appreciates what I’m doing, I trust knowledge will prevail against prejudice....” I have written at length on changing the formed in **The Grounded Theory Perspective**. This kind of mentor is hardly worth the time and mentoring. A novice’s skill grows in doing GT, and ends in a theory in a dissertation. His/her skill in changing others is not the task at hand, nor the measure of the novice.

Mentoring is the way of the world and who’s to say that maybe QDA fits a particular novice better. But many novices with the wrong mentor, who can do GT, are lost to it. Now let us look at three aspects of experienced QDA views of the novice: skill undermining, staying open and pattern finding.

Skill Undermining

The basic problem emanates from the simple fact that the experienced QDA researcher does not understand the learning curve and its properties of beginning to do GT. The experienced QDA teacher blocks the novice with a formed view of QDA training and with a given image to the novice of not skilled enough. The experienced misread the novices confusion and evolving self development as an ineptitude. Hence the beginning “not knowing” quandary, confusion, data overwhelm and often depression is rescued by training in forcing procedures varying from structured data collection to framework analysis as the anxious novice reaches out for help and solace and QDA researchers rush to help.

I have written extensively in **Doing Grounded Theory** on not reviewing the literature in the field before doing a GT. Remember students at the PhD level have been institutionally selected partly for reading ability. And they have read a lot which makes them very sensitive to the conceptual style in their general field. They also continue reading in their field, if not their substantive area. To read in their area of research preconceives them and also with GT, since one doesn’t know where it will take them, they do not know what literature to read. Not reading the

literature and suspending knowledge about it for the time being is not hard, but is seen as being a difficult challenge for the novice by experienced QDA researchers. It is not seen as a skill developmental step.

Rita Schreiber flatly says (page 59) “Thus, in today’s world a literature review is usually a necessary first step in beginning any research project, including a grounded theory.” She attributes this erosion and novice blocking to funding agencies, but takes relief in it while faulting others.

Janice Morse is firmly opposed to not exploring the literature before commencing data collection. She says, “Such a naive perspective as working without consulting the literature may be possible for a senior investigator with a vast knowledge of social science theory with many concepts at his or her fingertips and with real theoretical wisdom. However, ignoring the literature is a strategy that is fraught with danger for a new investigator. Literature should not be ignored but rather bracketed and used for comparisons with emerging categories. Without a theoretical contest to draw on new investigators find themselves rapidly mired in data.”

Actually it is just the opposite case in spite of Morse. Novices without a literature search in the substantive area to distract or force them are more open to the emergent and soon find their thought emerging from the constant comparisons in the data. They find this with exciting clarity. The senior investigator does not get mired in the data because of immense preconceptive almost automatic forcing. He wants to share this power with the novice and the consequence is default remodeling of a GT procedure. Remember the literature does not disappear and “which literature” will be there for constant comparisons during sorting and writing- up. It is a pacing and efficiency concern. Scholarship is of course required to show the contribution of the GT to the substantive area.

Kaise Backman, in her article, “Challenges of the GT approach to a novice researcher” (**Nursing and Health Sciences**, 1999), incorrectly mixes not reading the literature first with the novice being too emotional to suspend his/her knowledge. In fact it is easier for the novice to suspend knowledge as they are more open to new categories and ideas as data collection starts. Backman says: “This detachment (from the

literature) may however be quite difficult for a novice researcher because reading the literature usually helps to clear up one’s thoughts and narrow down the topic of research.” She counsels just the opposite of GT to discover the problem, not to preconceive it out of the literature.

Backman continues: “The novice researcher must identify and suspend what he/she already knows about the experience being studied and approach the data without preconceptions. This could be particularly difficult to a novice researcher, because he/she has little experience about the emotions involved in data collection and analysis in qualitative research.”

To rescue the novice from the emotions of confusion Backman says, “it is always implicit in the way a problem is presented, the way the literature is reviewed. Concepts which strictly narrow down the research questions easily direct the study deductively. Clean cut and well defined concepts make it easier for a novice researcher to maintain the logic of the study. If the research questions are very flexible and the researcher begins data collection by interviewing without a guide, the choice of suitable themes may also be problematic.”

In short, Backman counsels forcing concepts and problems, the opposite of GT orientation. Such clarity from the start in a research is at the expense of GT emergence. It simply blocks and default remodels GT for the novice. It forestall’s and finalizes his/her GT skill development.

Rita Schreiber’s misread of the experiential skill developmental process in learning GT is throughout her article on the “how to” of GT, pages 55–85. She says at one point “Selective coding serves as a guide for further data collection, focused on filling in gaps in the theory. It is at this point that novice researchers sometimes stall, as they succumb to the temptation to follow other interesting leads through the data. (75)” She has selective coding totally wrong (see **Theoretical Sensitivity**). But more importantly at the moment that the novice is about to look at comparative groups through interesting lead, she counsels against this creative processing which comes from input and constant comparisons. Again GT is eroded by the experienced view. Her QDA structured view reduces flexibility of theoretical sampling and openness to emergent.

Schreiber continues blocking the novice in the name of

warning of incapacity, which is misplaced. As you read this quote remember that theoretical connection between categories occurs in mature memos and sorting memo banks based on theoretical codes. Theoretical connections that increase the level abstraction do not occur early in the GT process. She says as a foreclosure: “Many novice, and sometimes experienced, grounded theorists encounter difficulty raising the level of theoretical abstraction from description to theory in the emerging theory.... Most novices do well creating categories and describing how the categories relate to each other, often in some sort of linear story line. Where difficulties arise is in being able to elevate the theoretical level of the findings so that what is produced explains the action, that is, how people work to resolve the basic social problem. Too often, researchers are content to create elaborate descriptions of the phenomenon of study and fail to take the next, vitally important step into abstract theory development.” This is, of course, the effect of QDA training of the novice, resulting in descriptive capture as I explained at length in **The GT Perspective**. It is not from being a novice.

Some experienced researchers suggest skill enhancers for lacking skill rather than working on skill development as GT requires. Phyllis Stern warns against these enhancers (taping and computers) when she says in counseling the novice: “With the invasion of technology, investigators have not only come to rely on it (technology) but also consider avoiding its use as heresy. Janice Morse (this volume), for example, seems aghast that Glaser advises researchers that using a tape recorder allows one to collect and then to analyze meaningless data. While it is true that when one has an inexperienced research assistant, tape recording may be necessary, but anyone who has plowed through pages of irrelevant, transcribed data must agree with Glaser. Is Morse suggesting that generations of researchers who lived prior to electronic equipment created theoretical frameworks that were weakened because a word or two might be skipped. We can only speculate, but our collective heritage suggests that recording every word informants utter is not necessary in producing sound grounded theory.”

Stern is quite right. Morse seems to want the full coverage of evidentiary QDA, which is not necessary and time taking in GT. Tape recorded data is not “meaningless”, it is interchangeable and yields saturation of categories and their properties long

before wading through it all. It is a waste. See my chapter on taping in **Doing GT**.

Regarding computers see my chapter above on computer use as eroding GT. Stern agrees when she says: “In truth, unless the beginning researcher understands that any computer program simply serves as a tool to the investigator, that it is the mind of the student that creates and refines the conceptual framework, she or he is in danger of discovering a thin analysis that fails to illuminate the problems and processes in the scene.” Yes, indeed: thin, flat and forced, a true erosion of GT.

The Richards, creators of Nudist, imply, inadvertently, that computer skill enhancing has its drawbacks. “We have learned too that novice researchers, who may find their own rich and messy records to be alarming in their diversity, may be further alarmed by software that seems designed to celebre diversity. Novices too are often stalled by the anxiety about creating a perfect index system, not trusting the promise.” (**Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials**, 1998, p. 237.) This travail for the novice is simply unnecessary derailing and distracting from the task at hand: generating GT for all the reasons I have been detailing in this book.

Guba and Lincoln (**Naturalist Inquiry**, pp. 193–5) seem to undermine the skill of the novice by offering the supernormal view of the human-as-instrument in qualitative or natural research. The human as the instrument of choice has these enigmatic qualities they say: “Responsiveness, adaptability, holistic emphasis, knowledge abased expansion, processural immediacy, opportunities for clarification and opportunity to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses.” The reader could study what these all mean, but it is not worth it. They are trite, yet demanding to the point that they are, they say, “meaningless if the human instrument is not also trustworthy.” And if this is not enough quandary, Guba and Lincoln imply the novice is essentially untrustworthy when they say: “One would not expect individuals to function adequately as human instruments without an extensive background of training and experience.” the novice who embraces this program is lost to GT forever. The desire to do GT is enough as GT provides its own motivation at each stage (see *Doing GT*) and skill development to do and generate

systematically that which comes as natural to us all as we theorize about our daily lives.

There are a plethora of writers acting as authorities giving advice to novices on doing GT. They engage in the adapt, adopt, coopt and corrupt pattern to some degree that I wrote about in **The GT Perspective**. They superficialize GT by mixing it with QDA requirements, hence diluting and eroding GT procedures by default remodeling. Once written these writings are taken as authoritative gospel, as accurate and adequate. The writers have no notion how the naive novice will take them and in what direction. But surely the block on GT is a consequence. The novice reader should not read too many of these “advices” and trust to the emergence experience of doing GT and the growing skill development. Reading too much “advices” will surely sour GT’s purity.

Listen to this advice by Backman (page 5). “The purpose of the grounded theory approach is to create a theory which has connections with the data. The instructions for the analysis process emphasize that the connection with the data should be maintained throughout the whole process. This requirement may prevent the researcher from conceptualizing the data and from formulating abstract categories and discovering theory. If he/she is unable to do that, he/she may discover a theory which is naive, concrete and written by using the same terms as in the data. In that case the discovered theory may be simplistic and ill-constructed.”

This discouraging statement to novices is just plain, opposite and wrong based on not knowing the constant comparative method. The researcher has to stay engaged with the data totally and let the abstract patterns emerge through the constant comparisons, as they surely do. Disengaging from the data leads to conjecture which is counter GT; it undermines grounded. Good grounded theory has never ended up naive, concrete and simplistic. This is just disparaging method talk of a corrupting nature.

Backman continues her negative advise: “For a novice researcher, applying the grounded theory approach is more or less a compromise between the demands of the approach and the resources which he/she has available.” Wrong again, it is a very economical way to do a dissertation using field notes. GT moves

much faster than QDA and it just takes the researcher’s time, which has its cost, but minimal compared to the reward for the GT product.

Backman closes her paper on the novice GT researcher with again a completely corrupting, negative, skill undermining statement: “The GT method can be a good tool for a novice, but it may also hinder the way to create inductive theory.” Just the opposite: GT enhances the skill in achieving the goal of generating inductive theory. That is what GT was designed for: abstract, inductive theory generating.

Miles and Huberman (page 14) give nebulous warning advice to the “beginning researcher” in reading their book *Qualitative Data Analysis*. “The biggest enemy of your learning is the gnawing worry that you’re not doing it right. Dissertation work tends to encourage that.” “We have encountered many students launched on qualitative dissertation or research projects who feel overwhelmed and under trained.” These warnings are neutralized by GT methodology. As I have repeated so many times, data overwhelm is solved by the many delimiting procedures of GT: it is QDA that worries about full coverage and accuracy.

“Doing it right” is minimized if GT methodology is followed. the data is never wrong, it just has to be figured out what it is, baseline, properline, interpreted on vague, and thus conceptualizations of it are never wrong, since they are carefully grounded. The GT product always appears as original, creative and conceptually general. The novice may start his GT research with little skill, but experience increases it quickly. He/she may compulsively collect too much data and wonder what to do with it. He/she may be scared and impatient at first to get beyond the data. But as the constant comparative process continues, abstractions emerge from the data. The GT skill increases and with it confidence.

The novice should be encouraged at this point by the experienced research involved, NOT blocked and derailed to a QDA approach and eventual description capture by QDA rescue advise. Kate Felix in a written communication to me on 5/5/2000, said “I really enjoyed our brief conversation and wanted to study your newest books before calling. However your words of encouragement were very much appreciated the last time we spoke.” She wrote a lovely dissertation on “Developing Trust

Within Teams in Health Care Organizations”, (*Nursing*, University of Colorado, 1997)

Antoinette McCullum wrote in the beginning of her dissertation, regarding my encouragement: “Much of the motivation behind this project can be attributed to Dr Barney Glaser and his inspirational workshop in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1996. Barney’s commitment and enthusiasm for the grounded theory method encouraged this student to proceed with a daunting task, minus methodological mentoring.” She wrote a brilliant dissertation on pluralistic dialoguing. Encouragement motivates and helps the minus mentoree stay the course, as skill develops and produces its own motivated momentum.

Openness

What the novice has to offer GT is openness: being open to the emergent. They are not yet formed in a method or a substantive area to any extent. They are still free to forsake the preconceived. It is not that the experienced formed cannot remain open. It is just that few seldom do. Confident knowing is its own downfall in GT: almost nonstoppable. The greater the light, the greater the darkness does not seem to apply. Rather the greater the light, the more the formed see clearly “in advance” or preconceive the theory.

Here is a good example of how the openness occurs in the Phd candidate. Brene Brown wrote on page 3 of her dissertation. “Initially I set out, on what I thought was a well-traveled path, to find empirical evidence of what I knew to be true. I soon realized that conducting research centering on what matters to research participants — grounded theory research — means there is no path and, certainly, there is no way of knowing what you will find. This research began as a narrow quest to verify if one small group of helping professionals utilized a practice I believed ‘essential to good helping.’ Through the use of grounded theory, I was forced to challenge my own interests, investments and preconceived ideas in order to understand the concerns, interests and ideas of the research participants. The process evolved from ‘I think this is important — are you doing it?’ to ‘what do you think is important to helping and why?’ This evolution transformed my narrow quest for verification into the development of a complex theory about a basic social-psychological process of professional helping.”

Openness forces itself on the novice GT researcher. I see it happen over and over again. The experienced researcher is often too formed to get this message. They are realization immune unlike the novice whose receptiveness is just waiting for emergence.

Brene continues: “At the dissertation proposal stage, there are numerous challenges for the grounded theory researchers. These challenges include: (a) acknowledging that it is virtually impossible to understand grounded theory methodology prior to using it, (b) developing the courage to let the research participants define the research problem, and (c) letting go of your own interests and preconceived ideas to ‘trust in emergence.’”

These challenges emerge for many and are met and the novice’s dissertations are quite good. Space limits me giving the multitude of examples of this openness that I have in my files. These challenges are certainly quite different than the negative challenges professed by Backman and others mentioned above which block good GT and block and undermine the skill development of those novice GT researchers who cannot withstand their advise and rescue.

A profile of the experience view is not beneficial to the novice GT researcher. The experienced with their formed view are constantly worried about the lack of skill in the novice, as we have seen, without realizing that this lack leaves them more open and more developable in GT skills. This worry translates in concern about novice confusion and a need to see the novice force the data according to the experienced’s professional interest and framework. The formed, experienced have a stake in a status quo of their design and therefore a stake in not letting the novice stay open, which is subversive. They say that the novice’s inexperience is a block and, as we have seen, it is just the opposite. The experienced’s stake blocks the novice and forces him/her into applying an eroded GT.

The more experienced GT researchers become as careers advance, the more fixed and formed in professional interests and knowledge they are likely to become about substantive areas and their adopting, coopting and corrupting GT methodology to the study of the areas. They do not realize their forcing frameworks. Many become fixed on pet theoretical codes, such as Janice Morse

focuses on process as the distinguishing characteristic of GT, she sees it as a core variable. (“Situating GT” in **Using GT in Nursing**, 2001, page 1–4. First of all in **Theoretical Sensitivity** I detailed 18 theoretical coding families, only one of which is process. The theoretical code has to emerge as organizing feature of the GT. Actually some of the best GTs I have read are topologies and are cutting point analyses based on ranges. I have detailed even more theoretical codes in **Doing GT**. Morse is not unique. Many experienced GT researchers become proficient in using one theoretical code and it takes them over. They force the theoretical codes in subsequent researches and want their novice to force with them. It is hard to stay open under such influences, but many novices do. I remember clearly how Anselm Strauss wanted everyone to analyze the research on how the action was “paced” irrespective of emergence. Many researchers now want to see context in all theory irrespective of emergence. Theoretical codes become fades among the experienced. The novice has the best chance of breaking out of these trends.

Morse is also wrong about classifying a theoretical code (process) as a core variable. A core variable is a substantive category that accounts for most variation in resolving the main concern of participants. The theoretical code of the theory is how it integrates the core category with other categories in writing the theory. Morse also considers (page 2) GT as a theory of the middle-range. This is purely a QDA descriptive perception. GT can be written at any level of abstraction and all substantive theory has complete general, conceptual implications. This level is in the hands of the GT researcher. For example a GT on the credentializing of diploma nurses can easily be generalized to the credentializing of all work to insure quality, accountability, reliability etc.

To be sure the openness of the novice is subversive and threatening to the experienced if they do not preconceive as they do. Their inexperience is not seen as openness, it is seen as an ineptitude that should be trained, usually by QDA requirements. This is blocking, eroding and remodels GT in the eyes of the novice whose openness is compromised. Fortunately many are not compromised as they take on their experienced supervisors with the armor of their discovery of what is really going on. It is very hard to talk a novice into what he should see in the data when he/she knows what he did see emerge in the data. In sum, it is

hard to close the openness of the novice by the fears, projections and frameworks, framed as wisdom, of the experienced.

Pattern Finding

A focused view of the experienced is that the novice has a hard time finding patterns in the data and therefore cannot do GT without using preconceived categories. This worry, of course, brings us back to the experienced wanting the novice to use pet categories for professional interests. This view is surely a block to emergence.

This view is debilitating to novices and inaccurate. The ability to see patterns and to conceptualize them is innate and starts at a very young age, long before PhD candidacy. It is latent patterns that the novice has to learn to see emerge, and he/she having reached high degree status likely has the pattern viewing ability that can be used to see latent or underlying uniformities. To be sure some at the PhD level cannot see patterns, nor are good at conceptualizing and therefore should go into descriptive QDA to alleviate the confusion (see **The GT Perspective**). BUT many more novices can see patterns than do or are allowed to do. And, of course, GT enhances this ability toward generating conceptual theory.

Novices often, because of openness, see patterns quicker and of better fit and relevance than the experienced do because of their normal forcing of previous categories and models. One email on 4/5/2001 from Kennedy John, a new PhD said to me: “Secondly experts do not see patterns as novices do. Experts are so formed in their learned view that they see it everywhere and force it on whatever to sound learned. Novices who are high in intelligence and still open and if they use GT procedures see patterns easily. Thirdly, GT provides a procedure, careful constant comparison, that empirically establishes patterns and their and properties. Impressionistic patterns stated by formed experts, based on professional interests, who have lost openness are just particularistic. These patterns are expert mantled, and usually irrelevant, if patterns at all. The constant comparison method carefully grounds latent patterns as real to what is going on and is relevant to substantive action. They explicate the realities behind professionally forcing interests.” This PhD is young, but very close in formulation. The open novice using GT methodology has the best chance to discover relevant categories as to what

continually resolves the main concern. The experienced expert will establish patterns along the lines of his received, formed view, which are often not relevant to what action really takes place.

It is light touch when Janice Morse writes (page 8, Situating GT) “One strength of grounded theory is its ability to recognize patterns (topologies) of behaviors.” Of course, that is how it is designed to generate theory. It goes without saying. But discovering patterns is a complex constant comparative process followed by subsequent GT procedures to a finished product, which I have written about at length. Whether or not they are topologies, one of many theoretical codes, has to emerge. And to what degree a category (pattern) “permits a voice to remain”, as Morse says, is a forced view of a pattern that may or may not emerge for the open novice. As I wrote in **The GT Perspective**, a pattern may come from the participants voice, it is a conceptualization of it, not the voice.

Miles and Huberman (p. 58) do not favor the trust for the novice to see patterns in the data through constant comparisons. They say “One method of creating codes — the one we prefer — is that of creating a provisional ‘star list’ of codes prior to fieldwork. That list comes from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas, and/or key variables that the researcher brings to the study.” This is of course total preconceived forcing and shuts down the openness of the novice if used. Miles and Huberman do say the emergence of codes from the data has a lot going for it, but the prefabricated list rescues the novice from a GT process “so daunting to new researchers.” I believe they see emergent pattern recognition as so daunting to novices, because their discussion of “generating pattern codes” in pages 69–72, is based on comparing descriptions to constantly check out the code. This is based on descriptive redundancy. This type and level is indeed hard.

M&H miss or omit the GT constant comparative method in their pattern generating. They do not understand that the GT comparisons are conceptual generating of categories and their properties, and the patterns get delimited by choosing a core category and going to selective coding, and by the interchangeability of indices. Thus M&H’s QDA descriptive capture orientation is very “daunting” (blocking) to novices. To be sure their approach results in data overwhelm compared to the

delimiting of GT methodology. The openness of the novice to pattern generating is maximized by using GT methodology.

Katheryn May also does not understand that conceptual pattern recognition comes from the constant comparative method, during which the researcher conceptualizes the comparisons between the differences and similarities of emerging categories. She believes that patterns come from the experienced’s experience, intuition, creative reasoning, magic and training. Perhaps in QDA, and they are forced by her listed sources. But these are not the GT conceptualized latent patterns coming from conceptualizing comparisons, that a novice may see just as easily as an expert, and maybe more easily since the novice is more open (less preconceived), less tracked by accumulated knowledge in the substantive area.

May says (pages 18–19): “Although the basic processes of creative intellectual work are the same in novice and expert, the expert will notice more, remember more, and exercise better judgment. I would argue that an attribute of expert practice in qualitative research is an exquisitely tuned capacity for pattern acquisition and recognition. Pattern recognition is the ability to know where to look, in this area, the expert analyst may be informed substantially by intuition and creative reasoning. Pattern recognition is the ability to know similarities and differences based on previous experience. Again these processes cannot be observed or understood directly; they can only be understood by the product. Experts cannot tell you how a pattern was seen.... Pattern recognition is instantaneous and can be substantiated in retrospect, but cannot be predicted. The expert relies as much on intuition and creative reasoning as on past experience. Another potentially important difference between how novice and expert analysts know involves the interaction between pattern recognition skill and knowledge of the substantive related to the phenomenon being studied.”

May in lauding the expert over the novice has to be talking QDA or descriptive patterns recognition. These descriptions in her view are based on accomplished skill, seeing redundancy, a buildup of considerable experience in the substantive area which includes much literature knowledge and a methodological approach based on intuition, unanticipation, magic and mysterious impressions. This view has no procedural credibility as scientific. It is particularistic to an individual (expert) view. It

is a rhetorical way to force the data along professional interest lines from the start. Obviously this skill is absent in the novice for good reason. The novice has not yet been indoctrinated with this kind of rhetoric of description capture.

May blocks, not encourages the novice who is doing GT. I am talking of an entirely different approach to pattern recognition for the novice; that of the constant comparative method of conceptualizing categories ... it is a clear procedural, observable, predictable approach to conceptualizing latent patterns, which can be predictable as always there. It is scientific not mysterious. The novice can rely on it as productive. The less the novice knows, the more he/she can suspend what he/she knows, the more open he/she will be open to discovering these patterns, particularly the core category, because the less forced will be the generating. Knowledge does not go away, it always stands ready to be woven in at the right pacing — later in the sorting stage of the research. The issue for the novice is to be open to careful GT skill development, not to be held to an absolute expert QDA skill standard.

A quick example would be in May's view of pattern recognition would say that teacher and students give up over time their respective roles toward a getting together as just people. And this would be redundantly described ad infinitum. A novice grounded theorist would conceptualize the latent pattern of binary deconstruction, based on constantly conceptualizing comparisons. There is no magic in this, it is a careful form of index formation as I have said many times (see **Doing GT**, chapter 2 and **Theoretical Sensitivity**, chapter 4) The novice with more openness from less skilled and knowledge forcing has the edge in these discoveries. The novice with openness is truly in a favorable state to emergently conceptualize what is exactly going on undistorted with little wishful, professional interest forcing. He/she need only adhere to the rigor and tedium of the constant comparative method of generating categories and their properties. This is not the methodological, particularistic magic of May's expert. It is just using a method that generates fit, relevance and works.

I have come on a bit strong to offset the replete, constant description of “novice lacking” in the methodological literature written by the experienced. The novice is described in the literature as lacking skill in interviewing, coding, clear

organization of data, ability to focus on a line of thought, theoretical sampling, handling data overwhelm, analyzing, literature search, pattern recognition and on and on with the QDA preconceived requirements. But this skill undermining and lacking applies, if at all, to routine QDA research.

Here I am talking of GT research and what is seen as skill lacking is ok, because built into GT is the progressive skill development of the open novice. The novices's GT skill will develop relatively rapidly if he/she is not distracted and distorted with QDA rescue tactics that force the data and block trust in emergence and emergence.

Not one of these experienced methodological writers — as I pour through the literature — talk of the benefits of being a novice. NOVICES ARE NOT ENCOURAGED. They are discouraged by being characterized as lacking skill, hence their freshness to skill development is being undermined by the need for mentored training in QDA. This negative characterization is a misread characterization as I have said throughout this chapter. In addition to their openness and unforced pattern recognition ability, novices have a big stake in finishing a good GT in order to receive the PhD in a timely manner, to get on with a career. Experienced researchers seldom have this degree of pressure or stake in completion.

My general point or message in this chapter is read the novice's situation, problems and actions correctly. Do not rescue the initial confusions and data overwhelm with preconceived frameworks and outs. They block GT. Trust to emergence and skill development using GT methodology. Trust to delimiting procedures of GT. Encourage the novice's openness to emergence by encouraging him/her to stick to the tedium of conceptualizing constant comparisons and allowing GT skill development, and letting categories of latent patterns make sense of the confusion. Normal descriptive pattern recognition soon turns into conceptualizing latent patterns. It happens faster than novices and experienced alike realize. It happens often too fast as impressions try to take over to reduce the productive aspect of confusion. The latent patterns must constantly be verified over and over by conceptualizing comparisons and the ensuing property development of categories.

For example describing patterns of being careful in dentistry

to avoid AIDS soon turns into a theory of cautionary control with amazing general implications: (from another dissertation written by a formidable previous novice: Barry Gibson.) This is just one novice among a legion of them sending me and working with me on generating incredibly creative grounded theories. These are novices who were not blocked and discouraged by an erosion of GT along the lines of QDA requirements.

Listen to the pattern recognition of this novice as stated in her dissertation, See Brene Brown: “Acompanar: A GT of developing, maintaining and assessing relevance in professional helping”, 2002) “What a wild ride this is. I was really depressed in early Dec. Nothing made sense — I was hating the process. I called Amy Calvin, a grounded theorist, and we talked for 1 1/2 hours. It was too helpful. About four or five weeks ago I started noticing patterns as I coded my field notes. Then I started to see one major category and the infrastructure that supported that category. Some infrastructure — properties but I think some — categories that support my core. These appear to have their own properties. The relationships between the concepts make so much sense. its like seeing the anatomy of something you think you’ve always understood. It has been amazing, I have definitely become more specific in terms of who I’m interviewing and how I’m coding. I’m totally amazed about how complex this is going to be. I thought it would be difficult to conceptualize, but it is really the only way I can think of it.”

It is clear from this passage that the experienced should not rescue a student from confusion. Patterns will emerge and with amazing clarity, theoretical sampling, a multivariate theory and conceptual grab. My view on the novice researcher is shared by Miles and Huberman in their own way but the dimensions of concern are roughly the same. They say: “We found that making the step of analysis explicit makes them less formidable and uncertain, and more manageable. You don’t need prolonged socialization or arcane technologies. The core requisites for qualitative analysis seem to be a little creativity, systematic doggedness, some good conceptual sensibilities and cognitive flexibility — the capacity to rapidly undo your way of construing or transforming the data and to try another, more promising tack. None of these qualities is contingent on a battery of advanced ‘methods’ courses.”

Since my view on the novice is grounded, it cannot be new to

others. What is new is my formulation and its assertion in the face of experienced writers who would deny the novice his/her power.

Selection of Grounded Theory as an Appropriate Research Methodology for a Dissertation: One Student's Perspective

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Abstract

Doctoral students wanting to use grounded theory as a methodological approach for their dissertation often face multiple challenges gaining acceptance of their approach by their committee. This paper presents the case that the author used to overcome these challenges through the process of eliminating other methodologies, leaving grounded theory as the preferred method for the desired research issue. Through examining the approach used successfully by the author, other doctoral students will be able to frame similar arguments justifying the use of grounded theory in their dissertations and seeing the use of the method continue to spread into new fields and applications.

This paper examines the case built for selecting grounded theory as a defensible dissertation approach. The basic research issue that I wanted to investigate was *how practitioners in an applied field sought information in their work*; in other words, how they researched. I further narrowed the investigation down to a more specific field, but the paper presented here is left in broader form so that other students can see the approach in more general terms.

Introduction

“How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?” ... Sherlock Holmes to Watson in **The Sign of the Four** (Doyle, 1950, p. 163)

Like many other doctoral students aspiring to use grounded theory for their dissertations, I had a graduate committee comprised of members who had never supervised a dissertation that used grounded theory and whose members had never done

grounded theory themselves. As there were no other faculty members on campus who were experts in the approach, and because a dissertation exclusively using grounded theory had never been done on that campus, I had to fill the role of both educator and sales representative for the approach.

For me, the key to being successful in this approach was to show how grounded theory was not just one *possible* approach for the desired purpose of the study, but in fact the *only* appropriate methodology. I moved from broad research issues down to more focused examples, eliminating all the “impossible” (as Holmes put it), eventually leaving grounded theory as the only acceptable choice for the study.

I deliberately selected texts and references that had been used in previous courses with the committee members as it was felt that they would make relevant exemplars. The intent was to use resources that the committee members were familiar with and already trusted in order to make the case, so that the argument could be kept focused on the methodology rather than the references. Other references that were similar in research intent were also used to illustrate the acceptability in the academic community of the approach, albeit in other disciplines. This resulted in a more limited but focused literature review than might be used in other instances, but one that was intended to be more persuasive.

Research Approach and Intent

Research has been defined as “the formal, systematic application of the scientific and disciplined inquiry approach to the study of problems” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p.3). Just as there are many different types of problems, there are consequently many different types of research methodologies used to investigate them. Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) see the research problem and how to investigate it as intimately intertwined, “The identification of the problem and the choice of methodology may be seen as an interactive process, with each influencing the other” (p. 46). Selecting the appropriate methodology for a research problem is therefore much like selecting the right tool out of your toolbox; you might be able to get the job done with screwdriver, but it will not be as effective or efficient if you really needed a hammer all along.

There are several important factors to consider when

selecting a methodology. Madsen (1992) states, “Once you have set forth the research problem...you must set forth precise steps you propose to take to answer your question and solve your problem” (p. 68). Sogunro (2002) describes this process:

When faced with the question of which method to choose in conducting research...the following factors are important for consideration: matching research purposes and questions with methods; depth of study of phenomena; availability of resources (money, time, etc [sic]); availability of supporting literature; ‘knowledge pay off’ (i.e., which approach will produce more useful knowledge); and ‘style’ or preference for a method....and so forth. (p. 8)

Note that the first factor Sogunro (2002) advises us to consider is the research *purpose*. The purpose of the research will drive the rest of the process of selecting an appropriate methodology. Merriam and Simpson (2000) posit, “Ultimately the value or purpose of research in an applied field is to improve the quality of practice of that discipline” (p. 7). While this lofty goal of improving practice may indeed be the ultimate goal of the researcher, contributing aspects must be examined as well.

First, whose practice is the researcher interested in improving? For the given case of examining how practitioners seek information, the answer to this question may have dramatic effects in the selection of an appropriate methodology. For example, if the researcher was the manager of practitioners and ultimately only wanted to improve the practice of the practitioners directly under his or her charge, this would be a very important consideration. In this case, an *action research* approach might be most appropriate, since “its purpose is to obtain knowledge that can be applied directly to a particular situation” and does not require hypothesis formulation, extensive procedural planning, or experimental condition control (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

On the other hand, if the researcher is an information manager at a particular firm who is considering subscribing to an improved online search service, action research may not be the most appropriate choice. Instead, the information manager might really only want to know how much practitioners currently use the current package to evaluate whether or not an upgrade would

be worthwhile. In this case, evaluation or evaluation research might be appropriate where a decision will be made based on the systematic collection and analysis of data (Boulmetis & Dutwin, 2005; Gay & Airasian, 2003).

In addition to whose practice the researcher is interested in improving, the researcher must consider the intended audience for the research. In the examples discussed above, the action researcher or the evaluation researcher may or may not be interested in preparing and/or presenting the results to anyone else. It may simply be a separate project undertaken in the course of other duties, or it may be formalized in a report to upper management for approval. On the other hand, a pragmatic academic may want to publish the findings in peer reviewed journals that require more rigorous and/or replicable methodological treatments. This too would influence the researcher's definition of the ultimate purpose for the investigation. Dissertations related to an applied field may want to appeal to audiences in both industry and academia.

The preferences and skills of the researcher must also be honestly evaluated (Brause, 2000; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). If the researcher dislikes interacting with people, methodologies that use interviews may not be desirable. If the researcher dislikes statistical analysis, a quantitative approach may be unsuitable. Besides simple likes and dislikes, acknowledgement of skills and preferences towards certain methods may be given and evaluated. For example, if the researcher has extensive experience in correlational research but another approach is warranted, new and/or additional skills may have to be obtained.

There are also other practical considerations. As mentioned previously by Sogunro (2002), the resources available, particularly money and time, must be considered. There are at least two related aspects of time that might affect the researcher in the selection of a methodology: the time that the results are required or desired and the time that it will take to produce them. As Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) state, "In general, qualitative studies take more time than quantitative ones. Ethnographic studies are especially time-sensitive" (p. 46). If the researcher needs the results in a month, this will clearly limit the choice of methodologies or preclude the proper conduct of the study altogether.

Methodology Selection

With the above considerations in mind, the researcher begins to be guided towards certain methodologies and away from others. For the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that there are no overriding constraints on methodology, such as publishing in a journal devoted to a particular approach or having to have the results in a month. Further, it will be assumed that the research will not be used or consumed solely by the researcher, but will be presented to at least a limited audience of academics and professionals with the goal of explaining and potentially even predicting this information-seeking behavior. The final product is a defensible dissertation of the quality expected of a doctoral candidate and the utility to be used by practitioners.

Although one of the stated intents of the research is for it to ultimately be applied by practitioners in the field, there is no desire to judge the information-seeking behavior of the participants, only to learn what it is. Although considered a form of applied research, evaluation research approaches would therefore be categorically rejected in this case, as they are intended to be used in rating and making decisions on the subject, as discussed previously.

The process therefore turns back to the research question itself. The key word in the research problem is the interest in *how* practitioners seek information. In general, a study to of *how* or *why* things are a certain way would indicate a qualitative approach would be most suitable (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 13). This allows for the development of hypotheses about how the behavior occurs, in contrast to a quantitative approach, which would test hypotheses (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 8-9). As recommended by Merriam and Simpson, if it is revealed "that no theory fits the phenomenon under investigation, the one study goal may be to formulate a theory and/or hypothesis to explain observed events or behavior" (2000, p. 27).

However, eliminating approaches that are exclusively quantitative only narrows the field of potential methodologies slightly; there are a host of qualitative approaches left to consider. Action research, discussed previously, is considered a qualitative approach, but it is also considered to be non-generalizable and limited to the specific conditions under which it

was conducted (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Since the researcher has a specific audience of both academics and practitioners in mind, with the intent of the research being applied, action research would therefore be eliminated from consideration. Since the researcher is interested in current practices, historical research methods are also inappropriate. This leaves several other options remaining.

A case study approach would allow detailed investigation into how a practitioner or practitioners seek information. Perry (1998) believes that case studies are particularly suitable for offering realistic portrayals of behavior:

Given this appropriateness of realism for case study research, the research problems addressed in theses are more descriptive than prescriptive, for example, no positivist experiments or cause-and-effect paths are required to solve the research problem. That is, the research problem is usually a “how do?” problem rather than a “how should?” problem. This “how do” rather than “how should” problem captures the positive versus normative dichotomy, for case study research is concerned with describing real world phenomena rather than developing normative decision models. (p. 787)

This fits the stated research problem of *how do* practitioners research. Case studies are likely to provide some important information, as Stake (2005) discusses:

We recognize a large population of hypothetical cases and a small subpopulation of accessible cases....On representational grounds, the epistemological opportunity seems small, but we are optimistic that we can learn some important things from almost any case. We choose one case or a small number of exemplars. (p. 451)

While learning *something* is a good start, the case study approach has several drawbacks for the proposed study, which focuses on how practitioners in an applied field seek information. First, it may be difficult to actually define a *case* to study for this research. Stake (2005) explains:

Custom has it that not everything is a case. A child [patient] may be a case, easy to specify. A doctor may be a

case. But *his or her doctoring* probably lacks the specificity, the boundedness, to be called a case. (p. 444)

Similarly, a practitioner seeking information may likewise not be a suitable case for study. More importantly, while a case study would provide a lot of detail about that particular practitioner being examined, this may be inadequate for the given purpose, since the researcher wants to know how practitioners (plural) seek information. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) point this limitation of case studies out:

They are not generalisable [sic] in the conventional sense. By definition, case studies can make no claims to be typical....because the sample is small and idiosyncratic, and because data is predominantly non-numerical, there is no way to establish the probability that data is representative of some larger population. For many researchers and others, this renders any case study findings as of little value. (p. 10)

This leaves us to consider other methodologies as more appropriate.

Ethnography is another qualitative approach that could be considered for this project. Gay and Airasian (2003) define ethnography as “a qualitative approach that studies the participants in their natural setting” (p. 16). This definition seems appropriate for the given study, as the researcher wants to know how practitioners seek information in their natural work setting. However, as Groat and Wang (2002) elaborate:

Although it emphasizes in-depth engagement with its subject...the researcher’s aim is not to create an explanatory theory that can be applied to many settings. Rather, ethnographic research culminates in a rich and full delineation of a particular setting that persuades a wide audience of its human validity. (p. 182)

This level of detail and focus on the context, while potentially interesting, are not what the researcher is seeking in this instance, eliminating ethnography as a suitable methodology for this study.

Although not exclusively a qualitative method, a grounded theory approach may also be considered for this research. The researcher is looking for a way of explaining *how* practitioners in

an applied field seek information; in other words, a *theory* of how this is done in actual practice. Building a theory based on, or grounded in, actual data is specifically what a grounded theory methodology is designed to do. Glaser (1998) defines grounded theory as “the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method” (p. 3).

Grounded theory is used to investigate problems of why and how in a systematic way, one that is "grounded" in the data itself rather than being deduced logically or hypothetically. It is particularly well suited for fields of practice, as it can be used to "give the practitioner a conceptual tool with which to guide practice" (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 113). This satisfies the aforementioned overall goal of applied research of improving practice.

Another advantage of the grounded theory approach is its flexibility with regard to data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is particularly important in this case because the researcher wants to know how the practitioners actually seek information, which presents difficulties with regard to data collection, as the behavior may not be possible to directly observe. As noted in Ellis' (1993) grounded theory study of the information-seeking patterns of academics, the use of direct observation is “almost totally impracticable” (p. 475) due to the nature of the study. Even if access and timing worked to the researcher's favor and he was present at the exact moment that a practitioner was seeking information, the actions would not be transparent and would not allow any depth of understanding, specifically regarding the “how” issues, to be obtained. Furthermore, the situation would certainly not ameliorate itself were the researcher to continuously ask the practitioner what they were doing, why they were doing it that way, and what influences were acting upon their decision making process. The observation of research would, by definition, end at that point, with the possible outcome being that the researcher would no longer be welcome in the setting.

Data collection methods other than observation, are therefore required. While journaling or diaries would be possible approaches, they have several drawbacks. First, it is doubtful that they would be properly maintained, if completed at all, by busy practitioners. This is particularly true of personnel in an applied industry, who might not be familiar with journaling and

may view the process as strange and/or uncomfortable. As Ellis (1993) stated in regard to his study of academic research activities,

The use of diaries...would have relied on the willingness and ability of the researchers to complete the diaries, and, even if the researchers had been able to complete them, it is questionable whether they would have been able to have done so comprehensively and accurately (p.475).

Furthermore, the data collection would still be post hoc; no one would stop in the middle of their information-seeking to record their actions, thoughts, and motivations. Finally, the collection process would be slowed considerably as the diaries were completed, collected, and read before learning if they contained information of value to the researcher.

Grounded theory often employs interviewing as its data collection technique, and this appears most appropriate in this case. Interviews are particularly suited for this approach; as Fontana and Frey (2005) stated, "the focus of interviews is moving to encompass the *hows* of people's lives...as well as the traditional *whats*" (p. 698). These *hows* and *whats* are exactly what the researcher is seeking.

As with any methodology, there are several potential criticisms of grounded theory as an appropriate research tool for this study. A common criticism of grounded theory studies is that they are not "real" research. These criticisms are nothing new; in 1967 Glaser and Strauss noted that "qualitative research is generally labeled 'unsystematic,' 'impressionistic,' or 'exploratory'" (1967, p. 223). However, these criticisms fall short in the case of grounded theory as a methodology. It is not exclusively qualitative; it has a systemic process including sampling, coding, and memoing; it is based on data rather than impressions; and, while it can explore new subject matter, is a complete methodology rather than simply a starting point for further (presumably quantitative) research.

The acceptance of the grounded theory framework has been evinced by its inclusion in a host of research texts, in subjects ranging from architecture (Groat & Wang, 2002) to education (Gay & Airasian, 2003; Merriam & Simpson, 2000) to qualitative research in general (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) (while it uses qualitative data, it is not a qualitative method). As Glaser has

noted, grounded theory has "product proof" which nullifies criticisms: "Let the product legitimize it self [sic], as it is doing in health, education, and business professions, where it is crucial to have relevant research that works" (1998, p. 16).

Grounded theory is therefore the most appropriate methodology for this research study. It allows the researcher to determine how practitioners actually seek information in their field and develop a theory to explain and predict this behavior. Although there are minor concerns with the methodology, these are outweighed by its applicability for this situation.

Conclusion

The persuasions described previously convinced my committee that grounded theory was not just the best methodology for this study, but was in fact the only appropriate choice. This allowed me to gain the committee's acceptance with grounded theory as the methodological approach and for the study to progress. While there were certainly still other challenges to the use of grounded theory for a dissertation proposal, the acceptance of the method in general was a key factor in the overall success of my completing the process and successfully defending my dissertation in the summer of 2008.

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Striking a Balance between Program Requirements and GT Principles: Writing a compromised GT proposal

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Abstract

Glaser's term "compromised GT proposal" (2001, p.114) refers to the type of Grounded Theory (GT) proposal that is written in order to conform to the requirements of a standardized qualitative research proposal. A GT proposal needs only to supply information on the area of interest, the data source and a statement of method to the effect that the researcher begin to collect, code and analyse the data and let the theory emerge. Thus, the proposal may only occupy "a page or two" (Glaser, 2001, p. 111). Whilst being consistent with the methodology, a GT proposal sometimes has to give way to the format specified by a PhD program or committee even though the format was not defined for a GT proposal and in some areas, conflicts with GT principles; for example, the format may require a literature review. This short paper reports on my experience of writing a compromised GT proposal as a first-time GT researcher. It describes how both Glaser's advice on writing compromised GT research proposals and the characteristics of the substantive area of the proposed research were used to satisfy program requirements while still maintaining GT fundamentals.

The Program Requirements for Research Proposal

As a PhD student at the School of Library, Archives, and Information Studies (SLAIS), my area of research is archival and information studies, which traditionally does not have discipline-specific or preferred research methodologies. Students may select any of the social science research methodologies as long as they justify the selection for their dissertation projects. My selection of GT is based on three grounds: first, it is evident that there are no theories existing in the substantive area which I am interested in; second, I have been conducting deductive (i.e., theory-testing) research for all my research projects and I consider my dissertation project a good opportunity to practice inductive

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research; third, based on my past research experiences, I trust that I am theoretically sensitive and capable of generating concepts and hypotheses.

The requirements of writing a research proposal in my school are contained in the *PhD Handbook of Policies and Procedures*, which explains the purpose of defending the research proposal (Table 1), lists the required contents of the proposal (Table 2), and explains that: “A well-designed proposal should provide the basis for the first two or three chapters of the final dissertation. In most cases, the proposal should be at least 30 pages long” (SLAIS, 2005).

Table 1: Purposes of the Defence

- to ensure that the student has a clear understanding of the research he/she proposes to conduct,
- to ensure that all Committee members have a clear conception of the research proposed,
- to reach agreement on the methodology to be followed for the dissertation research, and
- to ensure that all Committee members formally approve of the student's topic and research plan.

Table 2: The Contents of a Proposal

- Title page, with student's name, working title, and names of Committee members
- Table of contents
- Introduction, including an explanation of the Research Question
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Information on issues relating to ethical review and their resolution, if applicable
- Planning information - Timeline, itemized budget, if applicable, any other appropriate planning information
- Reference list

While not as constraining as some proposal formats, students are required to demonstrate to the committee the breadth and depth

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of their knowledge about the research subject (i.e., literature review, research questions), the suitability of the selected methodology and the do-ability of the project. The purpose and format of the GT proposal are apparently not considered, or accommodated, here.

The Substantive Area of Research

The term “substantive area” does not have a formal definition in Glaser’s books. In *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Glaser states that a substantive area in GT is “a specific area e.g., heart disease or route milkmen” (1978, p. 52); however, the criteria for determining “specific” are not provided. Based on my understanding of Glaser’s discussions on “substantive theory,” “general substantive theory” and “formal theory” (1978, p. 52; 1992, p. 99), the substantive area that interests me is defined as the Electronic Documents and Records Management System (EDRMS) implemented in the process of developing electronic government in the Government of Canada. This substantive area is comprised of a general substantive area, i.e., the EDRMS, and the qualifiers that make it specific: electronic government development in the Government of Canada. The EDRMS is a complicated piece of software designed to manage (or control) the creation, use, and maintenance of documents and records in electronic format, which now predominates in organizations. The design, implementation, and operation of the EDRMS are primarily relevant to the academic field of Archival Science, which I study.

To write a GT proposal for this substantive area following the GT requirements, I need only to specify two items: area of interest and data source (Glaser, 2001, p. 111). Thus, my GT proposal would only identify the substantive area that interests me and how I would collect data to discover problems, and generate theories for the discovered problems within a Canadian federal government department. This, however, will not satisfy the program requirements for proposal defence. I did not request changes to the current *PhD Handbook* to consider GT when writing my proposal because I am the first PhD SLAIS student who has selected GT and consider that a request for change would be more likely to be accepted after I had successfully defended my GT proposal. I decided to write a compromised GT proposal – a proposal satisfying the current program requirements to the degree that my Committee is willing to

accept and support it but still maintaining the essence of GT. In other words, the proposal needed to present an acceptable balance between the program requirements and GT principles.

The Compromised GT Proposal

The major difference between a standardized social research proposal and a GT proposal rests with the literature review. A literature review is an indispensable requirement for writing a standardized proposal because it is used to formulate the theoretical framework (i.e., identified research gaps and proposed hypotheses) under which a research project is designed and conducted. As such, a literature review serves as the foundation for traditional social research on which the researcher demonstrates his or her theoretical grasp of the substantive area (i.e., research questions and researcher qualifications), justifies the suitability of selected methodology, and defends the do-ability of the research design. GT, however, requires that the literature review be avoided at the research proposal stage. According to Glaser, "There is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study" (1992, p. 31), which is one of two "very strong dicta" (Glaser, 1998, p. 67). The "need not to review" is derived directly from the underlying logic of GT to ground theories in empirical data, that is, the perceptions of the actors in the real world. In GT's view, both research problems and the theories developed to account for the problems emerge from field data. The preconceived theoretical framework based on the literature review typically causes data to be forced into the framework and the preconceived research problems most likely are irrelevant to the substantive area being studied (Glaser, 1992, p. 21; 1998, pp. 115-132). At the proposal stage, reviewing literature may be a waste of time and may be counterproductive to theory generation (Glaser, 1998, p. 69).

However, to avoid a literature review in a research proposal "only works with a PhD committee that is totally sold on GT" (Glaser, 2001, p. 111). To help students overcome the difficulty of satisfying the standardized requirements, Glaser recommends the following:

- 1.) Studying areas with no literature. When possible, open up areas where there is virtually no literature, thus the researcher does not have to contend with what has been "said" (1998, p. 73);
- 2.) Relying on all-is-data and constant comparative analysis:

a.) Turn the literature review into data collection to be constantly compared after the review is done. The attitude is data collection, not reverence for the authenticity and authority of the printed word and the published author (1998, p. 72);

b.) If a researcher has studied for years the substantive area, he/she should take his/her knowledge of the literature as data and write copious notes on it. Later as the study begins, these notes become more data to be constantly compared (1998, p. 73);

c.) Delimit coverage to giving the committee what they emphasize. Then do the study and let GT correct the preconceptions (2001, p. 114).

3.) Writing the proposal with stated flexibility: The proposal should provide some strategies for building a clear conceptual framework while retaining the flexibility to allow the unanticipated to emerge (2001, p. 114).

4.) Demonstrating research qualification:

a.) Examples of conceptual ability can be shown to the committee (2001, p. 121);

b.) The candidate facing a non GT oriented committee should engage in some sort of competence display on as many levels as possible (2001, p. 121).

5.) Finding a mentor: To be supervised and supported by a GT mentor resolves a major committee concern on guiding skill and its development (2001, p. 121).

Recommendations 1), 2) b, 4), and 5) were relevant to the writing and defending of my GT proposal, which also took advantages of the characteristics of the substantive area to be studied. The compromised GT proposal occupies 44 pages (references not included), satisfying the program requirement of being "at least 30 pages long" (SLAIS, 2005). Furthermore, the strategies used to strike the balance between the program requirements and GT principles were reflected in the sections of my proposal, i.e., *The Setting, Area of Problem, Area of Research, Research Methodology and Project Planning*.

The Setting

The term "setting" is used as it is in a traditional research proposal, which serves the purpose of delimitating the boundaries

of the research focus and keeping the project to a manageable level. In the context of GT, this section is about the substantive area, specifically, its three aspects: the Government of Canada, the development of electronic government, and the development of electronic government in the Government of Canada. These areas were the subjects of my minor area which I studied in the first two years in the PhD program for the purposes of understanding and of identifying relevance to my major study (i.e., electronic records management and its sub-field, the EDRMS). The literature in these areas includes the type of discipline-specific (i.e., electronic government, the development of electronic government in the Government of Canada) and the type of government publications (i.e., the Government of Canada, the development of electronic government in the Government of Canada). The literature in these areas were not studied to identify research gaps or to formulate research questions/hypotheses. In the proposal, the literature was used, in the form of quoted or summarized factual information, to introduce the three areas and their defining features. I thus do not consider it a violation of the GT principle of “not to review literature” at the beginning of the research. At the same time, the literature was noted as data for constant comparison at the later stage of the research process.

While information in these areas was quoted or summarized, it was carefully selected based on its relevance to the proposed project, which is an analytical process similar to the search for relevant literature in a standardized research proposal. Because of the vast amount of information in these areas, figures for each area were crafted to depict key features and relationships within and amongst the areas. This, to a large degree, satisfies the program’s requirement regarding researcher qualifications because it demonstrates to the committee the width and depth of my knowledge of the areas relevant to the proposed study as well as my abilities of assessing and sorting massive information. The analysis was done using factual information from the literature, not research findings or theoretical articles. I consider this section necessary even for an uncompromised, GT-compliant proposal because the substantive area in this case is not readily understandable like “dying patients” or “alcoholism,” which do not require explanations.

Area of Problem

In contrast, the section *Area of Problem*, is not necessary for a GT compliant proposal. The section was included to satisfy the program requirement of identifying research problems or gaps. The problem “identified” here is a publicly reported and serious issue: there is an *information management crisis in the Government of Canada*. Because information management emerged in the *Setting* section as one of the two key defining features (the other being information technology), the information management crisis looks like a research problem identified in relation to the setting. Satisfying this program requirement does not violate the GT principle of not identifying research problems before the research starts because the “identification” was not based on a literature review, thus the problem was not pre-conceived. The GT research problem that should wait for emergence was not identified and is still waiting for discovery in the substantive area.

Area of Research

The *Area of Research* introduces the specific EDRMS that the proposed research intends to study, which, together with the setting, forms the substantive area of study. The literature used for this section is the type of government publications, which again is not reviewed but presented. This section also identifies the EDRMS’ relationships with the areas in the setting through analyzing the factual information previously presented in the proposal. The identification of relationships between the EDRMS and the setting establishes the significance of the research because of the publicly reported information management problem. The analysis demonstrates my research competence, which, at the same time, follows the GT requirement of avoiding literature review in the substantive area. Literature on the core area of my substantive area, i.e., electronic records management and its sub-field, the EDRMS, is not reviewed in its entirety.

Although a considerable amount of information is presented in the proposal and in-depth analyses were conducted to identify complex relationships, the research question (the other critical program requirement) was not formulated because the literature was not reviewed. The research question is where I applied GT principles authentically without any compromises. The justifications for not formulating the research question in my

proposal include:

GT requires, fundamentally, avoiding pre-conceptions, i.e., research questions and/or hypotheses derived from literature review, as much as possible in order for concepts to emerge from data collected from the substantive area. Researchers are required to be open to data and not to be restrained by research questions.

The absence of research questions creates no problems but instead offers benefits for conducting the research. It creates no problems because GT's theoretical interviewing and theoretical sampling techniques are capable of guiding the direction of research, thus replacing the guiding role of research questions required by other types of methodologies. It is beneficial because lack of research questions eliminates the danger of forcing data into existent concepts or pre-conceived categories, thus guarantees the generated theories are relevant to the area of study and powerful for explaining the main concern.

Research Methodology

A detailed *Research Methodology* section is unnecessary for a GT proposal because as a general method of inquiry, GT can be used for any substantive area and can work with all types of data and is already well documented (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The *Research Methodology* section is absolutely necessary for a compromised GT proposal because GT needs to be first introduced and then justified for being selected. My proposal introduces GT and its three "versions" and justifies my selection of Classic GT. The justifications focused on the need for theories to be generated for the substantive area where currently theories do not exist and my personal cognitive style which finds Classic GT convincing. I find it is hard to appreciate constructivist "GT" and it would be unreasonable to require a researcher to apply a methodology with which he or she has issues.

Classic GT was introduced to satisfy the program requirement of "[reaching] agreement on the methodology to be followed for the dissertation research" (SLAIS, 2005). Following Glaser's advice on not rewriting GT, key concepts and processes are introduced using information directly from the Classic GT books in simple sentences, with references being made to Classic GT books when necessary (Glaser, 2001, p. 127). These concepts

include constant comparative analysis, theoretical sensitivity, and all-is-data; procedures include theoretical interviewing, sampling, coding, memoing, sorting, etc. Emphasis was placed on the fact that GT is a complete methodological package which contains guidance on each step in the research process and that GT can be understood effectively when it is being practiced. Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis (Glaser 1992) helped answer many questions during the proposal defence.

Data collection techniques identified in the proposal include: free-style conversational interviewing and document reading. Free-style interviewing with emergent questions is a GT-specific data collecting technique which is driven by the logic of GT (Glaser, 2001, p. 174). The employment of this technique is critical to the generation of theories and to the quality of the generated theories. To follow this GT requirement, there should not be identified informants or pre-conceived interviewing questions. This, however, causes difficulties for obtaining ethical review approval because the letter for informants' consent and sample questions – two typical requirements for any research involving human subjects – cannot be submitted in the ethical review application. Compromises were made in my proposal to address the difficulties following Glaser's advice to offer "general questions to cover [the] area of interest, with explanations on the emergence of interview style and specific questions" (Glaser, 2001, p. 141). Sample questions were conceived but focusing on the technological aspect of the EDRMS. These questions are necessary for the researcher to understand the operation of the system and at the same time, demonstrate to the Ethical Review Board that the questions are unlikely to cause privacy concerns. An initial group of informants (i.e., records managers of departments) was identified to allow a sample consent letter to be drafted. The proposal explains the possibility of site- and informant-spreading using the rationale of theoretical sampling and states that updates will be submitted to the Board when major changes in informants and/or interview questions occur.

The aspects of the substantive area serve as qualifiers for site selection. Both the initial or concentration site and the subsequent sites are designed to be selected based on their status of participating in the electronic government development in the Government of Canada. The site needs to be a department or agency in the Government of Canada which participates in the

development of electronic government and which is a user of the EDRMS.

Role of Literature

While literature was a significant component in the writing of my proposal, there is not a section named *Literature Review* because literature was not reviewed in the manner required by the standardized research proposal. For the purpose of explanation, the section *Role of Literature* is placed within the *Research Methodology*, summarizing the usage of literature in the proposal and the proposed project:

Literature in this proposal

Literature in this proposal was not reviewed for identifying research gaps or formulating research questions, hypotheses; instead, it was used to:

- describe the setting in which the proposed research is situated,
- reveal a publicly reported problem that is relevant to the research,
- describe and justify the area of research in relation to the setting,
- introduce and justify the selected methodology, and
- plan the research.

Literature in this research

Literature in this research will be read and reviewed as data at a later stage following the GT's all-is-data principle: "The literature is not forgotten or ignored, it is put in proper sequencing of GT research phases" (Glaser, 2001, p. 139). A note was created in this section addressing literature review on the core aspect of my substantive area, i.e., electronic records management and its sub-field, the EDRMS. Although literature in this area was not reviewed in this proposal, it was reviewed when I studied my major area and for other research projects. As such, pre-conceptions exist in my mind though they are not explicit in the proposal. The note documents this fact and serves as a reminder of re-reviewing the literature later in the research process and in light of the discovered concepts and hypotheses.

Project Planning

The *Project Planning* is a section needed by both the GT-

compliant and the standardized research proposal; it contains information regarding the do-ability of the project, which is usually a major concern of the committee. A standardized proposal provides detailed information on timeline, resources, anticipated difficulties, etc., for the purpose of ensuring the successful execution of the designed project. To provide details on these aspects in a GT proposal is quite difficult because the research process follows the track of theory generating and it cannot predict how concepts and their properties will emerge, when they will emerge, or when theoretical saturation can be reached. My proposal uses direct quotes to help answer the program requirement of project planning:

"Time is very predictable in GT research. It should not take more than a year to do a GT dissertation or study.... GT data management is not expensive and does not require staff.Tape recording and typing, which costs greatly in time and money, is not necessary in GT.... A GT can be stopped at anytime if resources are near exhaustion since a little theory goes a long way. Most people use one or two GT hypotheses based on a few categories no matter how complex theory" (Glaser 2001, p. 115). This information, however, did not ease the committee's concern about the execution of the project. To address the concern, it recommended inviting a GT expert on campus to join my committee for the purpose of guiding the conduct of the project and to ensure my questions to be answered.

Summary

Applying Glaser's advice and taking advantages of the characteristics of the substantive area, my compromised GT proposal achieved the balance of satisfying the program requirements without violating GT principles. Through the "alternative use" of literature, the proposal demonstrated my qualifications and competence of conducting research, highlighted the significance of the proposed research, and justified the suitability of the selected methodology. However, it did not completely ease the committee's concern about the execution of the methodology. This is perhaps due to the fact that none of the committee members have supervised GT projects. The proposal was successfully defended on May 4, 2009, with all committee members agreeing on the significance of the research and the suitability of GT to the research area; no revisions were requested. An on-campus GT expert was solicited by my

supervisor after the defence, who agreed to join my committee. My project is ready to begin. As the first student in my School who has defended GT as her research methodology, I hope GT will be recognized by more students as a defensible methodology and the work I have done will pave the way towards a smoother, easier process of proposing GT research projects in the School.

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Learning Classic Grounded Theory: An Account of the Journey and Advice for New Researchers

Carol Roderick, Ph.D.

Abstract

Graduate students who employ CGT for their theses or dissertations predominantly learn the methodology on their own. As a distinct methodology, CGT is challenging to employ. This challenge increases further when graduate students encounter poor advice from dissertation supervisors who are unfamiliar with the methodology, or attempt to incorporate elements from the many alternative and modified versions of grounded theory presented in the literature. This article provides an account of one student's experience learning CGT to complete her doctoral dissertation. It is hoped that this article will assist other new researchers to anticipate some of the confusion, challenges, and insights, and growth that they may encounter in their first CGT study. The article concludes with advice for new researchers including: seek expertise, engage in community, just do it, know self, and balance challenge and support.

Introduction

Classic grounded theory [CGT] is a fundamentally distinct methodology. It does not fit within the established qualitative or quantitative paradigms. Instead, it stands on its own and can use all as data (Holton, 2007). While there is a growing body of literature focusing on the experiences of learning to do qualitative research (Drago-Severson, Asghar, Gaylor, 2003; Gale, 1990; Hein, 2004, Hughes, & Berry, 2000), little has been written about the experience of learning classic grounded theory from the novice's perspective.

Graduate students who aspire to employ CGT for their theses or dissertations predominantly learn the methodology on their own as 'minus mentorees' (Glaser, 1998). Few individuals have access to relevant graduate level courses or a dissertation supervisor experienced in CGT. In fact, because of the many ways CGT has been altered and modified since **Discovery of**

Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was first published, many individuals who supervise CGT dissertations may have misunderstandings of the methodology.

This article provides an account of my experience learning CGT to complete my doctoral dissertation. I hope that my account will assist other researchers, new to classic grounded theory, to anticipate some of the confusion, challenges, insights and growth that they may encounter in their first CGT study. I hope that elements of my journey resonate with other researchers, and provide them with company in what can be a long and lonely dissertation journey. In the process of completing my dissertation, I learned many valuable lessons. These lessons serve as advice that should interest doctoral students engaged in CGT and may help them to avoid pitfalls along the dissertation path. This article also provides insight into the process of learning CGT that can inform the design and teaching of CGT in various contexts, and the mentoring of students employing the methodology.

Account of the Journey

My journey began with an initial resistance to all things grounded theory, followed by gradually understanding the methodology and some of the ways it has been modified, to actually conducting and completing my dissertation. This journey explicates some of the challenges and highlights that I encountered as I tried it out, made mistakes, got stuck, read, felt frustrated, had 'Aha!' moments, revised previous work, and took incremental steps forward before getting stuck again.

Getting Acquainted with Grounded Theory

I was first introduced to grounded theory as one of a smorgasbord of methodologies in a graduate level introductory qualitative research course. At the time grounded theory was a mystery to me. I was initially turned away from grounded theory by what seemed to be inflexible and rigid procedures and confusing terminology. Two years into my doctoral studies, however, I began exploring using grounded theory methodology for my dissertation. I read the seminal text **Discovery of Grounded Theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and quickly saw the potential offered by CGT to produce a dissertation that would be practical and significant. CGT is a rigorous methodology, containing directions for each aspect of the research process while

also allowing for creativity and intuition (Glaser, 1998).

As part of my doctoral studies, I had to successfully complete three comprehensive examinations. These examinations took the form of essays and presentations, and included one examination focused on methodology. While completing my examination on grounded theory, I wrestled with the various forms of the method, examined its evolution, and its congruence with philosophical paradigms. I came to understand that my initial resistance reflects extensive diversity within what researchers call grounded theory. The many ways researchers have altered and changed the methodology since **Discovery of Grounded Theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was published has led to various reformulations, contradictions, and modifications and caused considerable confusion. This exploration solidified my interest in pursuing classic grounded theory, the methodology as it was originally conceived.

Given that I began my dissertation trained in qualitative methods, my first attempts at CGT somewhat distorted the methodology. I started well intentioned but inexperienced. As I progressed, I engaged in "a set of double-back steps" (Glaser 1978, p. 16) to revise my previous work in concert with my developing understanding. I trust that I am not the only individual who has experienced this: "beginning researchers, as much as they want to do GT, come to research with many positivistic rules and method procedures that inhibit their openness to not knowing and that keep them preconceiving" (Glaser, 2001, p. 82). I cycled through the various procedures "learning from each attempt and developing clarity and confidence in their application" (Holton, 2007, p. 266).

The substantive area for my dissertation was the senior year of undergraduate study. I framed my research question as "What is the key concern of senior undergraduate students and how do they attempt to resolve this concern?" I began by interviewing students as they approached graduation at a single university and then extended my sampling to other universities. The thirty formal interviews that I conducted included students enrolled in a variety of academic programs, both women and men aged 20-25 from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and levels of parental education. I developed and employed a demographic questionnaire, and tape-recorded and transcribed each of these interviews despite Glaser's (1998) advice against it. After each

interview, I created field notes, listened to the recording, and performed an initial coding and analysis. Mirroring my growing confidence and ability, I would now choose to rely on extensive field notes rather than tapes.

After three interviews, I thought that students' main concern was *figuring out what to do after graduation*. I restructured my interview guide accordingly but soon realized that this was not students' main concern. I was confused and frustrated: "Why wasn't the methodology working?" I was overwhelmed with data, and had no idea how to do constant comparison. My highly descriptive codes did not reveal much about what was going in the substantive area. I decided that I should try to more closely adhere to the guidelines of classic grounded theory. Patiently, with several repeated attempts to code, compare, and memo, I began to see reoccurring incidents of *resisting planning life after graduation, seeking assistance to plan life after graduation, and avoiding assistance to plan life after graduation*.

One day I arrived at an interview and realized that I did not have my interview guide and demographic questionnaire. After a moment of panic, I asked the student simply to tell me about being a graduating student. The interview flowed well and I learned more in this interview than I had in others because I was listening differently. At this point, I ceased using my interview guide: "Many still try to use standard data collection techniques until they shed them, especially set units, interview guides and taping. They shed them as they see that they interfere with generating theory as GT purposes" (Glaser, 2001, p. 46). The result was freeing, and communicated clearly to participants that I was not looking for 'right' answers to my questions. I also knew better what questions to ask having become increasingly sensitive through analysis, coding, memo-making, and interviewing. I ceased my directed questioning and shifted towards emergence.

Until then, my theoretical sampling consisted of obtaining more male participants, to balance my sample, that included more females than males, and seeking students from a diversity of programs and universities as revealed through my demographic questionnaire. Upon reflection, I can see how much of this sampling was not theoretical but based on my presumption of the relevance of gender, program of study, and other

demographic information. I did not understand the full meaning of 'do not assume the relevance of any face sheet variable including age, sex, social class, race, skin color, academic discipline, etc. unless it emerges as relevant' (Glaser, 1978, 2002). In the end, much of the information that I collected using this questionnaire was of little relevance.

Through my best first attempts, the graduating student experience seemed to be about exploring identity, values, career goals, and planning life after graduation. I had two key concerns: *responding to the pressure of figuring out life after graduation and facing adulthood*.

Trusting CGT

While ordering books from the Sociology Press website, I stumbled upon advertisements for the Grounded Theory Institute seminars. I applied and was accepted to a seminar, in Mill Valley, California that would be facilitated by Dr. Barney Glaser, co-originator of the methodology: I was thrilled and terrified. At the time, I did not know how valuable these seminars would be for my learning and how well they would complement the mentoring of my supervisory committee. The seminar required that I share my research. Although I was told that this sharing would be informal, I had no idea what was actually expected. I was worried that I was off track. I knew that I was not supposed to tape record, transcribe, or employ a demographic questionnaire. Motivated largely by fear of critique, I decided that if I was going to attend the seminar, I had better employ the full methodology. I turned all of my transcribed interviews into field notes and put the demographic questionnaire permanently aside. Cycling back to the beginning once again, I coded the field notes rather than interview transcripts. This eased data management and helped to realign my work with the methodology.

Sharing of my research was scheduled for the second day of the seminar. I was prepared with typed and photocopied handouts. When I arrived for the opening social I found myself excitedly talking grounded theory with new found colleagues and friends. It was welcoming and friendly. I did not need to be afraid. Many seminar attendees were also in the midst using grounded theory for their doctoral dissertations, and others, more experienced in the methodology, were there to observe and to assist. During an intense two and a half days we talked,

breathed, and lived grounded theory. It was a complete immersion. I learned so much that by the time it was my turn to present, I had completely reworked my handouts to reflect my seminar learning.

When I presented, I began by explaining the methodology I had used to date, including how I had begun preconceived and off track. I then shared the rationale for the study and bits of field notes and concepts that had emerged. I was asked to share more about certain aspects of my research. I discussed the potential core category: *securing a good future*, “if you want to secure a good spot, you try to increase your grade point average or get involved in particular extra curricular activities, you do whatever you can to get yourself to where you want to be”. This concept has since evolved into *opportunizing* (Christiansen, 2006). I explained that some students whom I interviewed talked not about work as what they are going to do, but as who they are, as if it was their identity.

Many seminar participants seemed to be able to relate to the incidents that I shared and contributed their own. One experienced participant suggested that my study was likely a typology. While this was indeed the case, I did not have the main concern isolated. I learned that I had likely collected enough data for several studies and had been going for full coverage with my analysis. I had to delimit my research to a single concern even though it seemed students had many. I was also cautioned that what I thought was the main concern might really be a professional concern and not that of participants. I was told to go back to the data and let the data tell me where to go.

Although some of the feedback I received was difficult to accept, I was very grateful for the insights. The seminar was energizing and furthered my learning immensely. The notion of conceptualizing gradually gained more meaning for me, although my skills needed further development. I was not alone: “many novice, and sometimes experienced, grounded theorists encounter difficulty raising the level of theoretical abstraction from description to theory” (Schreiber, 2001, p. 77).

Gaining Confidence

After the seminar, I reviewed, recoded, and recompiled incidents in my field notes, memoing about the relationships between these incidents. I tried sorting my memos, doubting

whether I would ever be able to bring the theory together. I tried, but struggled, to relate conceptual categories and properties to each other to stay on a conceptual level rather than a descriptive level. I uncovered a new central concern: the *pressure to commodify self*, defined as the pressure to transform oneself into a marketable product for the workforce. I also uncovered what I thought was a set of strategies that students use to resolve this pressure.

I attended a second Grounded Theory Institute seminar in Halifax, Nova Scotia facilitated by Dr. Holton. This seminar increased my confidence, added depth to my understanding, and immersed me once again in a community of like-minded researchers. During the seminar I realized how learning CGT requires being open, and being able to respond to feedback and suggestions constructively. What individuals leave the seminars with is not necessarily what they expected, but rather what they actually need help with. The seminar increased my ability to conceptualize and I began identifying when I was conceptualizing and when I was slipping into description; this is an ability that I am still continuing to develop.

I shared a draft of my theory with my supervisory committee who provided useful feedback and affirmed my work. They were so impressed that any concerns they initially had with the methodology were forgotten. I attended a third grounded theory seminar in which I presented students' responses to the *pressure to commodify self*. Using theoretical coding, I identified what I thought were three strategies: *complying with commodification* (employed to achieve economic prosperity and social status), *resisting commodification* (employed to seek happiness and self fulfillment no matter the economic cost and often without considering the economic consequences), and *humanizing commodification* (employed to maintain a sense of authentic self while attaining a certain level of financial prosperity), and seven factors that influence the use of these strategies. I was provided with suggestions for illustration dosage, literature to review, writing, as well as when to let go of incidents that do not fit.

In addition to the 30 taped and transcribed interviews, my data collection also involved less formal interviews with additional students, parents of senior students, faculty, and student affairs and services providers. For example, I presented the theory at an international conference in my field. The theory

was well received, and those who came to my presentation contributed further examples of students' experiences that I later incorporated into the theory using constant comparison. The various presentations I attended also provided further data, and allowed me to see that the *pressure to commodify self* likely extends beyond the substantive area into other years of undergraduate study. Other interviews typically resulted from being asked about my research; as soon as I shared what I was studying, people wanted to talk. Incidents from these interviews were written up in field notes.

Later, in conversation with a colleague, friend, and fellow grounded theorist, I realized that the appropriate theoretical coding family for my research was the typology family, and not the strategy family. The strategy family is applied when there is a conscious effort to maneuver others (Glaser, 1978). In this case, students were not deliberately maneuvering anyone but rather attempting to find a place for themselves in the workforce. I continued to edit, refine, and rework the theory.

When the theory was sufficiently integrated, I reviewed relevant literature for integration. So much seemed relevant, making it difficult for me to limit the breadth of my reading. I struggled with how to present the theory. I looked for models and found examples of classic grounded theory studies that wove the relevant literature directly into the theory and concluded with a final chapter explaining the limitations, implications, and calls for future research. This worked well for me and is in line with the guidelines for writing within classic grounded theory (Glaser 1978, 1998). To curb potential resistance from my supervisory committee, I expressed gratitude to them for allowing me to proceed with the full methodological package although it deviated from a traditional qualitative layout.

I continued editing my dissertation, strengthening weak points and restructuring where needed. I continued reading CGT studies for form and style and my struggle to integrate the literature gradually dissipated. With a complete draft of my dissertation submitted, I knew that it would take time for my supervisory committee to assess it, however, the waiting period seemed to take forever. I continued to edit and refine. Each revised draft challenged and extended my thinking and my writing. Even now that I have successfully defended my dissertation, I continue to identify areas to edit and revise. This

was my first experience with CGT and no doubt my learning journey will continue as I engage in future studies.

Advice to Novices

From my experience learning and applying CGT in my dissertation, I have distilled five pieces of advice that may be of use to researchers embarking on their first CGT study, including: 1.) seek expertise, 2.) engage in community, 3.) 'just do it', 4.) know self, and 5.) balance challenge and support

Seek expertise

As a novice GT researcher, I employed not only the expertise of my supervisory committee, but made efforts to connect with students in my program who were further along in the research process. I also sought top expertise in CGT that was unavailable at my university. These experts, particularly fellow grounded theorists, served as mentors, offered me support and advice, and challenged me to learn. There are many ways to access grounded theorists and CGT expertise. I recommend reading the Sociology Press books and the Grounded Theory Review, and contacting authors whose work you admire. Locate and review completed CGT dissertations, analyze these documents in terms of their structure, degree of conceptualization, and their strengths and weaknesses (Glaser, 1998). You can also connect with CGT experts through the Grounded Theory Institute Forum and seminars (<http://www.groundedtheory.com/>). Most importantly, find a mentor for your work. Seek constructive feedback and take this feedback seriously.

I would concur with Bowen's (2005) advice on getting familiar with the work of expert methodologists within your research tradition and accessing the expertise of your dissertation committee, "they were my consultants and advisors, and I was quite fortunate that they also played the role of mentors, providing counsel and guidance along the way" (p.212).

Engage in community

Research about the learning of qualitative research details the value of engaging in community and in collaborative and peer learning (Boardman, Detweiler, Emmerling, Lucas & Schmidt, 2002). Some instructors deliberately encourage their students to form communities within and outside of a course context (for example, Davie, 1996; Drago-Severson, Asghar, Gaylor, 2003;

Strauss, 1988). Learning about the research experiences of others, as Shaffir & Stebbins (1991) note “enables them [students] to anticipate more accurately the trials and rewards of their own research efforts (p. xi).

While completing my dissertation I organized a group of graduate students who met weekly for coffee. We would discuss our progress, support each other through challenges, and celebrate our accomplishments. Through the grounded theory seminars I met many individuals who I could contact when I ran into trouble. Engaging in community reinforced my learning, and provided opportunities for intensive and regular feedback. I recommend finding others who are doing CGT for the first time, read grounded theory texts together, and discuss what you are learning and your progress. This can be done either in person, on the phone, or online.

Just do it

Although my graduate qualitative research courses involved considerable experiential learning, more of my learning came from facing real challenges in my dissertation: facing data overwhelm, struggling with constant comparison, stressing about how to move from description to conceptualization, and attempting to integrate the literature. These are likely common challenges that researchers new to CGT encounter.

My advice aligns with Boardman et al. (2002) who indicate with respect to qualitative studies, to learn how to research one has to do it. Relevant literature describes how in course experiential activities help students learn and to see the research process (Hein, 2004). Actually participating in research, however, goes beyond coursework learning, it engages learners, scaffolds their learning, helps them to build connections with other scholars, and provides them with experience to mitigate research anxiety (Lee & Roth, 2003).

Know self

As a graduate student, I felt real pressure to situate my research within a defined worldview, including an epistemology and ontology, as is typical within qualitative research. Research concerning the learning of qualitative research stresses the importance of exposing students to the philosophy of science in research methodology courses (Efinger, Maldonado, & McArdle,

2004) and that students determine their methodological preferences after thorough grounding in the philosophical assumptions behind the various methodologies (Paul and Marfo, 2001). All that is needed to do classic grounded theory, however, is an awareness of how you see the world and the willingness to challenge it as you compare your beliefs with incoming data. During the proposal phase of my research, I defined my worldview as largely post-positivist but with elements of constructivism (Crotty, 2003). Although my worldview did not shift dramatically while conducting my dissertation, I am now more sensitive to critical perspectives and am more aware of the power of societal structures to influence individual experiences. Worldviews are personal and inform how we see the world. Know yourself: if you are not open to challenging your worldview, CGT may not be for you. Instead you may wish to consider a qualitative or quantitative design nested within an appropriate paradigm.

Balance challenge and support

When I began my dissertation, I anticipated that I would encounter some challenges including: tolerating isolation and periods of confusion and ambiguity, and not forcing the data, remaining open to the emergent, and trusting to preconscious processing (Glaser & Holton, 2004). There really were times that I felt “stupid, young, out of control and like one doesn’t know anything” (Glaser, 1998, p. 50). Knowing this in advance helped me accept and surmount these challenges. Throughout my dissertation process, I continuously challenged myself and sought support in meeting those challenges. I stretched my comfort zone first by even attempting CGT, then by attending a grounded theory seminar, and later by trusting the full CGT methodology. I sought support when I ran into difficulty analyzing and presenting my research. I obtained support and was challenged by my supervisory committee, peers, and the GT community.

To foster learning, student development literature recommends providing the right mix of challenge and support (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Studies focused on learning qualitative research indicate that students may experience considerable anxiety in this process, especially when introduced to qualitative research and philosophical underpinnings (Clark & Lang, 2002; Huehls, 2005; Poulin, 2007), during analysis (Davie, 1996; Hein, 2004; Tantano Beck, 2003), and when trying to

present their results (Davie, 1996). Hein (2004) recommends that students seek out and be provided with step-by-step guidance, in-class practice, and reassurance to relieve their anxiety.

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Methodological Learning-by-doing: Challenges, lessons learned and rewards

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Abstract

The experience of minus mentoring in learning classic grounded theory (CGT) is shared by many people over the world. The aim of this article is to share experiences of learning and using CGT. Data for the article included methodological discussions in the author's thesis and articles, as well as memos. Consequences of learning grounded theory by doing are presented in the form of challenges and lessons learned but also some rewards. Challenges and lessons learned include sampling-confusion, delimiting-disregarding, judging saturation and conceptual language-struggling. Rewards include trusting the method, insider-researcher and expert-resourcing. Presented rewards could be seen as advice and inspiration for novice GT researchers.

Introduction

Grounded theory (GT) is an inductive method, useful and suitable for qualitative data. It is highly appropriate for nursing research (Nathaniel & Andrews, 2007; Schreiber & Stern, 2001) and aims to discover a main concern of participants and how they manage and resolve such concern (Glaser, 1978). GT was formulated by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and elaborated by Glaser (1978, 1998), Strauss and Corbin (1998), and others. The method elaborated by Glaser is often called classic grounded theory (CGT). Researchers need to choose not only what method to use but also what approach (Heath & Cowley, 2004), remodeling (Glaser & Holton, 2004) or even synthesis of approaches (Chen & Boore, 2009).

The aim of postgraduate studies is to get a deeper understanding of both the subject and scientific methodology (Karolinska Institutet, 2007). A situation in which no expert is present to teach and guide in GT methodology is known as *minus mentoring* (Glaser, 1998, p. 5; Stern, 1994). Experience of such a situation is shared by many people over the world. One challenge with minus mentoring is that informed formative feedback, given

during the process in order to enhance learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007), may be lacking.

When my research education started, I did not know much about CGT. One of my supervisors had supervised an earlier thesis using a “grounded theory approach” (Baarnhielm, 2003, p. 47); the other two supervisors had no experience in using GT, though their attitude to the method was positive. In choosing the CGT method, my main concern was to perform good research while learning-by-doing.

The aim of this article is to share experiences of learning and using CGT. Memos as well as methodological discussions in my thesis and articles have been used as the basis for this discussion. The various categories, presented in the text below, are further illustrated with examples from my experience. The examples are taken from the my thesis (Pergert, 2008) and the four studies included there, referred to throughout this article by their Roman numerals I – IV.

Methodological Learning-by-Doing

This refers to the capability to acquire methodological skills and understanding while using the method and doing research. Consequences of learning grounded theory by doing include challenges and lessons learned but also rewards.

Challenges and lessons learned

In this section, some challenges and lessons learned, from my experience in using GT and learning-by-doing, will be presented, including sampling-confusion, delimiting-disregarding, judging saturation and conceptual language-struggling.

Sampling-confusion

The initial decisions for sampling in GT are based on the general subject area (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). This is similar to purposive sampling in the sense that it aims to include people who are knowledgeable about the subject being studied (Polit & Hungler, 1999). In GT, this initial sampling should be followed by theoretical sampling of comparative groups and literature. “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.

This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Since theoretical sampling proceeds in tandem with CGT’s joint processes of data collection and analysis, it could easily be confusing. A study that does not theoretically sample to sample other groups would still use the joint procedures for data collection and analysis; analyzing data between interviews to influence questions in subsequent interviews to further elaborate the emerging categories. Furthermore, the researcher needs to decide how large the sample should be from the initial group. If the study is a part of a dissertation project, the initial group might be sufficient for one study, so there would be no sampling from other groups. However, full use of theoretical sampling is important in developing the theory. For example, my third study (Pergert, Ekblad, Enskar, & Bjork, 2008b) is the one where I theoretically sampled beyond the initial group and it is by far the best GT study in the thesis.

Delimiting-disregarding

GT has delimiting tools for data collection. Some of these delimiting tools may be disregarded in studies, thus contributing to data-wallowing, which needs to be dealt with. In CGT, field notes are recommended in data collection rather than recording since the latter will undermine delimiting (Glaser, 1998). There could be several reasons for not following this recommendation. One is that recording is more acceptable to the scientific community, since field notes are often viewed as selective and biased (Glaser, 1998). Other reasons for recording interviews could be to have transcriptions for comparative analysis, quotations for illustrating various points as well as to enhance transparency in the supervision of the scientific work. However, this decision will contribute to data-wallowing, which can lead to premature closure of data collection and a lack of theoretical sampling, leading to a lack of conceptual depth.

Another methodological choice is the data collection method. In GT, common methods are interviews and observations. Focus group interviews, which I used in studies I & II (Pergert, Ekblad, Enskar, & Bjork, 2007, 2008a), may not be the preferred method for data collection in CGT, but it was argued that “the process of generating theory is independent of the kind of data used” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 18). Focus group interviews were found to be highly relevant for collecting data in the beginning of

a GT but not as good later in the process, since theoretical focusing and delimiting can be hard. One problem is the large amount of data from a few focus groups, which can delay the start of theoretical sampling and lead to premature closure of data collection, leading to a lack of conceptual depth.

As delimiting-disregarding will result in data-wallowing, it needs to be dealt with somehow, often by using different software programs for handling qualitative data. In the thesis, the software program QSR NVivo 2.0 was used as a tool (QSR International, 2002) to manage the data. Being relatively computer literate, I was soon engrossed in learning the software. However, becoming too enthusiastic, I started to use it for organizing code trees and creating models (Bazeley & Richards, 2000), which is not consistent with CGT. The main concern did emerge but the use of code trees and models may have preconceived an outline rather than letting the integration emerge in later sorting of memos (Glaser, 1998). In subsequent studies I used the software only as a coding tool, to deal with data-wallowing in a more GT congruent way. Even though the ambition was to use full GT procedures in every study of the thesis, different conceptual levels were reached in the analysis. This could be related to my GT learning curve and a lack of theoretical focusing and delimiting relating to delimiting-disregarding.

Judging saturation

There is no such thing as an ideal sample size in GT; instead, size is based on saturation (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). That is, sample size is based on a judgment, in coding and analyzing, of theoretical saturation of categories, which implies that “no new properties emerge and the same properties continually emerge” (Glaser, 1978, p. 53) and that gaps in major categories are more or less filled (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saturation is always a subjective judgment and the decision to stop theoretical sampling, using the methodological guidelines, is always influenced by the scope of the research project, particularly in terms of time and resources. This judgment is a real challenge and the outcome could always be different; further theoretical sampling can usually be motivated. For example, in study I (Pergert, et al., 2007) it was decided not to theoretically sample for, and saturate, the subcategory of trust-building, since it could probably be a whole theory in itself. In

study IV (Pergert, Ekblad, Bjork, Enskar, & Andrews, n.d), theoretical sampling could have been carried out among Swedish-born parents but it was decided to use literature for comparative analysis, which is consistent with GT methodology (Glaser, 1998). Furthermore, only one father was included in the individual interviews with foreign-born parents. This did not emerge as relevant but could be seen as a limitation, as support-seeking, one of the subcategories, is used more frequently among women (Norberg, Lindblad, & Boman, 2006). Theoretical sampling was delimited by a judgment about the scope of the dissertation project; other comparative groups could always be sampled. In all of the studies, further theoretical sampling, bringing in new relevant data from new fields, would undoubtedly lead back to theoretical non-saturation (Glaser, 1978) and modification, but then again, a GT is always modifiable.

Conceptual language-struggling

Conceptualization is central in GT. The name of the core category should have “grab” (capture attention) and often takes the form of a gerund (ending in *-ing*) to bring out its nature of explaining a behavior; managing and resolving the main concern (Glaser, 1978, 1998). Naming a category with grab in a language that is not one’s mother tongue is a challenge, as nuances and subtle meanings are easily missed. Often categories need to be named in two languages and sometimes translation can be a problem. For example, I named categories in the analysis in both English and Swedish, the latter being my native tongue. However, the use of gerund verbs is characteristic of GT but the Swedish language lacks the gerund verb form, so the core is often named as an infinitive, for instance “to bridge” instead of “bridging”. In the search for the best possible names of categories, I discussed my choices with English text editors; this was a great help but these text editors were not acquainted with the method and seldom enthusiastic about new conceptual gerund names.

Rewards

Rewards from using and learning GT will be presented below. These rewards, which could be seen as advice and inspiration for novice GT researchers, include: trusting the method, insider-researching and expert-resourcing.

Trusting the method

In CGT, emergence of theory is central (Glaser, 1998). The concept of emergence may sound unscientific and strange but it is simply a matter of trusting that what is going on in the empirical field will emerge from the data (Glaser, 1998). The aim of CGT is to let the participants' main concern emerge, instead of focusing on what Glaser (1998) calls "professional concern" (p. 99) or a "professionally preconceived problem" (p. 118). The inductive emergence will guarantee a good fit; that is, the theory will adequately express what is happening in the empirical situation, and be highly relevant. For example, when I began my first study (Pergert, et al., 2007) my preconceived notion was that the study would be concerned with medical information; this was also healthcare staff's spontaneous answer to what was the biggest challenge in transcultural care. As data were analyzed, using GT, what emerged instead as the core was bridging obstacles to transcultural caring relationships. Bridging is what Glaser (1998, p. 5) calls the 'latent pattern' of behavior, of which participants are not necessarily aware. The preconceived notion of giving medical information was something that healthcare staff was aware of, whereas obstacles to transcultural caring relationships were actually a major concern. This major concern would probably not have been identified with a method that focuses more on predefined problems, testing hypotheses, and using preset and narrower questions. For example, Strauss and Corbin (1998) proposed that professional experience and suggestions could be used to identify the research problem. Experiencing emergence is a most rewarding moment; after working in complete confusion with masses of data; you finally discern the pattern or the core. It is a great advantage to use and trust a well-tried methodology, especially when doubting one's own capacity.

Insider-researching

Glaser (1998) holds that research is easier to do where you know nothing about the substantive area under study; on the other hand, doing research in a familiar area leads to motivation and more variables to deal with. Insider research is common in the qualitative field in the context of nursing (Asselin, 2003; Cudmore & Sondermeyer, 2007) and could be seen as an advantage, as the double role may enhance trust in the interviewer (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); positively influence the

relationship (Asselin, 2003) and consequently also the data. This was, for me, a rewarding experience in working as an "insider researcher". Further, my motivation and drive as an insider were far more important than doing easy research.

Expert-resourcing

Gathering resources to compensate for minus mentoring includes information-seeking by using the literature on CGT and feedback-seeking while learning by using available resources such as research groups, experienced grounded theorists and reviewer feedback on manuscripts - not always fun to get but sometimes very helpful indeed. When I had written my first manuscript, I heard of a GT troubleshooting seminar arranged by the Grounded Theory Institute (2005a) in Stockholm. To prepare for the seminar, I read three books on GT (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and realized that I had been on the wrong track. Following the seminar, I reworked the manuscript, now with a new core category and an attempt to write more conceptually. Since then, I have had the opportunity to participate in several international GT seminars (Grounded Theory Institute, 2005b, 2006, 2007) given by GT experts, providing great assistance in naming core categories, taking the analysis several steps further and contributing immensely to the GT learning process.

Discussion

In this article, challenges and lessons learned as well as rewards in learning GT by doing have been presented. Expert-resourcing and feedback-seeking are recommended in this article, in accordance with educational and methodological literature that states that feedback is necessary to enhance learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Glaser, 1998). Feedback-seeking could include feedback from reviewers of manuscripts, using errors for learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). However, it is crucial to consider how the feedback is given and received, especially if there is a discrepancy in the understanding of GT as held by the reviewer and the author. This is often the case when CGT is confused with other approaches referred to as GT.

In regard to learning-by-doing, one could argue that research education should be organized differently, with much more methodological study before starting the research project. Equally, it could be argued that the only way to learn a method is

by using it and in doing so, develop one's skill. Learning-by-doing is similar, or rather has an ingredient of just-in-time learning, which is about learning something when one needs to (Biggs & Tang, 2007), thus giving motivation and relevancy. Methodological studies that are not needed for the task at hand are often perceived as boring and irrelevant. In the words of Glaser, "Just do it" (1998, p. 254) and "Trust Grounded theory, it works!" (1998, p. 254).

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A Grounded Theory Approach in a Branding Context: Challenges and lessons learnt during the research process.

Anne Rindell, PhD.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss challenges and lessons learnt when conducting a classic grounded theory study in a marketing context. The paper focuses on two specific challenges that were met during a specific research process. The first challenge related to positioning the study, namely, specifying “what the study is a study of”. The second challenge concerned the choice between formal or substantive theory. Both challenges were accentuated as the emerged core category concerned a phenomenon that has caught less attention in marketing, that is, the temporal dimension in corporate images. By the temporal dimension in corporate images we mean that corporate images often have roots in earlier times through consumer memories. In other words, consumers are not tabula rasa, that is, blank sheets of paper on which communication messages can be printed. Rather, consumers have a pre-understanding of the company that works as an interpretation framework for company actions in the present. The lessons learnt from this research process can be summarized as “stay faithful to the data”, “write memos on issues you reflect upon although they might be in another substantial field” as they might become useful later, and, “look into thinking in other disciplines” as disciplines do not develop equally.

Introduction

Classic grounded theory is not a mainstream methodology in marketing, especially not in branding and image research. This is surprising, as the original perspective marketing adopted was that of the consumer, and therefore classic grounded theory studies could provide important new insights into consumers, given that the aim is to develop fresh insights and new theories (Goulding, 1998). As Payne et al. state, although consumer understanding expresses the initial perspective marketing

adopted, the mainstream marketing literature is largely organization-focused in its nature (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). However, especially within marketing communications and branding, leading scholars now urge for genuine consumer understanding in a branding context (Schultz, 2006). This may enhance the interest for classic grounded theory among branding and marketing communication scholars as this area might benefit from the development of explanatory theory. Nevertheless, from my own experience, there are only a few academic articles that have a methodological approach and can provide explicit guidance for novel researchers in using classic grounded theory in a marketing context (see e.g. Goulding, 1998). Practical advice from experienced CGT scholars in marketing can also be hard to find in one's home country. Moreover, differences in methodological approaches concerning GT and especially misconceptions among scholars (Goulding, 1998) made the present research process challenging. However, my supervisor's full support was valuable here.

In sum, this paper examines a research process with a classic grounded theory approach in a branding context. The purpose of this paper is to discuss especially two challenges met and lessons learnt during the research process. The first issue concerns the challenge of positioning the study within an area in marketing and the second challenge concerns the choice between formal or substantive theory. In the paper, some reflections are also made in relation to researcher experiences in doing the research.

The paper is organized as follows: first, a short overview of the conducted study is provided in order to give a context for the discussion. Then, the first challenge, positioning the study within marketing research, will be discussed together with some lessons learnt from the journey. Then, the second challenge, to choose between generating formal or substantive theory, is discussed. Finally, concluding reflections, implications and contributions of the paper are presented.

The Temporal Dimension in Consumers' Corporate Image Constructions

This research process was initiated by an episode in the spring of 2004. It was Saturday and I came out to the parking place outside our house. Our neighbor had just arrived from a

shopping trip and was unpacking his car. My presence obviously got him embarrassed, he took his time when unpacking his car and finally, as I didn't leave, he began to excuse himself for having shopping bags from a shop nearby for home decoration that had opened up some time ago. He explained he got an impulse all of a sudden to look into the shop although he doesn't usually shop there. It had been a real surprise to him to find out that they sold nice, good quality things and that the shop was really fresh and inviting. He hadn't expected that and was still embarrassed and tried to convince me to go to and visit the shop to find out myself and to verify the difference.

I didn't intervene but I was confused. What was he referring to? What was the difference he wanted me to verify? What is he thinking of? I hadn't paid attention to the opening of the warehouse and didn't think "anything" of the company although I knew it and had visited it years ago.

This episode became the inspiration for a series of five (5) studies with 23 informants focusing on understanding "how do consumers construct their corporate images, focusing on the temporal dimension in the image constructions". The whole data set consisted of 12 interviews, 11 written accounts, one group interview with five persons, and seven learning diaries from students. (see (Rindell, 2007)

In the first inductive and exploratory part, six (6) open-ended conversational interviews were conducted with adult male and female informants at differing ages. The informants were asked to freely elaborate on one initial question: "what comes to mind when you hear XX" [the name of a Finnish retailer]. The data were open coded and a temporal dimension emerged, that is, informants referred to past and present times and future expectations with representations of the company.

The temporal dimension emerged as the most salient code throughout the data and was chosen as a core category. For generating a theory on the temporal dimension theoretical sampling was conducted and data was analyzed and constantly compared in accordance with a classic grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978; Goulding, 1998). Therefore, the process of data collection was "controlled" by the emerging theory. The chosen core category was also considered as the most relevant category for prediction and explanation.

Discovering the temporal dimension was not difficult as informants expressed it very clearly, but it was surprising; “why do informants refer to past times, the founder of the company and earlier corporate strategies and own and others’ experiences?” As the study was positioned and thereby also contributed to branding research the time dimension was conceptualized and labelled image heritage. Within this literature, corporate [brand] image stands for the consumer’s view of the company (Stern et al (2001). Image heritage stands for the consumers’ activated memories over time with representations of a company based on which they construct corporate images today. In essence, image heritage stands for those consumer memories that are activated on certain occasions and become the interpretation framework for corporate images in the present.

Based on the emerged view, a theoretical proposition of corporate images was formulated as “consumers’ corporate images are constructed through dynamic relational processes based on a multifaceted network of earlier images from multiple sources over time.” Therefore, corporate image constructions were found to be processes in the consumers’ minds with roots in the past. These past activated memories were not only initiated by the company or by consumers’ own personal experiences; other “sources”, like other people or other happenings in the past, also influenced them.

The study met the current challenges within the branding research of consumer-orientation and added to the understanding about consumers’ corporate image constructions, especially by introducing the temporal dimension into corporate images. Additionally, the study supported process and relationship oriented views on corporate images as it recognizes that corporate images may change, they are multiple and constructed over time.

Next, two specific challenges that were met during the research process will be discussed.

Positioning the Study: “What is the study a study of?”

The dictum not to generate concepts from data with preconceived ideas and thereby to force data in the wrong direction (Glaser, 1978) is essential in classic grounded theory. However, as the theory emerged, difficulties in situating the study within the marketing literature surfaced. In essence, the question concerned the overall phenomenon. What were these

past and present representations of the company that consumers referred to and how do they influence their thinking today?

Within marketing, some scholars do focus on consumer images and perceptions; however, the temporal dimension at the consumer level had not been the focus of research. For example, service marketing has a focus on customer experience. Customer experience can be regarded as the internal and subjective response a customer has to any direct or indirect contact with a company (Meyer & Schwager, 2008). Within relationship management, the guiding principle is on building relationships between buyers and sellers (Hollensen, 2003). This approach in marketing therefore takes account of the temporal dimension in a buyer-seller relationship. Within branding research the relationship approach has been recognized in research focusing on what kind of relationships consumers build with the brand (Fournier, 1998). Within branding research, corporate brand images are a frequently studied phenomenon. However, the majority of studies look at images as attributes and static end-states (Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001), not as dynamic consumer constructions over time as the findings of the present study indicate.

Literature reviews were made within the service and relationship management literature, branding, postmodern brand research, and consumer behavior. Additional literature reviews were made within management studies on sense-making and identity. After the understanding emerged that the study was related to memory, psychology, neuroscience and pedagogy literature on memory was also reviewed. For example, Bar and Neta (2008) propose that the human brain should be considered as proactive, continuously producing predictions of the environment based on similarities between novel inputs and closest familiar representations stored in memory. They suggest that mental life and behavior are guided by “scripts” developed from experiences and stored memory. Bar and Neta’s study can be considered to support findings in this study.

The challenge was, however, accentuated as the findings did not support mainstream marketing thinking, which was confusing and challenging. Our department and especially my supervisor supported me as they considered the findings to be based on empirical evidence although no studies were found with similar or related data for support. Researchers at my

department are world renowned for new thinking within service marketing, and thus they were familiar with the confusion and conflicts new thinking may create and encouraged me to continue. Their support was invaluable but it also enhanced the challenge.

As the study progressed I became convinced that participants were engaged in the process of image construction; especially during the interviews this could be observed not only in what informants said but also in how they expressed themselves through body language and mimic. All the multiple images they constructed during the interviews became a body of consumer experiences out of which the images were constructed.

Moreover, according to Alasuutari (1995), qualitative research processes often have deep roots that can extend well into the researcher's past, making it difficult to specify an exact starting point for the research process. Likewise, Glaser (1998) has argued that grounded theory is especially appropriate for lifelong interests. During my study, I discovered that this research had a long history. I had occasionally been puzzled about how people perceive things, for example, students seem to perceive companies so differently, and even apologize for having misunderstood advertisements and company intentions. A question posed by a colleague after a presentation of the results became important: "are you taking about memory?" This question inspired me to undertake a multidisciplinary literature review. Nevertheless, the question of situating the study within marketing was kept open for as long as possible and frequently discussed during the research process.

The lesson learnt was to believe in emergence and to stay faithful to and to believe in the data. The interviews became experiences for the interviewer as well, and many other things beyond spoken words convinced me about the emerging issue. Especially during the exploratory highly inductive phase, it can be hard to foresee what is to be regarded as data. The lesson learnt became therefore the emphasis made in textbooks in relation to taking a broad view on what can be considered as data. However, as expressed by Glaser (1978, 37) "it is never clear cut for what and to where discovery will lead". Thus, personal support from experienced CGT researchers, supervisors and researcher networks especially within one's own discipline could be extremely helpful. Likewise as positioning the study, the

decision of the status of the generated theory may not be easy and evident in the beginning of an inductive study. This will be discussed next.

Formal or Substantive theory

Theory generated using grounded theory is of two types: substantive or formal. *Substantive theory* emerges from research conducted in a substantive area and is relevant to that, while *formal theory* is a theory of a substantive theory's general implications generated through data and literature outside of the substantive area (Glaser,2007).

In a grounded theory approach, a substantive theory aims at explaining 'what is going on' in the data in one substantive area. The present study is a "one substantive area" study as it concerns how consumers and employees perceive a retailer. The emerging theory on the temporal dimension in images is generated based on data from this one area but the findings have general implications within marketing. Therefore, in the research report it was specified that the focus was on *generating a starting point for a formal theory within marketing*, that is, on the temporal dimension in consumers' image construction processes within marketing. The reason for this specification was due to the fact that the body of collected data at the end of the research process was also from substantive areas other than retailing, like B-to-B and international marketing.

This discrepancy is due to how the research process evolved. Based on data analysis in the inductive phase, theoretical sampling focused on the temporal dimension in corporate image construction processes. As good grounded theory should be modifiable (Glaser, 1992, p. 24), additional episodes were analyzed during the research process in other substantive areas so as to gain a deeper understanding of the emerged theory. No memos were added however, to "the official data set" due to inexperience in using CGT. Also, new research projects focusing on the emerged theory were conducted in other business areas but they were reported separately. Additionally, as the generated theory is in its core about understanding the role of consumers' memories in a business context the findings were also compared with knowledge from other fields of science concerning memory. For example, Biggs and Tang (2007) emphasize within pedagogy the role of earlier knowledge and understanding as the

framework upon which new understanding is constructed.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasize that in advancing a substantive theory to a formal one, a comparative analysis of groups from many kinds of substantive areas may be the most powerful method. At the end of the research process, confidence in and conviction about the theory was reached. Therefore the status of the theory was stated as a starting point for a formal theory.

There were two lessons to learn. First, when undertaking one's first grounded theory study it is hard to know in the beginning or even during the research process what becomes important in the end when the puzzle takes shape and one starts to understand the emerging theory more fully. The first lesson learnt was to continuously write memos on every occasion that probably relates to the emerging theory and add that to the data set, instead of following strictly a structured, albeit emerging research plan.

The second lesson learnt was related to writing research reports. As my understanding about the emerging theory developed, based also on the other conducted studies with the same focus, a discrepancy between my understanding about the phenomena and what can be reported based on one single study developed. The lesson learnt was to try to keep focused on reporting and theory development although it is extremely challenging in the beginning when the phenomenon under study has yet to emerge, since such understanding develops slowly.

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to discuss challenges and lessons learnt while conducting a classic grounded theory study in a marketing context. As marketing studies using classic grounded theory with emphasis on methodological issues sparse in academic marketing journals, to learn and to get confidence in the method from other studies becomes a challenge. Therefore, a special issue in an academic marketing journal on CGT research could provide useful guidance for those who are inexperienced with the method. Discussion of discipline specific issues could provide help here as it is sometimes difficult to learn from papers written in other disciplinary contexts when one is unfamiliar with the substantive area. Additionally, articles that make more explicit the research process could be used as the reference point

for proper application of the method and lessen the researcher's work to convince other non-CGT researchers of methodological issues. Finally, classic research reports provide the good overviews of research findings; however, research reports following and opening up the research process may contribute in new additional ways as guidance for others. Therefore, it could also be helpful and interesting to read research reports based on actual experiences of using the method rather than the sanitized accounts presented in the literature.

As a concluding remark, the challenge of situating the conducted CGT study within one's discipline is not an indication of a lack of knowledge about the discipline; rather, it simply indicates that the emerging theory may oppose mainstream thinking quite radically. In the present study conviction in the emerging theory was also gained from other disciplines. As a result, the lessons learnt can be summarized as "stay faithful to the data", and "look into thinking in other disciplines" as disciplines do not develop equally.

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Data Analysis: Getting conceptual

Helen Scott, Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper will track my battle to 'get conceptual' in the production of a Grounded Theory. It will discuss early attempts at creating substantive codes through the process of open coding which, despite my best efforts, merely produced descriptive codes. It will illustrate the process by which these descriptive codes became more conceptual, earning the title of substantive code and how their presentation in essay form produced a perfect example of 'conceptual description'. It will then describe the slow dawning of the purpose of 'theoretical codes' as organisers of substantive codes and the emergence of a Grounded Theory.

Open Coding: The mechanics

The substantive population¹ of my study is adult online distance learners whose main concern (in descriptive terms) is finding the time to study. The process which addresses this concern is the *'temporal integration of connected study into a structured life'* (Scott, 2007 a, b). An overview of the theory and its structure is offered in the Appendix to this paper.

Participants were located all over the world, therefore most of the data for the study was collected online using email or chat². Typically, the first emailed response from each person was the most detailed response with perhaps one or two emails received in reply to follow up questions. I would print and read the email or chat transcript for an overview. If I felt that I could understand what the participant was telling me, I started coding, otherwise I waited until subsequent emails or chat sessions improved my understanding. When open coding I had a piece of paper in front of me which asked:

- What category does this incident indicate?

¹ The area of interest is online distance learning for adults (from the perspective of adult online learners). Here I use the wording substantive population to mean the people in/of the substantive area.

² Collecting data online for a Grounded Theory study has its own issues which are discussed in a separate paper (in preparation).

- What property of what category does this incident indicate?
- What is the participant's main concern? (Glaser, 1998, p. 140)

I asked these questions of every *incident* that I perceived and I wrote the codes in the margin. In addition, I used coding cards and wrote the *indicators*³ in full on the appropriate coding card(s) and referenced the indicator both on the printed, coded document and on the coding card. As a reference number, I used the initial of the person plus the incident number e.g. J-10. Coding to cards was cumbersome and time consuming but it helped me to get a feel for the process and to feel in control of my data. Actually I had too much control of my data; since I could record each and every code, the number of codes soon spiralled out of control. Thus the rhythms built into the method could not operate allowing the undesirable state of 'full coverage' over parsimony. Had I only coded in the margins, the relevant might have emerged more quickly, by the process of forgetting that which did not pattern out. Not yet understanding this, I would write the name of the code at the top of the card and in the body of the card write the reference number and the indicator. This was reassuring; as the cards became fuller, I could compare incident to incident easily. I could see how codes grew and became saturated. I could compare codes with codes and indicators between codes. I could see codes metamorphose into other codes and see the dimensions of codes emerge either across cards or within a card. For example, the coding card 'Compliance' listed indicators of 'high compliance' and 'minimal compliance'. Indicators of 'reducing compliance' emerged, then 'non compliance' and then there were degrees of 'non compliance'. Thus I realised that 'non compliance' was an aspect of

³ I understand an incident as a section of data in a source document/field notes. As an act in the process of coding, I label the incident. A label with only one incident does not earn the status of substantive code. It is only if other incidents join this incident under the same label that a code emerges. At this point of emergence, incidents earn the status of being indicators of a code. Thus not all that I label becomes a code. This matters later when I think I am overwhelmed by codes - many are not, they are simply labels!

'*withdrawal*' which itself was '*partial withdrawal*', '*temporary withdrawal*' and '*permanent withdrawal*'.

The practice of using coding cards misled me into thinking that one allowed the relationships between codes to remain unwritten and subject to preconscious processing and that one sorted codes, whereas the stricture is to memo ideas about the relationships between codes and to sort memos (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). When I finally realised this, the relief was enormous and led to a flood of memos.

When coding, I was very much aware of having some experience in the field of online learning as a student, designer and facilitator. As advised, I interviewed myself (Glaser, 1998, p.120) which helped enormously; setting down my experiences and thoughts and coding them helped me to relax about what I thought I knew. If it was relevant it would pattern out, if not it would sink without trace. I wrote in a method memo⁴ of my conscious effort "to follow the data absolutely. I am not coming outside of it and investigating how much of this is obvious or banal". I was therefore not judging the data, merely working with it. Thus in coding, I believe that I was successful in suspending my professional concerns; however, I recognise that the way that I understand the world determines how I interpret any given incident, where I fracture the data and thus the codes that I choose.

The Main Concern

After nine months of online discussions and open coding I prepared for a Grounded Theory Seminar in October 2004. My elaboration to the question 'Have you identified your core category?' is shown in Textbox 1..

Textbox 1. Attempting to identify the core category

Have you identified your core category? If so please elaborate. I think I have several potential cores as follows: (categories shown in capitals).

Online Learning offers the opportunity of further study to part time adult distance learners. The property of Online Learning 24/7

⁴ I used 'method memos' to record my tussles with learning and applying the Grounded Theory method.

AVAILABILITY, where the learning environment is open for business 24/7, means that I (as an online student) can develop the solution: I ADAPT. Both of these things together, means that for those with EXISTING COMMITMENTS to work and family, further study becomes a viable option. There is a process where the NEED for study is identified and (consciously or unconsciously) EXPECTATIONS as to outcomes of studying are formed. Where the outcome of the decision process leads to a decision to undertake further study there is a COMMITMENT2LEARNING (to various degrees). Committing to further study gives rise to the problem of when do I DO THE WORK? And the solution I ADAPT and find time in which to work: This can mean TIMETABLING TIME i.e. planning time; OPPORTUNISTIC USE OF TIME i.e. taking advantage of the spare moment; JUGGLING COMMITMENTS to free up time to do work; EXTENDING-THE-DAY i.e. working late/getting up early.

Equal to the opportunity offered by 24/7 AVAILABILITY is the problem of ACCESS: How do I overcome the barriers and gain ACCESS to the opportunities to learn? TECHNOLOGY is a barrier to entering the learning environment including issues of: the right to use the equipment (privately owned or publicly available), which is of an appropriate specification, having the right software and having access to an Internet connection which is fixed link/wireless. SCATTERED ACCESS where access is spread across machines, where learners use multiple machines, gives rise to problems in managing software and work files.

There is a relationship between ACCESS: TECHNOLOGY and the scope for ADAPTING.

Also: there are language barriers to access the opportunities to learn because of the reliance on dense text; Dyslexia is a barrier to access the opportunities to learn for the same reason. There are financial barriers to the right to enter the environment i.e. the cost of course

‘Doing’ THE WORK leads to an iterative ongoing process of EVALUATION of the RELEVANCE OF WORK, i.e. its usefulness, potential use or its inherent interest i.e. its VALUE OF WORK to me. A positive VALUE OF WORK to me leads to CONTINUED COMPLIANCE where work is undertaken. Low VALUE OF

WORK is of REDUCING VALUE and therefore results in REDUCED COMPLIANCE or NON COMPLIANCE AND WITHDRAWAL.

At this point I was searching for the point from which to ‘hang’ my theory. The sense of knowing but not knowing was infuriatingly tantalising until at last I realised ‘Time is the problem for all my people.’ (Textbox 2)

Textbox 2: Memo on time

Time is the problem for all my people. Time to develop competencies: knowledge domain competence (time to explore issues), technical competence (time to explore software, master technology), language competence either as foreign language speaker or as dyslexic (time to translate/understand, formulate and express ideas). Finding time/making time/stealing time to study (juggling existing commitments). Constantly evaluating whether the time spent studying is well spent - is the work relevant, valuable, useful. If yes continue, if no withdraw.

Access as an issue which eats time. 24/7 Availability of online learning enabling people to ADAPT and find time, making study possible. A tutor is someone who saves me time. Poor design (of work or of environment) wastes time.

Memo dated November 10, 2004

Conceptualising the main concern during the seminar had led to the suggestion of the ‘Tyranny of flex-time as integrated into a structured life’⁵. This proved an extremely useful example of how to conceptualise a problem and showed me how to move forward though I was aware that it was not quite right. Eventually, I realised that the ‘tyranny’ was experienced by and captured the main concern of some of the participants of the study but not of all of them. Some did not experience the tyranny as experienced by others. The conceptualisation thus evolved over the next few months into the main concern of ‘integrating study into a structured life’, where the problem and its resolution eventually became as one.

⁵ I am indebted to Judith Holton for this suggestion

Selective Coding and Theoretical Sampling

At this point I had almost all I needed to create a theory except the skill. My next steps were to selectively code incidents that related to 'time', to saturate those codes and to theoretically sample within the substantive population⁶ of adult online distance learners for comparison groups. Glaser writes:

The general procedure of theoretical sampling, as we now shall describe it, is to elicit codes from raw data from the start of data collection through constant comparative analysis as the data pour in. Then to use the codes to direct further data collection, from which the codes are further theoretically developed with respect to their various properties and their connections with other codes until saturated. (Glaser, 1978, p. 37)

I decided to begin selective coding by revisiting the data from the initial interviews being certain that I had not noticed all that there was to notice about the participants' comments concerning time. I conducted further discussions with students from two other postgraduate courses run online. Glaser writes:

It [theoretical sampling] focuses questions more and more on the direct emergence of the theory (thus showing again, how interview schedules constrain theoretical sampling). Questions constantly change with the requirements of the emergent theory and theoretical sampling. (Glaser, 1998, p. 157)

Here, I found a tension between the constraints of the online data collection method and the Grounded Theory method. The questions deduced from the induced codes, at this point were:

- Was time a big issue for you?
- How did you fit in work and personal life and study?
- How did you decide what to work on and what not to work on?

⁶ This meant talking to undergraduates studying online as well as postgraduates and to people studying on differing online vocational courses. I also sampled outside of the substantive area and collected data in person and in literature review on on-campus online learners, correspondence distance learners, and part-time face-to-face learners. For the purpose of my thesis the area of interest was limited to online distance learning although the resultant theory has relevance for all adult part time vocational learning.

- Why did you take this course?

I did ask these questions of one participant with whom I had corresponded earlier and who had not replied to my original questions but who had contacted me again. The response gained was extremely useful though lacked the context of earlier replies. I reasoned that since the original questions elicited useful responses and that since the earlier participants seemed to respond well to the approach of having their earlier comments quoted back to them and being asked for more details, that I would continue with this approach but code and follow up only on issues relating to the main concern and its resolution. I made further attempts at writing useful memos and I found that I used memos to tease out thoughts about categories and that the memos showed my thought process but not yet the relationships between concepts.

In September 2004, I believed that I had the horrible amount of over 130 open codes⁷ in which time was mentioned only three times:

- Allocation of resources – time
- Designed work – similar time/discontinuity
- Making time

At that point, I saw time as a flow, as a resource and whilst I had identified 'similar time' working, I had not yet recognised time as structure. By December 2004, I had achieved a step change in the way I thought about the design of a course and put aside Wenger's (1998) concepts of 'designed work' and 'designed environment' for the moment and started to think about the '*Time Design*' of a course. My observations had surfaced assumptions about the pace of work achieved and the timing of when work would be accomplished based on assumptions about learners' competencies, in particular language competence and also about learners' work/rest and wake/sleep patterns. My data collection process had shown me that learners have a range of competencies and different work/rest, wake/sleep patterns which are further complicated by different time zones; thus that the pacing and the timing of work is often different from that assumed by the course designer. By March 2005, I believed the categories of Personal Commitment Structure and Time Design to be as shown in Textbox 3.

⁷ However, many of these were not codes but were one incident labels.

Textbox 3: Memo on categories

<p>Personal Commitment Structure Commitment type</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Work ○ Family ○ Social ○ Learning ○ Other <p>Committed time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Structure points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ By this time ○ At this time ○ Organisers (lunch break) ○ Fixed (children pickup) ● To commitment types <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Work ○ Family ○ Timetabled study time ○ Spare ○ Sleep <p>Location time relative to base time Patterns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wake/sleep pattern ● Work/rest pattern 	<p>Time Design</p> <p>Assumed/implicit typical learner profile:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assumed/Implied Personal Commitment Structure ● Assumed/Implied Personal Competencies <p>Attendance requirement Course period e.g. 10 weeks Study hours e.g. 80 hours Core Period e.g. one week Assessment period e.g. 3 weeks Base Time (of course relative to UTC) Focal Time (of local group or tutor) Structure Points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Start/end points ● Assessment points ● Organising points ● Emergent connection points <p>Connection Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Same time connections ● Similar time connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Any time connections
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Conceptual Description

In preparation for a Grounded Theory seminar in March 2005, I wrote per Textbox 4:

Textbox 4: Memo on core category.

Have you identified your core category? If so please elaborate:

GT Summary:
The issue for part time adult online learners – or **CONNECTED LEARNERS** – is **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE** in the context of **CONNECTED LEARNING ONLINE**. The main concern that protagonists are constantly working to resolve is the **INTEGRATION** of the **TIME DESIGN** of the learning opportunity

into their **PERSONAL COMMITMENT STRUCTURES**. **INTEGRATION** causes **TIME TENSION** and for some learners **TIME TYRANNY**.

The warning was in the phrase ‘GT Summary’. Instead of being able to state my core category as ‘Integrating study into a structured life’ my current understanding forced me to write a paragraph. The concepts are there but I am going for ‘full coverage’. I cannot let any of my concepts go, I am wedded to them all. The working paper prepared for this seminar is a perfectly crafted example of ‘conceptual description’ (Glaser, 2001) an excerpt of which is shown in Textbox 5:

Textbox 5: Conceptual description

A **CONNECTED LEARNER** will commonly have commitments to, for example, family and employment and perhaps to other social commitments e.g. Church or sport. A **PERSONAL COMMITMENT STRUCTURE** will therefore comprise **COMMITTED TIME** to work, family, social organisations, self, sleep and to timetabled study time. Any time left over is ‘spare’ time. Thus **Committed time plus spare time = Wake time**. **Wake time plus sleep time = All time**.

A **WORK/REST** pattern relates to days, takes into account shift working (e.g. one month on, six weeks off) and an example of which is the 5 day Saturday to Wednesday working week and the 2 day Thursday/Friday weekend of the United Arab Emirates. A learner working with such a pattern will find it harder to work and connect within a **CORE** period designed around a 5 day Monday to Friday working week and the 2 day Saturday/Sunday weekend where work for the core is released on Saturday.

A **WAKE/SLEEP** pattern is over 24 hours, takes into account shift working and is relative to **BASE TIME** of the **CONNECTED LEARNING OPPORTUNITY** and the **FOCAL TIME** of a group of learners. A **CONNECTION DESIGN** which requires **SAME TIME** working e.g. tutorials or next-stepping group organisation sessions can either effectively exclude some learners or add to the **TIME TENSION** experienced. Figure C.1 shows how day time workers in the USA attending UK based courses are effectively excluded from synchronous sessions by their **WAKE/SLEEP** pattern relative to **BASE TIME** because most UK chat sessions are held when they

are asleep. Similarly, night shift workers in the UK can only easily attend chat sessions held during their evening.

‘Theoretical coding’ is needed to rescue the theory, to enable the theory to be brought into relief from the flatness of descriptive codes where “...theoretical codes implicitly conceptualise how the substantive codes will relate to each other as a modelled, interrelated, multivariate, set of hypotheses in accounting for resolving the main concern” (Glaser, 2005a, p. 11).

My memos show how I was desperately seeking the structure of my theory as I drew bubble maps and decision trees to help me see the patterns but they were one dimensional and I focused on either what was in the middle of the bubble map or at the top of the tree. The best that they could do was to capture my confusion and illustrate my struggle to identify the structure as I sought to understand how to model the theory.

Upping the Level of Conceptualisation

Two strands of thought collided. Firstly, ‘How many Time Designs are there?’ Since there are an infinite number of variations of timings of assessments, course duration etc., the idea becomes useless. How can one possibly account for all the Time Designs where the distinctions between each are all but indistinguishable? It is this question that led me to leave behind the descriptive properties of course period, study hours, assessment period and to abstract the implicit; that is, to recognise that there are start points and end points of courses and assessment points. Thus I moved from the descriptive to the conceptual. The second strand had to do with participants’ comments about structure; that structure is helpful and that the lack of structure is problematic; that structure is linked to how learners organise their lives and integrate study that the beginning of the week is an organising point, where new work is required to be done. Together these strands led to the realisation that the descriptive properties of ‘Time Design’ (Textbox 3) were based on insight drawn from my experience as a course designer but that what really mattered to the learners were the structure points and the degree to which the points were fixed or moveable. Correspondingly, it was less relevant whether a commitment was to family, work, social life etc. and more relevant as to whether the structure point was fixed or moveable and thus that the whole issue for learners was integrating their structure points

into one life.

It is at this late stage that I can label ‘*Time Design*’ as a category, having a property ‘*Structure Point*’ where the dimensions of that property relate to the degree to which a structure point is fixed (or moveable). I can also label ‘*Personal Commitment Structure*’ as a category having a property ‘*Structure Point*’ having dimensions along a range of fixed to moveable.

Sorting and Theoretical Coding

For me, sorting and theoretical coding happened hand in hand, where I understood theoretical coding to mean the emergence of relevant theoretical codes as opposed to (as I had first envisaged) the active labelling of substantive codes as pertaining to a theoretical code, in the manner of open and selective coding. I had first sorted my memos in preparation for the working paper prepared for the seminar of March 2005. I sorted by code and wrote about each. This was an exercise in finding out what I knew and for me was a necessary part of the process – part of finding out what not to do, of finding out that this approach results in conceptual description and how a conceptual description reads.

In April 2005 **The Grounded Theory Perspective III: Theoretical Coding** (Glaser, 2005a) was published and offered invaluable guidance and discussion of ‘new’ theoretical codes. A memo of April 2005 is shown in Textbox 6 where I notice that several theoretical codes may be relevant.

Textbox 6: Memo on method

“I have too much; am blurring two stages. I don’t have the proper ‘story’ about how people absorb learning into one life. I do have: juggling-integrating-evaluating.” I should have this sorted before I start to identify theoretical codes. However, I think I need the theoretical code to help me make sense of the substantive!

I can see – as I read TC 05 – that many different theoretical codes might be relevant. Balancing, cycling, Basic Social Process (becoming a student).

I am having tremendous difficulty in seeing the theoretical patterns. I think I have 3 levels: strategic, operational, implementation with 3 level looping and spiralling and may have

two different spirals one for the successful and one for the unsuccessful.

But given that a TC is about the relationships between codes, I'm not really at that stage of identifying, merely sensitising self to same and playing with ideas."

All the theoretical codes in Textbox 6 are found to be relevant together with a few others and it will be helpful to define these. A 'Basic Social Process' (BSP) "processes a social or social psychological problem from the point of view of continuing social organisation. Irrespective of whether it solves the problem, to some degree it processes it. (Glaser & Holton, 2005, p. 6)

There are two types of BSPs – basic social psychological process (BSPP) and basic social structural process (BSSP). A BSPP refers to social psychological processes such as becoming, highlighting, personalising, health optimising awe inspiring and so forth. A BSSP refers to social structure in process... (where a) BSSP abets, facilitates or serves as the social structure within which the BSPP processes. (Glaser & Holton, 2005, p. 11).

Cycling "refers to going over the same path over and over. It also refers to going over and over the different paths in succession whatever the unit action. It easily refers to people's temporal order of work, eating, sleeping etc." (Glaser, 2005a, p. 24).

Balancing "is handling many variables at once in order to start an action, keep an action going or achieve a resolution. One gets an equilibrium between all the variables. One can achieve stasis for a time." (p. 29)

Having sensitised oneself to different theoretical codes, it is then a matter of 'trying on' various codes while sorting memos to see which ones fit. In June 2005, I notice that there are many potential Basic Social Structural Processes appertaining to any one learner (e.g. parenting, studying, working). I confuse the theoretical code 'Balancing' with the substantive code 'Juggling' – a stage in 'integrating study into a structured life'. This is understandable since

Balancing is an abstract model that also can be seen substantively or used as a substantive category e.g. the professional-client balance in a doctor-patient

relationship. Balancing as such can also be used as a BSP, when it is worked or occurs in stages such as balancing out the factors in a divorce settlement or in resistance to change in organisation. Thus balancing provides its own mix of TC and substantive categories. (Glaser, 2005a, p. 29)

I also wonder if those who juggle and those who struggle are defined by the integrating strategies they employ or the outcomes of their efforts to integrate. I make my first attempt at expressing the 'homeostasis of motivation' modelled on Thulesius' (2003) 'homeostasis of hope'. The homeostasis of hope has three variables:

Existential hope (H) which is a function of the value of every lived moment (V), and expected time left to live (T); $H=V \times T$. Existential hope is defined as the motivation and well-being required to live a normal everyday life. In the disclosure situation the expected time left to live (T) goes down and this reduces the value of the lived moment (V) and thus existential hope (H) drops very fast.... By increasing V and T the patient and the caregivers are trying to regain the homeostasis of hope. (Thulesius, 2003 p 158)

Thulesius captures beautifully the interrelationship of variables and the impact that a change in one has upon the other. In my study, at one point I had a huge and descriptive list of problems - which interfered with the integration of study - the negative effects of which were mitigated or exacerbated by the behaviours of the learners. The greater the learners' competence levels the less the negative effect. It occurred to me that an algorithm such as this might be helpful in expressing the complex inter-relationships between the variables in my study.⁸

At this point in the analysis, it felt as if all the categories were suspended above me, waiting to be told where to land. I was not threatened by them but there were a lot of them and they were beginning to weigh heavy. I remembered and was comforted by the comment: "Confusion? Rest in the confusion. Confusion is

⁸ Eventually, the homeostasis of motivation emerged – as the propensity to study – to become the feedback loop of the BSPP 'Integrating study into a structured life'.

a really good indicator of something emerging” (Glaser, 2005b). I disentangled ‘balancing’ and ‘juggling’ realising that in this study, ‘balancing’ is not part of the substantive code ‘integrating study into a structured life’ but is a theoretical code, where the substantive code ‘integrating study into a structured life’ is modelled by the theoretical code, ‘balancing’. On July 8th, I sorted my memos again and attempted to sort more intuitively. I had papers spread over two tables, a desk, the kitchen work surface and – dangerously – the cooker. I ended up with an enormous pile of memos under the heading of ‘normal integration’ and two smaller piles marked ‘integration: step change – new study’ and ‘integration step change – not study’.

By the end of July 2005 and in response to the question ‘What is failed integration?’ (see Textbox 7) I recognised the theoretical code of type and that I have a typology of learners where “types indicate a variation in the whole, based on a combination of categories” (Glaser, 1978, p. 75).

Textbox 7: Memo on Theoretical Coding

Failed to Integrate

What does this mean? To what degree has someone failed to integrate? Not consumed enough work. Enough work as planned by self or time design? Failed to integrate today, this week, at all, ever.

Integration is about the long term integrating of structure points. On a day to day basis stuff gets squeezed out or squeezed in. It’s at an Operational/ Implementation level.

Cumulative squeezing out And the relationship with propensity to study?

“I have yet to work out a routine that doesn’t have me stressed out come exam time”. The rest of his life is constantly tugging at his sleeve. His wife has the family to support – no time for him. Two people studying in one family. He is having time taken from him!!! Study is squeezed out because relatively other stuff is more important reducing his propensity to study – so he allows – reluctantly and stressily, study to be squeezed out. But the costs

of failure are high. He has no life and suffers time tension/tyranny. Come exam time, as a structure point approaches, becomes an operational/strategic issue – P2S (Propensity to study) increases and for a while he studies.

This makes him a struggler. How do you cope? It’s a struggle. Strugglers experience pain. They may complete or they may fade-away.

Passive Squeezing Out where study of low value and thus P2S is low. Operating in avoidance mode and displacement activities allowed to intervene

Active intentional squeezing out is part of juggling and is reorganising or reordering. (Jugglers and strugglers will do this).

Leavers decide to stop. Strategic decision.

Fade-aways not so decisive, they keep failing to integrate until the plug is pulled. (Which is why there are few reliable drop out rates, merely completion numbers – as people only become fade-aways when a structure point – an end point – defines them as having faded away. Stages of fading away: passive squeezing out, temporary withdrawal, end point defines. Fade-aways have not necessarily failed – may have developed competence to required level and have no need of the validation.

This made it easy now to re-sort the huge pile of memos regarding integration into piles pertaining to ‘jugglers’, ‘strugglers’, ‘fade-aways’ and ‘leavers’. Some of the memos had to be cut up, for example where I had talked about each type on one memo of integrating a step change into the personal commitment structure. I also noticed that the variables relating to type are the same variables that go into the evaluation calculation. The variables are predictors of type - of whether or not the learners will process their problem of integrating study into their structured lives and the time tension and time tyranny that they will be prepared to tolerate.

As one by one the theoretical codes brought order to a section of chaos, the codes were also confirmed and less pertinent properties dropped. This made it easier to see where other

smaller codes fit in e.g. 'catch up' is a strategy that both 'jugglers' and 'strugglers' employ but probably not 'fade-aways' and definitely not 'leavers'. By October 2005, I have seven theoretical codes: a Typology, two Basic Social Processes (BSP); i.e. a Basic Social Structural Process (BSSP) and a Basic Social Psychological Process (BSPP) also Balancing, Cycling, Amplifying Causal Loop and Cutting Point. Amplifying causal looping is "... an ordered, calculated growth of increased size based on a set temporal path (Glaser, 2005a, p. 24). For example 'strugglers' and 'fade-aways' fall further and further behind as they cycle through the basic social processes: integrating and studying. The Cutting Point family:

is a variation of the degree family. Degree focuses on the full range, while here we focus on significant breaks or cutting points on the range. Cutting points are very important in theory generation, since they indicate where the difference occurs which has differential effects". (Glaser, 1978, p. 76)

In this study, the Cutting Point is a step change of the Personal Commitment Structure experienced by 'Leavers' e.g. the birth of a child, the death of a close family member.

This part of the study was about seeking, noticing, exploring, defining, testing and trying on, refining or rejecting, and re-hanging codes and relationships. During this process I changed the way I thought about the descriptive codes (e.g. evaluating the value of study) and descriptive relationships (e.g. leads to). Where my focus had been principally on codes, my focus moved on to the dynamic relationships between codes. In this study, this is where the complexity lies and which is ultimately and elegantly expressed in an algorithm and a set of propositions. (Scott, 2007a, b)

Literature Review

Glaser (1998) is emphatic when he writes:

a) do not do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is to be done, and 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. (p.67)

Consistent with these strictures, I embarked on the literature review only when I felt confident about the shape of my theory. It was during the literature search that I came to appreciate much more the role of sorting in organising the theory and defining the relationships between categories; since it is the sorting and the use of theoretical codes to organise my theory that separates my work from the other qualitative studies reviewed. I can also see why we are enjoined not to read the literature first. Had I conducted the review before data collection and analysis, I would have read widely and wastefully in the field of personality since that was the field in which I had expected my study to be located. I had certainly not envisioned a study to do with student attrition and retention, or student persistence or withdrawal, as became the case.

Secondly, if I had located that field in advance, my study would have been abandoned. My horror at finding Kember's (1999) article "Integrating Part-time Study with Family, Work and Social Obligations" was profound; my study was almost done and my theory emergent. As I sat down to read the article I struggled to see how I could add to the understanding of the field particularly since very few of the categories I had identified in my theory seemed to be new ideas. As it was, however, I quickly came to see how I could add value.

The qualitative literature in the field of online distance learning, fully describes the problems such that the mass of detail is overwhelming (Dupin-Bryant, 2004). Since each issue is given equal prominence, the burden on online distance learning professionals is huge - every issue has to be addressed as there are no clues as to where interventions might be made most effectively. By offering an explanation of the main concern of online learners and how the structural conditions impact upon their experiences, it is possible to identify where interventions, changes, might usefully be made. It is possible to design for learner persistence.

Quantitative studies proved similarly unhelpful as practitioners struggled to find relevant and related variables to test and conjectured as to the meanings of what their statistics meant. As I read I could see how the tools, the methods, with which quantitative researchers analysed their data could not cope with the complexity of the field. My theory makes it possible to untangle the threads of description and add meaning to

conjecture; for example, it is now possible to identify separate strands of temporal issues and academic issues, which matters were often intertwined, maintaining confusion (e.g. Woodley 2004). This confusion was important since it meant that in some studies, inappropriate variables were used to measure persistence rendering the studies valueless. By regarding persistence and withdrawal (i.e. dropout) as a temporal matter and the process of academic performance and the outcome of that process, academic achievement (success or failure) as academic matters, those variables which do and do not measure learner persistence can be identified and used or not used as appropriate. Additionally, the algorithm which captures the dynamic relationships between codes can be used to identify dependent and independent variables.

During the review, I also came to appreciate that using the literature as more data in developing one's own Grounded Theory is invaluable, both in finding new categories and particularly in being able to theoretically sample and saturate existing categories of the emerging theory. Not least, as I tussled with the principle authors, I *finally* came to recognise what my study was about and that the core category was 'temporal integration'.

Summary

In this paper, I have exemplified the experiential nature of the process of producing a Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1998, pp.6,102); detailing how my understanding of the method developed as I engaged with it. I have also illustrated the power of the method and in particular, theoretical coding, by showing how the potentially overwhelming complexity of data is made manageable by organising theory using 'theoretical codes'. In doing so I have illustrated how the call for axial coding and the use of one theoretical code as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), is restrictive in the production of a Grounded Theory.

Appendix: Structure of Theory

This is a complex Grounded Theory and for completeness it may be helpful to outline the structure of the theory, i.e. how the categories are inter-related. In descriptive terms, the main concern of learners is fitting study into their lives on an ongoing basis. In conceptual terms, the basic social psychological process which processes this concern is *temporal integration*. This is the process by which the *structure points* of the *time design* of a

connected learning opportunity are combined into the *personal commitment structure* of the *connected learner*. Thus two related categories are of import to this theory; the *connected learning opportunity* and the *connected learner*. The category *connected learning opportunity* has properties of *the knowledge domain of the course, the language of the course, the technology of the course* and a sub-category of *time design*. The *time design* has properties comprising *structure points of start points, end points, organising points, assessment points and connection points*.

The category *connected learner* has properties of five personal competencies of the knowledge domain of the course, the language of the course, technical skills, integration skills and online learning skills. Each of these properties has dimensions ranging from high to low, i.e. from high levels of personal competence to low levels of personal competence. In addition, the related category *connected learning* has properties of need for learning and satisfaction (with learning opportunity) and cost of failure, all of which have dimensions from high to low. This category also has a sub-category of personal commitment structure which has structure points having dimensions of being more or less fixed.

The process of *temporal integration* has three stages; *juggling* which has properties of *scoping, prioritising and scheduling; engaging* having dimensions ranging from full engagement, reducing by degrees to partial withdrawal, temporary withdrawal down to full withdrawal (or *disengagement*); and *evaluation*. The *evaluation* stage involves the assessment of the benefits of engaging in study, ('*what's in it for me?*') and the costs ('*is it worth it?*'). The outcome of the evaluation is expressed as the *propensity to study* which forms a feedback loop to the juggling stage. The balancing algorithm, captures the relationships between the dimensions of a *connected learner* and the structural conditions under which *temporal integration* takes place and how they co-vary during the temporal integration process to impact upon the assessment of the benefits and costs of *engaging* in and the *propensity to study*. Lastly a learners' type is defined in the first instance by the two categories, *personal commitment structure* and *personal competencies*; by the *value of study* in the second instance; and by the *cost of failure* in the third. See also textbox 8.

Textbox 8: Substantive and theoretical codes of the study 'The temporal integration of connected study into a structured life: A Grounded Theory'

Temporal integration - core category and BSPP with stages of:

Juggling

Engaging

Evaluating

Connected learners - related category

Personal commitment structures – sub category and structural condition; having properties (e.g. structure points)

personal competencies – sub category having properties (*of knowledge domain of the course, the language of the course, technical skills, integration skills and online learning skills.*) with dimensions (high or low levels of competence)

value of study – property of connected learner having dimensions

satisfaction with study – property of connected learner having dimensions

'the propensity to study' – property of connected learner having dimensions.

cost of failure – property of connected learner having dimensions

Juggler, Struggler, Fade-away and Leaver – typology of connected learners defined by the interrelationships between the learner's personal commitment structure and his/her personal competencies.

Connected learning – related category and structural condition

Time design - sub category having properties (e.g. structure points)

Studying: BSSP relevant stage – 'Doing the study'

Theoretical codes which organise the substantive codes are: a Typology, two Basic Social Processes (BSP); i.e. a Basic Social Structural Process (BSSP) (studying) and a Basic Social Psychological Process (BSPP) (temporal integration) where the codes Balancing, Cycling, Amplifying Causal Loop and Cutting Point organise the movement and flow of the process.

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Demystifying Theoretical Sampling in Grounded Theory Research

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Abstract

Theoretical sampling is a central tenet of classic grounded theory and is essential to the development and refinement of a theory that is 'grounded' in data. While many authors appear to share concurrent definitions of theoretical sampling, the ways in which the process is actually executed remain largely elusive and inconsistent. As such, employing and describing the theoretical sampling process can present a particular challenge to novice researchers embarking upon their first grounded theory study. This article has been written in response to the challenges faced by the first author whilst writing a grounded theory proposal. It is intended to clarify theoretical sampling for new grounded theory researchers, offering some insight into the practicalities of selecting and employing a theoretical sampling strategy. It demonstrates that the credibility of a theory cannot be dissociated from the process by which it has been generated and seeks to encourage and challenge researchers to approach theoretical sampling in a way that is apposite to the core principles of the classic grounded theory methodology.

Introduction

With the introduction of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged the prevailing hypothetico-deductive method of theory verification, questioning the gulf that existed between abstract theory and empirical research. They advocated that a theory developed in direct response to immediate problems under investigation would ultimately be more relevant to the studied area than any pre-existing theory. Thus proffered as a potential means of bridging the theory-practice divide, it is perhaps of little surprise that the grounded theory method has been embraced widely by the health professions. Grounded theory offers healthcare researchers a systematic and interpretive means of generating a theory from data that has the potential to explain, interpret and guide practice. However, a review of

healthcare literature would suggest that while many authors profess to using grounded theory, they may only appear to have 'borrowed' a particular aspect of the method, most commonly the constant comparative approach to data analysis (Draucker et al 2007). Furthermore, 'grounded theory' studies have been criticised for possessing a somewhat "mystical" (Melia 1997 p.33) quality whereby:

a sleight of hand produces a list of 'themes', and we are invited to take it on trust that theory somehow emerges from the data without being offered a step by step explanation of how theoretical insights have been built up (Barbour 2001 p.1116).

Ultimately, this inconsistent application of grounded theory and the ambiguous way in which grounded theory studies are often presented within healthcare literature can pose several challenges to novice researchers. Without being able to refer to useful exemplars of grounded theory studies it is difficult to understand and prepare for the practicalities of carrying out one's own grounded theory research. Similarly, when using grounded theory studies as evidence in practice or as part of a literature review it is difficult to ascertain the credibility of the research if the product cannot be linked explicitly with the process. This article has been written in response to the challenges faced by the first author whilst writing a classic grounded theory proposal, particularly in relation to theoretical sampling. As an active and ongoing process that controls and directs data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling is pivotal in 'building up theoretical insights'. However, while many authors appear to share concurrent definitions of theoretical sampling, the ways in which the process is actually executed remain largely elusive and inconsistent. The purpose of this article is thus to clarify theoretical sampling, explore the practicalities of this strategy, and offer insight into the appropriate selection, execution and write-up of theoretical sampling in order to ensure credible and trustworthy research.

Theoretical Sampling

Classic grounded theory is a general methodology that seeks to develop, through a process of induction, a theory that is 'grounded' in the data from which it has been derived (Glaser 2002a). Sampling is thus *theoretically* oriented; it is directed

towards the generation and development of conceptual theory as opposed to creating a descriptive account. It is continually directed by the emerging theory, following up leads as they arise in the data and progressively focusing data collection to refine and integrate the theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Interestingly, despite the evolution of grounded theory since its inception, the original definition of theoretical sampling has remained largely undisputed:

the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p.45).

Indeed, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have described theoretical sampling as a means to "maximise opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (p.201). Furthermore, despite assuming a different epistemological stance, Charmaz (2006) has also similarly described theoretical sampling as a means of focusing data collection and increasing the analytic abstraction of theory by illuminating variation and identifying gaps that require elaboration. However, upon closer consideration, it would seem that while authors may at first glance appear to share a common definition of theoretical sampling, their apparent congruence with classic grounded theory is somewhat superficial.

The theoretical sampling process in classic grounded theory begins with initial data collection and analysis (Glaser 1978). Open coding of raw data generates initial codes, which in turn stimulate further data collection. In the initial stages of analysis, codes are elicited rapidly and it is through a joint process of theoretical sampling and memo-writing that codes can be corrected, trimmed, and continually fitted to the data (Glaser 1978). Memo-writing enables the researcher to conceptualise the boundaries and properties of each category and illuminate gaps in the emerging theory, thus highlighting where to sample next and for what theoretical purpose (Glaser 1978). Constant comparison of codes yields a provisional set of conceptual categories, from which point new categories emerge and new incidents are fitted and re-fitted into existing categories. The researcher samples both for theoretical similarity and difference in order to expound the properties of each category, attempting to

saturate all categories until the emergence of a core category (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Theoretical sampling is thereafter focused on data that is sufficiently and significantly relevant to the core category and its related properties. Data analysis and memo-writing become increasingly conceptual as the core category and its properties, through constant comparison of incident-category and category-category, become dense and theoretically integrated (Glaser 1978). When the core category is saturated – considered sufficiently dense and data collection no longer generates new leads – theoretical sampling will cease (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) have broken down the theoretical sampling process into stages of open sampling, relational and variational sampling, and discriminate sampling, which correspond directly with their stages of open, axial and selective coding. According to Glaser (1992), this fracturing of the sampling process offers the researcher little methodological help as all the stages “occur anyway” (p.102). Indeed, the above outline of theoretical sampling appears implicitly to parallel the open, selective and theoretical coding stages in classic grounded theory. Interestingly, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have received notably more popularity within healthcare as a very direct result of the ‘help’ offered by a clear set of procedural steps. Similarly, Coyne (1997) has noted that step by step guidance on theoretical sampling may be useful for novice researchers. However, the inherent risk within such a prescriptive approach to theory generation is that creativity is stifled, and without creativity there can only be limited conceptualisation (Glaser 2002b). While as a novice researcher it is unnerving to trust in the emergent nature of classic grounded theory, learning to be patient with the data and remaining open to multiple possibilities will ultimately generate a more relevant, and thus more useful, theory (Holton 2007). By adhering to strict procedures for collecting and analysing data, the researcher is at risk of manipulating the data rather than patiently allowing the theory to emerge inductively. Boychuk-Duchscher & Morgan (2004) have captured this concern aptly: “by focusing the researcher’s energies on the perfect approach to finding the data, the *true* nature of the data may be lost” (p.611). The theory should be grounded in the data, not in the procedure.

Regardless of the debate about the usefulness of sampling

‘rules’, the more concerning distinction between classic grounded theory and the method proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) is the extent to which data are processed deductively. While the open coding/sampling stages are notably similar within both approaches – both involve sampling and coding for all possibilities in the data – axial coding represents a significant divergence from classic grounded theory. Axial coding involves the application of a coding paradigm, otherwise known as the ‘6C’ coding family, to identify conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, intervening conditions and consequences (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Rather than allowing theoretical concepts to emerge inductively, emerging concepts are tested against and fitted deductively into this paradigm: “Strauss’ sampling is controlled by the evolving relevance of concepts, and relevance comes from testing out what is looked for, not what is emerging” (Glaser 1992 p.103). Indeed, there exist several possible coding families to explicate inter-relationships between categories (Glaser 1978), none of which can be identified as relevant in advance of the emerging theory. By pre-selecting the type of theory they wish to generate, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have effectively subverted the inductive nature of classic grounded theory. An inductive approach requires that the theory emerges after data collection begins, meaning that the researcher cannot predict in advance the relevance of any one particular type of data. As such, the constructivist revision of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) can be criticised for predetermining the lens through which data are processed before data collection has even begun. Glaser (1992) and Glaser and Holton (2004) have thus contended that, rather than being grounded theory, these authors have ‘remodelled’ the methodology as part of generic qualitative data analysis.

The Use and Abuse of Theoretical Sampling

As a general methodology, classic grounded theory can use either qualitative or quantitative data (Glaser 1978). Since its inception, however, grounded theory has been embraced fervently by qualitative researchers, ultimately leading to the dilution of classic principles and erosion of the original methodology (Glaser & Holton 2004). This dilution has been further exacerbated in healthcare research, in which grounded theory ‘versions’ are frequently confused or researchers have extracted particular methods outwith the context of the original methodology.

Theoretical sampling in particular has become embroiled within the multiple interpretations of sampling in qualitative research, often being misconstrued as inter-changeable with purposeful sampling (Sandelowski 1995). In *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser 1978) sought to address this same concern, and thirty years later this remains to be a notable problem. Ultimately, faced with many ambiguous examples of the theoretical sampling process, it is imperative to clarify and ‘demystify’ the distinction between purposeful and theoretical sampling in order to prepare novice researchers to produce trustworthy and credible grounded theory research.

Hood (2007) has suggested that “all theoretical sampling is purposeful, but not all purposeful sampling is theoretical” (p.158). Purposeful sampling is defined as the selection of participants with shared knowledge or experience of the particular phenomena identified by the researcher as a potential area for exploration (Sandelowski 1995). Typically, to ensure selection of the most information rich participants, the researcher will establish a set of inclusion or exclusion criteria based upon research questions generated deductively from prior knowledge of the area and a preliminary review of related literature. The concern is with who or what to sample for the purpose of answering questions about a predetermined topic. In contrast, the selection of participants in theoretical sampling, and the reason underpinning that selection, will change in accordance with the theoretical needs of the study at any given time (Morse 2008). Researchers using “theoretical sampling cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead” (Glaser 1978 p.37). While a purposeful sample is selected at the outset of the study for a predetermined purpose, theoretical sampling progressively and systematically tailors data collection to serve the emergent theory. Theoretical sampling is thus always purpose-driven; the sample is selected for the *purpose* of explicating and refining the emerging theory.

The Practical Realities of Theoretical Sampling

It has been clearly established that theoretical sampling is guided by the emerging theory, and is concerned with where to sample next and for what theoretical purpose. Yet for novice researchers newly embarking upon a grounded theory study, the most pressing practical concern is perhaps *where* to start. While Glaser (1978) has advocated beginning the study with a sense of

‘abstract wonderment’, this poses a significant challenge for researchers in the healthcare arena where detailed protocols are required as a means of securing financial and ethical backing. Furthermore, if the purpose of theoretical sampling is to seek data that will contribute to developing categories of the emerging theory, the researcher must surely first have the beginnings of a theory – some tentative ideas - upon which to build. Evidently there is an unavoidable need to begin somewhere. Dey (2007) has cautioned researchers not to confuse an “open mind with an empty head” (p.176). Initial ideas can benefit theoretical development by providing a point of departure and by raising important preliminary questions (Walker & Myrick 2006). Coyne (1997) has explained that “the researcher must have some idea of where to sample, not necessarily what to sample for, or where it will lead” (p.625). In this sense theoretical sampling may involve the purposeful selection of an initial starting point before moving into theoretical sampling when data analysis begins to yield theoretical concepts.

Beyond these initial decisions of where to start it is impossible to anticipate the direction in which sampling will proceed in advance of the emergence of a preliminary theoretical framework (Glaser & Holton 2004). It is pertinent to remember that the starting point is only that, and the researcher should avoid formulating a preconceived conclusion that these initially sampled characteristics will contribute to theoretical variation (Glaser 1978). For example, to sample only according to demographic characteristics is to deduce that they will be relevant to the emerging theory (Glaser 1978; Morse 1991). It is important to recognise that deductive logic does have a legitimate place in classic grounded theory; themes emerge inductively from the data but in following up these themes through further inquiry the researcher is essentially engaged in a process of ‘deducing’ who or what to sample in order to do so (Dey 2007). Glaser (1978) has referred to this deductive logic as ‘conceptual elaboration’ whereby theoretical possibilities and probabilities are deduced from the emerging theory. However, because points of departure such as demographic characteristics have not emerged from the theory, they must be considered merely another variable awaiting a verdict as to its relevance. Indeed, descriptive data may be elevated into abstract theory only by way of comparing theoretical categories and properties, not mere demographic opposites (Hood 2007). Pre-existing knowledge can guide the

researcher in identifying a starting point for data collection, but this knowledge should be awarded no relevance until validated or dismissed by the formulation of the emerging theory. In the same way as ideas must earn a way into the theory, the converse is also true; it is possible that initial ideas will earn a way out.

Theoretical Saturation

For the novice grounded theorist, the initial concern about where to start is often accompanied by a similar concern regarding the decision to stop data collection. Given the inductive nature of theory generation, it is understood that theoretical sampling, including the point at which sampling will cease, is controlled throughout the study by the emerging theory. Sampling is discontinued once a point of saturation has been reached, whereby categories and their properties are considered sufficiently dense and data collection no longer generates new leads (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Glaser (1992) has described this as the point at which the researcher has reached the full extent of the data, and thus “sampling is over when the study is over” (p.107). While this definition carries a degree of simplicity, theoretical saturation can be a difficult concept to understand, particularly for first-time grounded theorists who are yet to actually experience reaching the saturation point within a study. Furthermore, much akin to ‘theoretical sampling’, the term ‘saturation’ has become somewhat ambiguous, ill-defined and frequently misconstrued within the blurry boundaries of qualitative research. It is imperative to understand, however, that ‘saturation’ within generic qualitative data analysis and ‘saturation’ within classic grounded theory are inherently different. While the qualitative researcher seeks descriptive saturation, the grounded theorist is concerned with saturation at a conceptual level.

Theoretical saturation is not mere descriptive redundancy. That Glaser and Strauss (1967) have stipulated that categories be *sufficiently* dense denotes an understanding that theoretical saturation need not signal a point of complete coverage whereby the researcher ‘knows everything’. Instead, theoretical sampling does not aim for full descriptive coverage, but systematically focuses and narrows data collection in the service of theoretical development. While a predetermined, purposefully selected sample might cause the researcher to worry if one has captured enough relevant information, the theoretical sampling approach

assures relevance by progressively and systematically tailoring data collection to serve the emergent theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). In so doing, the grounded theorist is able to transcend the descriptive level typical of qualitative research. By saturating categories that seem to have the most explanatory power and integrating these into and around a core variable, the grounded theorist is able to present the theoretical essence of a substantive area. Rather than presenting findings, debatably ‘accurate’ facts or descriptions, grounded theory seeks only to present plausible hypotheses that are grounded in the data (Glaser & Holton 2004). While the saturation point indicates theoretical stability whereby the core category accounts for as much variation in the data as possible, it is crucial to understand that these concepts and hypotheses are openly modifiable within the substantive area. Saturation in classic grounded theory is thus neither concerned with verifying hypotheses or exhausting the description of a particular situation at a particular point in time. Instead, the researcher should be concerned with generating a theory that can cope with changing situations (a particularly important consideration within the ever-changing healthcare arena) and less with in-the-moment accuracy that has little temporal transferability.

Writing up Theoretical Sampling

Ultimately, it is difficult to clarify or ‘demystify’ theoretical sampling if researchers continue to misconstrue grounded theory as a qualitative method and not a general methodology. This article seeks to encourage novice researchers to be mindful that, as a general methodology, grounded theory should not necessarily be subject to generic ‘qualitative’ guidelines. For example, one element of ‘trustworthy’ qualitative research is that researchers provide a detailed description of participants (Curtin & Fossey 2007). For healthcare in particular, this is considered central to evidence based practice; a sample that is described sufficiently will enable the reader to transfer the research findings to a particular context, allowing comparison between the evidence presented in the research article and their own sphere of experience (Curtin & Fossey 2007). From a grounded theory perspective, however, there lies an inherent risk in the excessive description of potentially irrelevant detail. This is of particular concern in relation to the above discussion, whereby researchers should not automatically assume the relevance of participants

socio-demographic characteristics to the emerging theory. While demographic or social characteristics may provide a starting point for data collection, by presenting a thick, isolated description of participants at the start of a grounded theory research article the researcher is at risk of either belying an inappropriate approach to sampling, or obscuring the analytic flow and progression of theoretical insights thus compromising the credibility of an otherwise trustworthy study.

Morse (2008) has criticised the way in which theoretical samples are presented as static without detailing and justifying the selection and sequencing of the sampling process. Typically, researchers provide a one-off description of participants in the methods section of research articles, and ignore the impact of sampling decisions made during analysis (Barbour 2001). However, if the researcher does not capture the flow of the theoretical sampling process, the complexities involved in the development of the theory may be lost. Theoretical sampling is intertwined inextricably with the abstraction of description into theory, and is crucial to discovering and refining categories and their properties and suggesting relationships between concepts. Ultimately, the theoretical sampling 'flow' of moving back and forth between data collection and analysis poses a challenge to researchers writing up grounded theory studies; it is often difficult to convey the chaos of research within the structure of an article or thesis. However, sampling theoretically is "more difficult than simply collecting data from a preplanned set of groups, since choice requires continuous thought, action and search" (Glaser & Strauss 1967 p.52). Studies that produce an artificially neat and static account of the grounded theory process serve only to obscure this complexity (Barbour 2001). Novice grounded theorists should be careful to write-up a grounded theory study in a manner that best reflects the methodology. Grounded theory researchers should avoid isolated, one-off, static descriptions of participants but should instead be challenged to integrate within their write up the progression, justification and contribution of sampling decisions so as to mirror the complex and iterative process of theory development.

Evaluating Credibility

Theoretical sampling is theoretically oriented, and will thus be different for every theory. There is no definitive checklist for ensuring credibility, and the reader should be careful when

applying conventional guidelines of trustworthiness in qualitative research to grounded theory studies. For example, the emphasis on thick description in qualitative research has been demonstrated to be potentially antithetical to the inductive nature of grounded theory; sampling should be theoretically directed as opposed to variable oriented and only those descriptive characteristics that have a proven contribution to theoretical variation within the theory should be included in the write up. The adequacy of a theoretical sample should be judged on the process of theory generation. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that an inadequate theoretical sample would be evident in a theory that is lacking integration and has too many remaining gaps. It would seem then that transparency is a universal concern, common to both grounded theory and qualitative research; the credibility of a theory, or any piece of research, cannot be dissociated from the process by which it is generated. The 'mysticism' arises in grounded theory research when the researcher fails to describe adequately the complex and messy process of analytic abstraction whereby theory is developed from empirical data. In this sense, to ensure that a grounded theory study has credibility there must be evidence that the final theoretical product is actually 'grounded'. This should be achieved by making the process through which theory has been developed explicit within the final write up, paying particular attention to capturing the flow of theoretical sampling which will demonstrate and explain the build up of theoretical insights into abstract theory.

Conclusion

For the healthcare researcher, classic grounded theory offers an inductive methodology with a distinctly practical purpose: to provide a theory that has the potential to explain, interpret and guide practice. However, the full potential of grounded theory can only be realised through sound application of its distinct methodological principles, most notably theoretical sampling. Although grounded theory has evolved and diversified since its inception, the emphasis on theoretical sampling as being essential to the analytic abstraction of theory has remained largely undisputed. Despite this apparent agreement, however, it has been demonstrated that by pre-determining the type of data sought or looking for a specific paradigm in the data, other versions of 'grounded theory' seek only to subvert the inductive

nature of classic grounded theory. Furthermore, there is wide evidence of inappropriate use and documentation of theoretical sampling within healthcare literature, resulting from the misconceptions regarding the methodological nature of classic grounded theory. As a result, grounded theory studies have been accused of mysticism, whereby codes and categories appear as if out of nowhere. Novice and experienced grounded theory researchers alike are thus encouraged to 'demystify' their theoretical sampling processes, making explicit the steps taken to build up theoretical insights. Researchers should capture the complex flow of sampling for the purposes of theory development by integrating key sampling decisions and justifications within the write up of their studies. However, researchers should also be wary of overly thick description of the sample; descriptive characteristics may provide an adequate starting point however these must not be awarded any assumed relevance until validated or dismissed by the emerging theory. As a general methodology, novice researchers should beware appraising grounded theory on the basis of generic qualitative guidelines. Novice researchers are encouraged to develop a sound understanding of the theoretical sampling process in order to ensure the credibility of one's own studies, and to appraise that of others'.

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