



# The Grounded Theory Review: An international journal

## **The Future of Grounded Theory**

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

## **Is That a Real Theory or Did You Just Make It Up? Teaching Classic Grounded Theory**

*Odis E. Simmons, Ph.D.*

## **Theories in Progress Series:**

### **Perpetual Identity Constructing**

*Alison Clancy, RGN, M.Sc., HDNS (Diabetes), Pgrad  
(Teaching and Learning), Ph.D. Candidate*

## **Book Review:**

*Glaserian grounded theory in nursing research:  
Trusting emergence* (Artinian, B.M., Giske, T., &  
Cone, P.H.)

*Antoinette M. McCallin, RN, Ph.D.*



The Grounded Theory Review (2010), vol.9, no.2

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ISSN 1556-1542 (print version)

ISSN 1556-1550 (electronic version)



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# The Grounded Theory Review: An international journal

## From the Editor

This issue of the Review explores several interesting perspectives on teaching and learning. First, we asked Dr. Glaser to revisit an address he gave a decade ago on the future of grounded theory. Just as a decade ago, he continues to suggest that the future of grounded theory rests with the novice grounded theorist attracted by the promise of finding out what's really going on, of getting out into the field as soon as possible. As he points out, grounded theory often attracts a more mature individual; experienced practitioners pursuing a professional credentializing requirement as opposed to a purely scholastic pursuit. Many come from professional fields such as social work, nursing, medicine, allied health vocations, education, management and business. They're practitioners seeking a better understanding of the social patterns that underpin the behaviours they encounter in their work – those high impact access and controllable variables (Glaser & Strauss, pp.245-249) that suggest better ways to mobilize often scarce resources to resolving issues or leveraging opportunities. There's tremendous satisfaction in the emergence of such patterns in a research study. Perhaps somewhat intimidated by the standard academic prerequisites in qualitative research such as a declared philosophical stance, literature review and theoretical framework to guide the research, grounded theory's straight forward, unencumbered and perhaps less pretentious and more intuitive approach provides a "sensitizing recognition" (Glaser, 1998, p.62) for the experienced practitioner. Easily overwhelmed by the social structural dictates of the academy, they understand and embrace a method that offers a 'full package' approach and promises an outcome with practical value.

As such, grounded theory offers a somewhat 'counter-culture' alternative for the experienced practitioner with an intuitive sense that the preconceived, normative and prescriptive extant theories simply do not capture the reality they experience. Such theories not only lack relevance but may even inhibit constructive intervention and change. Even the novice with limited practice

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experience can feel hampered and hindered by the dictates of traditional research methodologies and the social structural constraints of many post-graduate research programs. The “draw and grab” (Glaser, 1998, p.62) of classic grounded theory is highly motivating.

Odis Simmons (this issue), one of Dr. Glaser’s earliest students and now one of the most experienced teachers of classic grounded theory, shares with us a very personal perspective on the challenges facing the novice grounded theorist and how he works with students to overcome these challenges. He alludes to the counter-culture nature of grounded theory in its taken for granted theory generating stance as “inside out and upside down “ in terms of traditional academic culture where, he suggests, theory development is considered a rare skill and most are content to make a modest contribution or modification to extant theories. Others engaged in supervising and mentoring novice researchers will find inspiration and sound advice in his paper.

Like Odis Simmons, Antoinette McCallin (this issue) is a Fellow of the Grounded Theory Institute and one of this journal’s most experienced peer reviewers. In this issue, she reviews a recent guide to doing grounded theory in the field of nursing (Artinian, Giske & Cone, 2009). The primary author, Barbara Artinian, is another experienced teacher of grounded theory methodology who openly embraces ‘Glaserian’ grounded theory while offering up her own “variation” (Glaser, 2009).

Common to all of these papers is a recognition that learning and doing grounded theory is a delayed action learning process (Glaser, 1978, p.6; 2001, p.1; 2003, p.78); that talking grounded theory without doing it fosters confusion through what are often unintended methods variations. Learning delays come from the cognitive confusion of grounded theory’s ‘staying open’ stance as opposed to the preconceived frameworks traditional in many other research approaches; from the need to tolerate confusion and regression (Glaser, 1998, pp.100-102) in service to the preconscious processing that facilitates ideational emergence of the theory in progress; and, from the resistance to unlearning taken-for-granted procedures standard to other research approaches. Staying open takes time but methodological realization grows with sustained engagement in using grounded theory methods. The importance of learning through doing cannot

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be under-estimated. As Glaser often comments in his troubleshooting seminars, grounded theory is asymptotic; its propositional nature allows for its modification with additional data and with further skill development on the part of the theorist. What one ‘misses’ in the first grounded theory study can be realized and ‘corrected’ in subsequent studies.

One goal of this journal has always been to encourage novice grounded theorists to submit their work for review and possible publication. To emphasize our goal and to encourage novices to submit working papers on their emerging theories, we are introducing a new feature – “Theories in Progress”. We are pleased to include here our first paper in this series. Alison Clancy (this issue) is a PhD Candidate at University College Dublin. Her emerging grounded theory offers an interesting perspective on the world of academia. Her theory of perpetual identity constructing proposes an interesting concept of ‘possibility portals’ where academics find crucial space and time needed for a becoming process in the construction of preferred professional identities. In much the same way, one might suggest that those desirous of becoming grounded theorists also need such possibility portals through reading, seminars and mentorships as opportunities to construct their preferred researcher identities.

- Judith A. Holton, Ph.D.

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## Submissions

We welcome papers presenting substantive and formal classic grounded theories from a broad range of disciplines. All papers submitted are double blind 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; these will be shared with the authors and may be published in subsequent issues of the Review. Manuscripts should be prepared as Word (.doc) files using single line spacing and New Century Schoolbook 11 pt typeface. Forward submissions as Word documents to Judith Holton at [judith@groundedtheoryreview.com](mailto:judith@groundedtheoryreview.com)

**Title Page:** Include names of all authors, their affiliations and professional degrees. Include the address of the corresponding author, telephone number & email. A brief biographical statement of each author is welcome although optional.

**Abstract:** The title page is followed by an abstract of 100 to 150 words. Include maximum of five key words.

**Introduction:** Briefly overview the focus of the study. Comment on data sources, data collection and analysis.

**Theory:** Using sub-headings, clearly identify the theory's core category (variable) and related concepts, explaining each briefly. Under an additional subheading, articulate the main theoretical propositions (hypotheses) of your theory.

**Discussion:** Discuss the general implications of your theory for practice. Discuss its contribution to knowledge by addressing extant theory and literature. Discuss its limitations.

**Notes to the Text:** Notes to the text should be kept to a minimum and should appear at the end of the text.

**References:** References should appear as a separate section titled 'References' at the end of the paper following the text and any endnotes. References should conform to APA publication format.

**Word Count:** As a rule, papers should not exceed 8,000 words.

**Graphics:** Our preference is to minimize the use of graphics, figures and tables. If they are necessary, authors of papers accepted for publication will be asked to supply print ready artwork.



## **Peer Review Guidelines**

The goal of peer review in this journal is to advance classic grounded theory scholarship by providing constructive comments to authors with a view to enhancing the quality of papers submitted. The role of the peer reviewer is to respect the autonomy of the author by coaching rather than criticising thereby encouraging and supporting the author's understanding of the methodology and subsequent skill development as a published grounded theorist.

Following peer review, papers are returned to the author with one of the following recommendations:

- Accept as it is
- Accept pending minor revisions
- Revise and resubmit

### **Basis for Revision:**

- Needs a clearer focus
- Core category needs clarification
- Related concepts need clarification
- Theoretical propositions (hypotheses) need to be clearly articulated
- Contribution to knowledge (addressing the literature) needs further work
- Implications for practice need to be addressed
- Limitations of the study need to be addressed
- Data sources need to be addressed
- Brief statement on data collection & analysis needs to be consistent with classic GT methodology
- Composition needs work

## **The Future of Grounded Theory<sup>1</sup>**

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

This keynote address does not detail a “wish list”; it is not an ideology. Rather, it is a grounded analysis of data from the author’s travels that indicates what the future of grounded theory is likely to be. The author discusses in whose hands the future of grounded theory appears to be as well as what accounts for its spread, its use, and its misuse. This paper was first written in 1998. I will try to update it, though most still applies.

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I would like to speak about what I consider the future of grounded theory. I will discuss in whose hands the future of grounded theory appears to be and what accounts for its spread, its use and misuse, and where the majority of grounded theory studies are occurring. I will then briefly review poor grounded theory, qualitative grounded theory, social fictions, and theory bits. Finally, I will touch on the future structures in which grounded theory will be taught and centered.

First, a few guidelines are necessary. Grounded theory refers to a specific methodology on how to get from systematically collecting data to producing a multivariate conceptual theory. It is a total methodological package. It provides a series of systematic, exact methods that start with collecting data and take the researcher to a theoretical piece that is publishable.

Now, all research is grounded in data in some way. It is implicit in the definition of research. Thus, research is grounded by definition, but research grounded in data is not grounded theory, although many jargonizers would have their work designated that way. It is grounded theory only when it follows the grounded theory methodological package. Second, grounded theory is just a small piece of the action in social psychological research. Research methods go in many directions, using many methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative and mixes thereof.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of a keynote address presented at the fourth annual Qualitative Health Research Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, February 1998. *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 9 No. 6, November 1999 836-845

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Grounded theory is a specific general methodology. It is no better or worse than other methods. It is just another option for researchers. Grounded theory is used in part or in whole by researchers. When used in part, it is “adopt and adapt,” with other research methods woven in, based on the training and judgment of the researcher involved. The multi version view of GT is based on jargonizing with the GT vocabulary, not on the GT procedures (Glaser, 2009). I will speak here on the pure or orthodox view, knowing as I said in my reader, *Grounded Theory, 1984-1994* (Glaser, 1995), that most researchers mix methods by jargonizing.

Third, when Anselm Strauss and I wrote *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Anselm would say to me, “Barney, we are 15 to 20 years ahead of our time.” He was right in my view, so I thought, “Good, I can do other things and bide my time.” Well, to my surprise, 15 to 20 years later, grounded theory has gone global, seriously global among the disciplines of nursing, business, and education and less so among other social-psychological-oriented disciplines such as social welfare, psychology, sociology, and art. Sociology Press sells books to Russia, Iran, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, China, Poland, Netherlands, Australia as well as Northern Europe.

Everywhere I travel, people come to my workshops at some expense and from some distance to hear me and to ask questions. People compete for my attention and to be my host. I embody what they embrace—grounded theory. We wrote the book in 1967, and this is 43 years later.

Since I wrote *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Glaser, 1992), I have been traveling in Europe, Down Under, Canada, and the United States. What follows is not a “wish list”; it is not an ideology. Rather, it is a grounded analysis of data from my travels and book sales that indicates what the future of grounded theory is likely to be.

### **The People Who Use Grounded Theory**

Unformed or novice 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 users today, mostly students who are doing M.A. or Ph.D. theses or dissertations, are

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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 areas of interest. This makes grounded theory very appealing on that one point alone—relevance.

They realize that grounded theory is a methodology that provides a total package, which takes one from data collection through several stages to a theory and in a scheduled amount of time. This ensures a finished product that can comply with a deadline. Again, this is very appealing at the M.A. or Ph.D. stage of an academic career when personal resources are limited. It ensures graduation and getting on to the first step of the professorial career. It ensures promotions based on achieving an advanced degree. It helps in getting published.

Whether or not the users continue to do grounded theory varies. Their training directs its use in future research, but with more autonomy. They take it their own way and use other methodology strategies with it. They adopted it for their dissertations, and now they adapt it in many ways for a multitude of reasons. The continued users take it in ways that seem “suitable” in their current careers and contexts. They then wrap their grounded theory identities around the adaptations, and it becomes the grounded theory they teach and do, however recognizable as grounded theory. The multi version view of GT, based on jargonizing, is unstoppable.

As careers mature, their research identities wrap around these adjustments, and this becomes their grounded theory. The purist view gets mixed with other research strategies and sometimes gets totally contaminated by them. Grounded theory use spreads in this way, sometimes only by name; that is, by jargonizing.

At the same time, other colleagues with identities involved in different methodologies might disappear through retirement and attrition, and grounded theory à la adaptation takes a place in departments and research institutes. Its suitability becomes grounded in context, and more Ph.D. students try it and like it.

### **Types of Grounded Theory Researchers**

Now it can be seen that in the beginning, the motivations run high to use grounded theory in the thesis stage of one’s career. It is linked with research age, career development, and (least likely) chronological age. It also is firmly linked with a

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certain type of researcher, whose profile does not fit everybody. One type of researcher is no better than another, although any one researcher might need to think so. Evaluation of these differences is a waste; people vary.

The grounded theory researcher must have three important characteristics: an ability to conceptualize data, an ability to tolerate some confusion, and an ability to tolerate confusion's attendant regression. These attributes are necessary because they enable the researcher to wait for the conceptual sense making to emerge from the data. This is just a fact.

Not everyone has these attributes, but some have them naturally. These latter researchers can do grounded theory almost automatically. Most often, they have self-selected grounded theory because its conceptualization and openness to relevance have grabbed them. They become formed in grounded theory methodology, and these are the researchers who will take it properly into the future.

Students who attempt grounded theory but cannot tolerate confusion and regression, and who need to continually feel in cognitive control, fall by the wayside. They get fed up. They might even decompensate if they do not give up. It is terrible to watch such a colleague break down while trying to do a grounded theory dissertation.

Those who can tolerate confusion and regression love the openness of grounded theory and the chance to really generate concepts that make sense of what is going on. They have come to grounded theory to escape the preconceived problems, concepts, and format methods of data collection and the processing of it. They wish to escape producing the irrelevance that is based on approved formed methods.

Being able to conceptualize is a must so long as it can be linked to the data and is not pure one incident impressionism. It must be linked with the tedium of constant comparisons. So, conceptualizing is just a start that can fail if it is not submitted to the rigor of grounded theory's constant comparisons. I have met students who do not have an ability to relate conceptualization to data, even on the impression level. They are not in the future of grounded theory, nor is the researcher who cannot conceptualize and who is slated to just story-talk or incident trip, never realizing the interchangeability of indicators but continuing to

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collect the same idea over and over with different data. Redundant data collection soon becomes a source of phasing them out of a grounded theory thesis. Thus, there is a constant weeding out of those who do not succeed in doing grounded theory from those who do. The people who do succeed in doing grounded theory probably cannot do much else because their natural inclinations lead them to become formed by grounded theory's rigorous methodology. In the bargain, they spread its use. Those who can only incidentally trip and work at the impression level barely spread grounded theory, even though they may profess by jargonizing that they are spreading it. It is merely a legitimating rubric in their case.

### **Spread of Grounded Theory**

There are several reasons for the spread of grounded theory. First, the disciplines that use and support grounded theory deal with important, highly relevant dependent variables, for which grounded theory gives answers to their variation. These variables are involved in pain, cure, social-psychological fates, profit, management problems, learning, and so forth.

Second, the spread of grounded theory is following on the tail of globalization. Globalization is occurring by communication, spread of business and manufacture, and travel. The core variable in this process is that people, including researchers, are constantly running into the multitude of ways in which diversity affects the worlds of business, health, and education as globalization continues.

The formulated evidentiary methods work far better in more homogeneous environments of culture and structure. Preconceptions fit and hold better. In culturally diverse environments, these methods do not work as well because preconception can lead the researcher far astray from realities that are not in his or her cultural view. These differences cannot be imagined or conjectured. They must be discovered to be relevant, work, and fit.

What is more obvious and visible in the globalization of economies is that cultural and sub-cultural differences abound everywhere. What is more apparent on macro levels now can be seen on micro-levels. Differentials abound, and preconceptions do not tap them because preconceptions are too normative.

Third, as a consequence of cultural diversity, more and more

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researchers and users of the more evidentiary, preconceived formulated research have become disaffected with their data collection, their findings, what they should find, and whatever hypotheses should be tested. Smoldering disaffection has grown as findings are seen to be beside the point, irrelevant, moot, and unworkable. And Ph.D. dissertations are going under because of this irrelevance and the lack of cogent explanations of important dependent variables. This is very serious on the human level, where identities and careers are in precarious involvement.

So, along comes grounded theory years after its inception, saying, let us find out directly what is going on and how we can account for it. Let us see what the main concern of the participants in substantive areas is and how they resolve it. Let us generate the concepts for the theory. Then, research will help in the area under view.

This promise of grounded theory, which has been fulfilled many times, is highly motivating and a sure thing for doing dissertations. People are latching onto it and feeling confident about producing something; they are feeling creative, original, and meaningfully relevant. Particularly in the world of business and health, people are very disaffected with preconceived evidentiary proof research because it is not producing findings that make business or health problems any better. These dependent variables, which are profit and cure related, are very important. Answers that work are wanted. Grounded theory tells us what is going on, tells us how to account for the participants' main concerns, and reveals access variables that allow for incremental change. Grounded theory is what is, not what should, could, or ought to be.

The conceptual grab of grounded theory is a very important factor in its growing popularity. It frees the researcher to be his or her own theorist, and it is empowering. Once the researcher has a grounded theory for what is going on in a substantive area, no one can tell him or her much different; new data just get compared into the theory, and the researcher's concepts have grab for others. People start to see the concepts everywhere (e.g., default remodeling, commodifying self, super normalizing, "elsewhereism," credentializing, cultivating, risky rapport, creative undermining). As a result, the researcher's empowerment as a theorist continues.

These concepts are not offensive to the people in the area.

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They help the participants to see that apparent disparate facts have an underlying uniformity. It is offensive to tell them in a descriptive way what they already know anyway, with no conceptual handles. “We spend all this money on research for you to tell us what we know goes on anyway” is the usual complaint. But giving them a way in which to conceptualize the pattern underlying dispersed facts gives them the power to control it better.

A friend of mine who did a study of corporate mergers discovered default remodeling. Everywhere he goes and mentions it, executives will say, “God, that is what is going on.” In their heads, these executives see examples of this concept. They are empowered.

The spread of grounded theory is also linked to perceptual empowerment. By this, I mean that the comparative process constantly raises the conceptual level of the study, which gives the researcher a continually transcending perspective, a constantly larger and less bounded picture. A good substantive theory has formal implications. The credentializing of nurses easily leads to the credentializing of all areas of work to ensure “expert” quality and to control abuses. Becoming a nurse, then becoming a health professional, then becoming a professional expert on whatever the subject, and finally becoming an expert is seen as the socialization process of social experts, whatever the subject.

Routinely grounded substantive theory is a third perceptual-level theory. Data go to concepts, and concepts get transcended to a core variable, which is the main underlying pattern. Formal theory is on the fourth level, but the theory can be boundless as the research keeps comparing and trying to figure out what is going on and what the latent patterns are. Now, probably most important for the spread of grounded theory and why we had to wait so long is, as I indicated earlier, that there are fields—particularly business, health, and education—that require research on high-impact dependent variables that help them to understand and handle problems by ‘imbuement’.

They are tired of ideology about how to make profit, relieve pain, and educate. What works is needed. Grounded theory does this. Many grounded theory studies now are altering the preconceived processes in fields of practice. For example, imposing treatment paradigms on patients that do not fit their



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lifestyles and thereby get ignored is changing to designing treatment regimes that fit their lifestyles, so there is hope for compliance. This is but one brief example of the many preconceptions that are being altered by grounded theory.

I am called by M.A. and Ph.D. candidates from all over the world to discuss using grounded theory in their theses. Their reasons are the grab, openness, freedom, and conceptualization provided by the method. But most of all, they wish to get at what is relevant and works. They want to make meaningful and lasting contributions.

Grounded theory, with its conceptual freedom from time, place, and received concepts, gives them this chance. It is a sure thing for success because what is going on always is there, and preconceptions are not. They realize that it is only through discovery that they can find out what is going on. They could not have dreamed it or deduced it from preconceived ideas and are turned off by the blind alleys of reformulated ideas in evidentiary, preconceived research and pre-study literature reviews. Researchers who are new to the scene are looking for a method that yields research that fits, works, is relevant, and is readily modifiable.

That a resulting GT is modifiable is crucial for two reasons. First, in many preconceiving, verificational methods, it is the data that are poor, not the theory. Second, grounded theory shows that all data, no matter what their quality, can constantly modify the theory through comparisons. This modifying of theory is crucial because it constantly keeps up with what is going on as changes occur and it increases its formal abstraction. It constantly corrects for poor data (e.g., response sets of interviewers), and it brings the theory into closer grounding.

I can give two succinct grounded theories of cultural diversity problems. Cultural diversity can ruin the production of a factory when the foremen are Japanese and the workers are English, or it can affect the client relationships and profit of a consulting firm that has one third local nationals and two thirds foreign nationals. The cultural conflicts could not have been anticipated beforehand because they were so subtle.

The survival of a small business is another example. Studies abound in this area, but only the grounded theory studies have shown how various forms of family slavery, black market, cash

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economy outside the tax system, imposing client relations, moment capture ability and closed networks really help the small business survive. Also, the growth of virtual organizations, while looking large, turns to small business contractors. So, some small business is on the rise under this umbrella.

High-impact dependent variables that are linked to research that yields good interpretations and theoretical accountings are highly motivating to researchers. By contrast, I used to see many researchers trying to study what was not there but what was preconceived to be there. This condition led to discouragement, reduced energy for the research, disaffection with research and resulted in the loss of potentially good researchers.

### **Poor Grounded Theory**

In the future of grounded theory, there frequently will be poor grounded theory research, but it must be seen as developmental. It takes time to fully learn how to do grounded theory. The realization process takes more than a year and often a few research studies.

Poor grounded theory is fine when it portends the future. People use a bit here and a bit there, and learning grows. There is a lot of competitive incident tripping, there is a lot of impressioning out, and there is a lot of logical conjecture as people take off on very rich theory bits. Grounded theory produces its own conjectures. It is okay when the future is the continuing skill development in doing grounded theory.

Minus mentorees, of whom there are many throughout the world, are particularly subject to this delayed action development. My admonition is to solve the skill problem discovered on one study during the next study. As the critical mass of grounded theorists grows, they will help each other in skill development through joining networks based on telecommunications and the internet, especially when personal contact and seminars are not possible. The future is developmental in skill, which is snowballing in researchers.

### **Qualitative Grounded Theory**

Let me be clear. Grounded theory is a general method. It can be used on any data or combination of data. It was developed

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partially by me with quantitative data.<sup>2</sup> It is expensive and somewhat hard to obtain quantitative data, especially in comparison to qualitative data. Qualitative data are inexpensive to collect, very rich in meaning and observation, and very rewarding to collect and analyze. So, by default to ease, costs and growing use by many, grounded theory is being linked to qualitative data and is seen as a qualitative method, using symbolic interaction. Qualitative grounded theory accounts for the global spread of its use.

I can only caution the reader not to confuse this empirical spread with the fact that it is a general method. It is a kind of takeover that makes routine qualitative research sound good by positive stigma and jargonizing. Only highly trained grounded theory researchers can see the difference and the confusion. Much of it revolves around the notion of emergence versus forcing and the failure to use all the grounded theory methodological steps. For instance, any kind of data can be constantly compared but that does not ensure a grounded theory. However, it is prudent for researchers to go with qualitative grounded theory when that is where the resources are to do it and when that is where researchers can reap career and personal rewards.

### **Social Fiction**

So much of the action in the world is run by socially structured fictions. Many people have large stakes in maintaining these fictions and have the power to maintain them. Grounded theorists often find out what is really going on and discover that the “powers that be” are running on fictions.

In the future, grounded theory will uncover more and more of these fictions, which will not always be welcomed by the participants. To prevent these people from stopping the spread of grounded theory, it is important for the researcher not to myth-break, whistle-blow, structure-bust, finger-point, bubble-burst, and so forth. Grounded theorists never should be seen as crusaders, subversives, or underminers. If they are, then they will be averted or crushed. Grounded theorists should engage in incremental changes slowly, if at all. In fact, before even trying incremental change, the grounded theorist should analyze the functional requirement of maintaining the social fiction. Learning the categories involved will help to make the incremental change

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<sup>2</sup> I have recently published a book on doing quantitative GT (Glaser, 2008).

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go smoothly. Furthermore, the functional requirement of the fiction might be more important to both the researcher and the participants than is the change.

### Theory Bits

Much of grounded theory's future is in the use of theory bits from grounded theories; bits of theory from a substantive theory that a person will use briefly in a sentence or so, whether as a colleague, teacher, consultant, or student. It is too cumbersome to tell the whole theory, especially when a bit works. Talking about a core category has the necessary irresistible grab on others. But the bit can be any concept or hypothesis from the theory (e.g., he is "supernormalizing," "cultivating" is the way to go, divorce lacks "ritual loss ceremonies"). It is easy to respond to these bits with meaning. Many colleagues will use theory bits when applying grounded theory instead of doing the tedium of emergent fit. In conversations with colleagues or friends, as well as in lectures or seminars about grounded theory, theory bits will be used almost unconsciously.

Theory bits come from two sources. First, they come from generating one concept in a study and conjecturing without generating the rest of the theory. With the juicy concept, the conjecture sounds grounded, but it is not; it is only experiential. Second, theory bits come from a generated substantive theory. A theory bit emerges in normal talk when it is impossible to relate the whole theory. So, a bit with grab is related to the listener. The listener can then be referred to an article or a report that describes the whole theory.

As grounded theory goes into the future and accumulates more and more information, theory bits of both types will be heard. Theory bits are impossible to stop because of their instant grab. The person talking can show his or her skill and power instantly.

Grounded theory is rich in imageric concepts that are easy to apply "on the fly." These are applied intuitively, with no data, with a feeling of "knowing" as a quick analysis of a substantive incident or area. They ring true with great credibility. They empower conceptually and perceptually. They feel theoretically complete ("Yes, that accounts for it"). They are exciting handles of explanation. They can run way ahead of the structural constraints of research. They are simple one- or two-variable

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applications, as opposed to being multivariate and complex. Theory bits can become stereotypical and routine as they get into the local culture. They are quick and easy. They invade social and professional conversations as colleagues use them to sound knowledgeable. Competitive parlance stimulates them. They are relatively safe, non-stakeful utterances. The danger, of course, is that they might be just plain wrong or irrelevant unless based in a grounded theory. Hopefully, they get corrected as more data come out. The grounded theorist should try to fit, correct, and modify them even as they pass his or her lips.

Unfortunately, theory bits have the ability to stun further analysis because they can sound so correct. Theory bits stun cognitive thought. They can seduce and denude one of motivation to go further in an analysis. Multivariate thinking stops in favor of a juicy single variable, a quick and sensible explanation. Also, they can jinx or label a person or situation badly enough to bring on negative consequences. People force them on us as routine explanations, to be unquestioned by further thought, much less further research.

Theory bits allow us to escape the particularistic, experiential explanation of an incident in favor of sounding as if one is applying sound, fundamental general knowledge. At least grounded theory bits are grounded, not biased, prejudiced, or conjectural. Multivariate thinking can continue these bits to fuller explanations. This is the great benefit of trusting a theory that fits, works, and is relevant as it is continually modified.

As grounded theory spreads, its future will, in part, be in spawning bits (concepts or hypotheses) that, in juicy richness, can be applied to situations or incidents to explain and make sense of them. But a responsible grounded theorist always should finish his or her bit with a statement to the effect that “Of course, these situations are very complex or multivariate, and without more data, I cannot tell what is really going on.”

### **Structural Location of Training**

The future structures of training and doing grounded theory are sporadic. It is not yet a widely taught methodology in spite of the qualitative research takeover. Although there are many schools with teachers who train people at some level in grounded theory, usually mixed with other methodologies, it is not yet possible to just go anywhere and expect to obtain training in

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grounded theory. There is not yet a critical mass of grounded theorists in any school or department. A student searching for grounded theory training must pick known specific teachers of grounded theory and go to the teacher's school.

Given the increased numbers of those who wish to do grounded theory, this apprenticing is not yet easy to obtain. There are many minus mentorees who learn grounded theory from my books and do it as best they can with little or no support. Often, the only formal training they can obtain is in my seminars. As they meet each other and then engage in telecommuting and internet communicating, they become a mutual source of support and can exchange ideas with each other. Soon, grounded theory associations might emerge.

We have started a grounded theory institute and a journal for grounded theory articles. This is abetted by the internet and will empower those learning grounded theory through minus mentoring by connecting them to the growing global network of grounded theory researchers.

Because grounded theory is still an 'adopt-and-adapt' method, it will continue to be routinely offered as an option, to some degree, within departments that support other methodologies to a greater extent. Where no teachers of grounded theory exist, the minus mentorees must find each other through the telephone, via the internet, and at seminars. Then, they must maintain long-distance contact when returning home.

### **Justifying Grounded Theory**

The future will bring less need to legitimize grounded theory; hence, there will be less need to justify using it. Now, many researchers have to explain it and argue for its use. Its future portends that grounded theory will be as accepted as are other methods (e.g., surveys) and will require little or no explanation to justify its use in a research project. With its use, grounded theory will empower the Ph.D. candidate with a degree, a subsequent career, and the acclaim of an original creative theory.

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## Is That a Real Theory or Did You Just Make It Up? Teaching Classic Grounded Theory

*Odis E. Simmons, Ph.D.*

### Abstract

The title of this paper was derived from an incident I observed some years ago while accompanying a highly talented musician-songwriter friend to a performance. During a break, an audience member approached him to compliment the last song he had performed. He had written both the music and the lyrics to the song, one of many he had written. The audience member queried, “Is that a real song, or did you just make it up?” A touch amused, and not knowing whether he should be flattered or insulted, he politely replied, “It is a real song and I made it up.”

This episode puts in mind a similar attitude in the social sciences that Glaser and Strauss (1967) noted, in which a small number of ‘theoretical capitalists’ originate what are considered to be “real” theories and others are relegated to the role of “proletariat” testers. The means by which these theorists derived their theories remained largely mysterious. Unleashing proletariat testers was one of the chief rationales behind Glaser and Strauss’ development of grounded theory. It brought a democratic option into the social sciences that enabled anyone who learned the methodology to generate theory. The democratic ethos of the methodology may also have inadvertently unleashed an abundance of aspiring remodelers of the methodology, who unfortunately have eroded its primary purpose—to generate theories that are fully grounded in data rather than speculation or ideology.

### Introduction

Since Glaser and Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, the methodology they originally conceived<sup>1</sup> has been subjected to numerous forms of methodological torturing. It has been misrepresented,

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<sup>1</sup> Constant comparative analysis, the seminal component of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) later dubbed grounded theory, was devised and published several years earlier by Glaser in the sociology journal, *Social Problems* (Glaser, 1965). This article was reprinted as Chapter 5 in Glaser and Strauss (1967).



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misconstrued, distorted, and “remodeled” (Glaser, 2003) into varieties of “constructivist grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2000, 2006) and/or standard qualitative data analysis (Glaser, 2002, 2003, 2004) which has been “jargonized” (Glaser, 2009) with grounded theory terminology. Grounded theory, or at least what many secondary authors attempt to pass as grounded theory, has been “slurred” (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Raffanti, 2006), “eroded” (Stern, 1994; Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005), “reconstructed” (Haig, 1995), “broadened” (Kools, McCarthy, Durham, & Robrecht, 1996), “diffused, diluted or distilled” (May, 1996), and “evolved” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006) to the point that much of what is called grounded theory has become a bit alien to classic grounded theorists who still honor its primary purpose, intent, and origins. Through all of these methodological machinations its original purpose has seemingly been forgotten. Before his passing, even Strauss (1987) and his co-author Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Corbin 1998) diverged from the original articulation of the methodology that he and Glaser laid out in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967).<sup>2</sup>

Although Glaser has continued to write books about grounded theory as he and Strauss originally conceived it<sup>3</sup> (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005a, 2006, 2008, 2009) the runaway perverting of the methodology continues largely unabated.<sup>4</sup> In my view, the primary reason for this is that the bulk of those who consider themselves to be grounded theorists gained their understanding of grounded theory through what Stern (1994) termed “minus mentoring” and I termed “bootstrapping” (Simmons, 1995).

Although the number of researchers doing what has come to be called grounded theory has increased exponentially since 1995, the situation regarding systematic training in grounded theory has changed little. However, for the last decade or so Glaser has

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<sup>2</sup> For example, nothing resembling “axial coding” existed in the original conception of grounded theory.

<sup>3</sup> In Glaser’s account of the early history of grounded theory (1998, p. 22) he reported, “I wrote 90% of the book [*Discovery*] while he [Strauss] was in Europe and gave it to him as a surprise present when he returned.” This may account for why Glaser has remained resolutely consistent with the original methodology.

<sup>4</sup> Despite this, Glaser in his usual transcending manner is optimistic that many researcher/analysts who do this will get beyond jargonizing and begin doing classic grounded theory, as it was originally intended.

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been teaching the nuances of grounded theory in periodic two day 'troubleshooting' seminars in multiple locations within the U.S. and internationally. Additionally, several Grounded Theory Institute Fellows and scattered others teach individual courses in classic grounded theory and supervise or serve on doctoral committees of students doing grounded theory studies.

As Glaser reminds participants in his seminars, "grounded theory is an experiential method." One implication of this is that to learn grounded theory well in all of its nuances, it is important to learn by doing. The jargon can be learned through reading but can only be deeply understood through the process of doing. Another implication is that grounded theory is skill based. When teaching grounded theory, you are teaching a set of high level skills. This cannot be done well with a singular approach. In addition to teacher, you also must serve the roles of coach, cheerleader, and occasionally even therapist.

Yet another implication is that it is best taught by people who have themselves done it. Teaching grounded theory at a deep level from scratch is a demanding undertaking that requires a deep understanding of the method in all of its nuances. It is unlikely that those who have not actually done grounded theory will be able to take students to a place they have never themselves been, although some try.

I have taught GT with individuals (one at a time), in full-sized classes, and in small groups.<sup>5</sup> In my experience, teaching it in small groups is preferable to teaching it in full-sized classes or individually. I learned early on that when teaching it in full-sized classes it is best to break the students into smaller working groups; learning occurs more efficiently, more quickly, and more deeply in working groups. For the teacher it is less time consuming and labor intensive because it alleviates the need for constantly repeating the same lessons; in working groups, learners support and learn from each other.

### **The Learning Process<sup>6</sup>**

In my experience, there are two general considerations

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<sup>5</sup> I have been teaching classic grounded theory for almost four decades, most recently (since 1998) in the Grounded Theory/Grounded Action program in the School of Educational Leadership and Change (ELC) at Fielding Graduate University.

<sup>6</sup> In the interest of straightforward clarity and sufficient detail, I have chosen to take a descriptive "how to do it" rather than a conceptual approach in this article.

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that you need to factor into your teaching approach. The first is that teaching grounded theory is an incremental, recursive process. The second is that at times you must attend to emotions such as fear and motivation as well as pedagogical concerns. For some learners, learning grounded theory can be a daunting process.

Learners gain the multiplicity of skills related to doing grounded theory incrementally. The learning of each skill is generally contingent upon the learning of prerequisite skills. It is important to devise a process and curriculum that accommodates this natural sequence. Where to begin and how fast to move are of course related to the starting point and natural pacing of the learner(s). Most of the graduate level learners I have taught over the years have been working professionals with little to no knowledge and sometimes even awareness of the existence of grounded theory, let alone the difference between classic and remodeled/constructivist forms of grounded theory. Although a few had considerable research knowledge and experience, most had moderate and sometimes even no research knowledge or experience. So, by necessity I have usually found it necessary to teach the method from scratch. Of course, if your learners are farther along in their experience and understanding, you can jump into the process at the appropriate point.

### **Preliminaries**

For many newcomers, learning grounded theory can be a daunting, intimidating adventure. They are being asked to think in ways that up to this point in their academic and professional careers is inside out and upside down from the ways in which they have been trained and are accustomed to thinking. And, they are being asked to do something that most of them never imagined themselves being able to do—develop an epistemologically sound theory of their own. Even in the academic professions, this is a rare skill. Before beginning the learning process it is important to take care of certain preliminaries. To help relax and prepare them for the learning process it is beneficial for learners to know from the outset what in general to expect of the teacher and process as well as what the process will expect and require of them.

### Cultivating skill-traits<sup>7</sup>

As one preliminary, I inform learners that to be successful grounded theorists it is important that they cultivate several general skill-traits. One important skill-trait set is the ability to be patient and deal with and even relish ambiguity and “not knowing.” I convey to them that a grounded theory study requires the researcher/analyst to minimize preconceptions, remain “honest to the data,” and let concepts and theory emerge from the data. I advise them of this to encourage them to be cognizant of and begin cultivating these traits and reflect on the types of preconceptions in both their professional and personal domains that they might even innocently let slip into the process.

Preconceptions that have their origins in the professional domain are such things as pre-selecting the type and range of data to fit an existing theory or pre-established hypothesis, notions about what is or isn't acceptable as data, assuming that particular questions, categories, concepts, ideas, hypotheses, or theories are relevant to or can explain a subject matter before data is collected or analyzed. These types of preconceptions are often very strong because of the social support they receive in their respective professions, often reinforced by professional training.

Preconceptions from the personal domain are those in which a researcher has a personal investment in a particular outcome or finding. These originate in personal experience and favored ideologies (religious, political, cultural). I emphasize that everything in a grounded theory study must be derived from data, not imported into the theory from these outside sources. I provide examples of the types of preconceptions and encourage a group discussion of the issue.

Some learners have difficulty with my asking them to suspend preconceptions. I recall one learner expressing strong indignation that I was asking her to “throw out everything I've learned in twenty years as an educator!!” I calmed her in my characteristic way by reminding her that I wasn't asking her to throw it out, I was merely asking her to suspend it and that if it had veracity she wouldn't need to force it because she would

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<sup>7</sup> I combine these two words because the phenomena to which I am referring are not fixed psychological traits. Although they are commonly seen as personality traits, they can be enhanced, cultivated, and learned.

discover it anyway—so what’s the risk?

Learners who are ideologically driven usually also have difficulty suspending preconceptions that are related to their preferred ideology. They tend to have difficulty differentiating and separating their view of “what-is” from their beliefs about “what-ought-to-be.” This may stem from the fact that with many, particularly political, ideologies the boundary is fuzzy. I remind such learners that I’m not asking them to abandon their beliefs only to bring them in at the appropriate time. I tell them, “You’ll never achieve your what-ought-to-be if you don’t start with a clear, accurate understanding of what really is. I add, “What’s the risk in being sure that what is really is?” I also tell them that they can bring in their what-ought-to-be at the appropriate time, after they have developed a solid, explanatory grounded theory. But, in the mean time it is important to remain open to what is really going on. This usually satisfies all but the most ideologically driven learners who tend to be firmly convinced that their epistemologically untested ideological views “are” reality. However, even the thinking of intransigent learners is usually transformed when they discover their first grounded concept, particularly if it is at odds with their preconceived ideological view. I recall one student expressing a common sentiment when he said, “I fought hard because I didn’t want to go there, but I finally went where the data led me.”

### **Dealing with fear**

Many learners begin wrapped in a cloud of fear—fear that they aren’t up to the task of being able to learn and do what at first glance appears to be such a complicated, sophisticated method, fear that their “inadequacies” may be displayed to other group members, fear that they aren’t smart enough, fear that they will say and do things that others may see as foolish, fear that they won’t be able to maintain the pace of other group members, and the standard fear about grades. These fears may follow some learners all the way through the process. Although rare in my experience, fear may occasionally compel learners to abandon their efforts to learn grounded theory. I have worked with very, very few learners who were simply unable to grasp and make use of the method or work through their fears.

Unless skillfully addressed, fear can slow down and even undermine the learning process. So, it is important to deal with it up front and whenever it seems to be getting in the way of

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individual or group progress. The subtlest and most general way of curtailing fear is to set up an atmosphere of enthusiasm and confidence about the academic, personal, and professional payoffs of learning grounded theory. It helps if you example enthusiasm and confidence yourself.

During the initial session, I address common fears that have the potential to impede the learning process. Being a standard fear in academic settings, I address assessment and grading at the outset. Most learners are accustomed to having their work reviewed and judged for grading purposes. I let them know that we are using an entirely different model. I emphasize to group members that the assignments are meant “only to let us know where you are at so we can move you up to the next step.” I reassure them that we are not interested in judging them personally or judging their work for grading purposes; their final and only grade will be based upon their commitment to the process as indicated by their faithful, consistent presence at group sessions, their progress, completing assignments on time, supporting their group colleagues and helping them if asked, and doing the best work of which they are personally capable. This isn't to let them off the hook; it is to help them get rid of fears related to assessment and grading. Even if you are teaching learners in a non-grading context, the fear of judgment may still be present. Because it can be such a strong impediment to learning, it should be addressed.

A second fear that occurs early on comes when learners begin reading the first set of assigned books, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978), *Doing Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1998), and *The Grounded Theory Perspective* (Glaser, 2001), in that order. These readings make some students' heads spin. For them, the academic writing style, ideas and ways of thinking are so foreign to their experience that they sometimes begin to question that they will ever be able to understand, much less do, grounded theory. I reassure them that if they keep revisiting the readings, ask questions of their group colleagues and me, and trust the learning process, what they are reading will enter into their preconscious and eventually begin to jell and burst forth into their conscious understanding.

Later on, when they have a few skill development assignments under their belt, they begin to experience what they

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read in Glaser's books. This enables them to go back and forth between experience, reading, and reflection. Glaser's words come alive for them. This significantly deepens their understanding.

Fear also commonly arises when learners begin working on skill development assignments such as interviewing, coding, conceptualizing and memoing. When this occurs, as I am explaining each assignment I encourage them to "let fear go" and just do the assignment as best they can. I remind them that the purpose of the assignment is "only to let us know where you are at so we can move you up to the next step." Throughout the learning process, whenever I sense that any type of fear may be creating an impediment to learning I reiterate this encouragement. If an individual student continues to struggle with fear, I meet with them separately with the aim of understanding and alleviating their doubts and fears. This helps to keep fear from inhibiting or blocking their learning.

### **The value of asking questions**

Another preliminary matter I cover is the importance of asking questions. I inform learners that learning grounded theory is a cumulative process so if they don't understand one step they may have difficulty understanding subsequent steps. I emphasize that it is important that they not let something go by until they feel like they have a reasonable grasp on it. If a learner asks a question that is premature in the process (one that requires complicated understandings that they don't yet have), I ask them to hold onto it for awhile but not to forget it.

I add that "there is no such thing as a stupid question and there is no such thing as a smart question;<sup>8</sup> there are only questions." I assure them that any question they have someone else will have and they'll be pleased that someone asked it. I do this to hopefully head off any fears that learners may have about not wanting to appear to be uninformed, stupid, or foolish. I usually joke with them that, "I'm an expert at making a fool of myself and it has served me well." In general I find light, gentle humor to be a useful tool. It helps to put learners at ease, provides brief breaks, and makes the process more enjoyable. It is

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<sup>8</sup> Although I had always reminded learners that there is no such thing as a stupid question, I learned from Glaser at his Troubleshooting Seminars to also remind them that there is no such thing as a good question. This helps to head off attempts to "impress the teacher."

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important to follow through and treat all questions with respect. Credibility and trust are crucial to the learning process.

### **The importance of participation**

Another issue I emphasize is the importance of participation. Group members will be sharing all work they do as part of a single, group project. If an individual falls behind, submits assignments late, or misses group sessions, all group members will be affected. The smaller the group, the greater the impact will be. I ordinarily keep group size at four to eight participants. In my experience six is ideal. At six, if one or two group members lag or drop, there will still be enough shared work for the process to work. More than six can be a bit difficult because group sessions can become excessively long in order to provide sufficient feedback to all participants. If you begin a group with three or four, all it takes is one member to drop or lag behind to cause problems.

### **Theoretical sensitivity**

One last preliminary involves theoretical sensitivity. At the outset, theoretical sensitivity amongst the beginning grounded theory students I have taught varies from minimal to moderate, depending upon their academic and professional backgrounds. Because it was not part of their professional training, many learners with backgrounds in the practicing professions have little familiarity with what a real theory looks like, let alone a grounded theory. The professional literature often contains what are essentially op-ed pieces that are regarded as theories, what I refer to as “high-level opinionizing”. In these sorts of works, explanation and advocacy are often mixed together with little discernment between them. I point out to learners that grounded theories are about explanation, not advocacy, although a properly done explanatory grounded theory is quite suitable as a basis for advocacy or action by taking a next step and doing grounded action (Simmons & Gregory, 2003).

To help familiarize learners with what grounded theories look like, I assign them Glaser’s (1993) reader, *Examples of Grounded Theory*. They are also encouraged to read other examples of grounded theory<sup>9</sup> and theory in general, particularly

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<sup>9</sup> I particularly encourage them to read the many examples of grounded theory in Glaser (1994 & 1995) and Glaser & Holton (2007).



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sociological theory.

Once learners remember and have a general understanding of the jargon and process of grounded theory, they have a common language with which to communicate and move forward with their learning. At this point they are ready to begin actually doing grounded theory, in the form of exercises, each designed to teach a particular skill and/or stage of the grounded theory process.

### Learning by Doing

As I said at the outset, learning the nuances of grounded theory requires the experience of doing it. Many, if not most, people who conduct grounded theory research learn it largely on their own during the process of carrying out their first grounded theory study, usually their dissertation. They are usually supervised by people who may be well experienced at qualitative research, but who often have little to no operational experience with classic or any other form of grounded theory. Many have to fight committee members who, because of their lack of knowledge and experience of grounded theory insist they incorporate needless “immaculate description” (Glaser, 1978, p.3), irrelevant elements such as face sheet variables, and/or verification elements into their research. These factors can make doing one’s first grounded theory study a frustrating, even distressing experience. And, they often result in a not-so-grounded theory, despite the student’s efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Another important word of advice I have to offer is, rather than allowing students in a working-group to work on individual projects, it is more efficient and effective to have them all working on the same project. I learned many years ago when teaching mostly undergraduates in a classroom setting<sup>11</sup> that having learners working on individual projects entails several problems. This is particularly true when you are working with

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<sup>10</sup> It is this type of circumstance that the Fielding/ELC grounded theory program is designed to alleviate. In this program learners are provided with the opportunity to learn grounded theory in an efficient step-by-step process, *before* they begin their dissertation research. Of course, they learn more as they conduct their research, but the program gets them to the starting line with reasonable confidence, some experience under their belts, and a strong support network of faculty and student colleagues, which continues throughout their dissertation research.

<sup>11</sup> See Glaser (1998, pp. 228-230) for a brief description of my approach to this.

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doctoral students doing dissertation research. As they get farther and farther into their projects, they begin to focus more and more on completing their personal work and lose focus and incentive towards achieving deep, lasting learning of the method. They become task-oriented. Some become impatient and even begin skipping sessions when other learners' projects are being discussed because they incorrectly think that it won't help them progress with their own work. In short, they center on themselves.

It also complicates the group process because group members are working on different projects at different stages. They pace differently, some working more quickly than others. Groups often begin to fragment. For the teacher, all of this can become a logistical nightmare. And, of course, when they begin to struggle because they have derailed their own learning, they begin to demand more and more individual time. In general, it undermines the strengths inherent in working in groups, for both learners and teachers.

As I suggested above, to prevent these difficulties and to ensure deep, lasting learning, for years I have elected to have all participants working on the same thing at the same time. I highly recommend this approach, when possible. When I have taught in classroom situations I have divided the class into groups of four to six members, with everyone working on the same general topic area and discovered core variable. During class sessions, I floated from group to group, trying to balance my time so that each group received generally equal amounts of attention.

Even more importantly, having all group or class members working on the same project has decided advantages. It allows for efficiency, speed, and shared learning. It also enables the teacher to manage the process much more easily. It is also time and labor efficient, considering the number of learners you can work with simultaneously.

### **Data collection**

Because the vast majority of grounded theory students I have taught over the years have used open-ended interviews as the primary data source for their dissertation or other grounded theory study, I focus primarily on interviewing skills. Furthermore, well done open-ended interviews are indicator rich, probably more so than any other type of data. This makes them

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particularly suitable for grounded theory.

At the initial session, before I begin the first exercise I briefly discuss the notion of “all is data” and refer learners to Glaser’s discussion of this in *The Grounded Theory Perspective* (pp.145-164). I also include brief discussions about taking field notes and conducting unstructured observations. But, for time efficiency I don’t give exercises related to these skills. However, I have at times offered face-to-face workshops in which I have participants conduct brief observations and write them up in field notes after which I discuss them and offer suggestions for improving these skills.

To expedite the learning process, in advance of the first session I provide (by e-mail attachment) an initial transcribed interview. I provide the interview in a format which allows for coding directly into a word processor so that it can be simultaneously worked and easily shared during group sessions.<sup>12</sup> I select a good but imperfect interview that has high potential conceptual yield and a fairly easy to discover core variable. I use this interview as a springboard for discussion and practice. Using the interview, I work simultaneously on interviewing, coding, and conceptualizing skills. I go back and forth from one to the other, as teaching and learning opportunities emerge, with more weight being given to coding and conceptualizing.

When working on interviewing skills, I relate to learners the importance of keeping preconceptions out of the interviews right from the beginning so that they can discover what is relevant to the respondents. I emphasize that grounded theory is about what is relevant to the people being studied, not what is relevant to the researcher. I tell them, “It is not your interview; it is the respondent’s interview.” I introduce them to the idea of opening interviews with a general, non-leading “grand tour” question to begin to get at what is relevant to the respondent. I also let them know that it isn’t necessary or desirable to reuse the same grand tour question more than once or twice. I point out that as a theory

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<sup>12</sup> I format it by creating a two column table into a Word document, then adjusting the width of the columns so that the left column is about 30% or so of the table width. This column can be used independently of the other, for coding. Data can be typed or cut and pasted into the right column and codes can be entered into the right column in relevant locations. Using table columns enables you to work either column without affecting the other.

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begins to emerge theoretical sampling engenders more and more selectivity in data collection, so grand tour questions become “less and less grand.”

### **Coding, conceptualizing, and core variables**

Prior to our first coding session, I instruct learners to make an attempt on their own at coding the interview I have provided, using what they learned from reading the substantive coding material in Glaser’s *Theoretical Sensitivity* and *Doing Grounded Theory*. I instruct them to “code fearlessly,” to “just do it the best you can, and don’t worry about it,” reminding them once again that it is not about judging them, it is “only to let us know where you are at so we can move you up to the next step.” I also instruct them to share their coded interviews with each other by e-mail attachment and to look them over before the upcoming session.

At the session we recode the interview, together. As a learning tool, I have them read the interview line by line and, using color highlighting to identify words, phrases, and patterns in the data that they think appear to be of potential theoretical relevance. Not only does this help them learn how to identify and relate indicators to codes and concepts, in the process, they gain theoretical sensitivity. In addition to line by line coding, I also emphasize coding for patterns that appear across the data, and particularly for potential core variables.

As we begin to code the interview, I refer them back to what they read in Glaser’s discussions of substantive coding and remind them that the purpose of coding is to elevate data to an abstract level, while remaining grounded in the data. I do this because their initial codes tend to be mere summaries of data. Conceptual coding being new to them, they tend to remain on a descriptive level. I point this out and remind them that codes are abstractions of the data, particularly patterns in the data, not mere summaries. I encourage them to fearlessly keep at it and assure them that they will eventually get it. For some it comes easily, for others not so easy. We stay at it until everyone has a basic grasp of conceptual coding. At times this requires an individual session or two with learners who haven’t yet made the cognitive breakthrough. As we code, as soon as someone offers a genuine abstract code, I identify it and discuss how it is different from a mere summary of data and therefore useful for building theory. Learning to conceptualize is usually the first big hurdle to overcome, for most learners.

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Much to the consternation of some learners, I don't provide illustrations or examples in advance of their attempts to code and conceptualize. My experience shows that it is best to allow them to struggle with it a bit so that they have the opportunity to discover the best fit between their unique mind and the task, as well as to experience the satisfaction of their own personal "aha" moments of understanding. As we code together, I select useful examples and continue to demonstrate the differences between mere summaries of data and abstract codes and concepts and show how codes and concepts enable you to transcend description and build theory. This approach engenders experiential learning, which is usually deeper learning. Also, "aha" moments of this sort generate excitement and a feeling of satisfaction that provides motivation and propels learners to keep moving forward in the learning process, particularly when a core variable is discovered and named. Over time, it also helps to build confidence and patience with ambiguity and "not knowing," which as I said earlier are important skill-traits for grounded theorists.

Once they get their feet wet with some coding and conceptualizing, I refer them back to what they have read about core variables (categories) in Glaser's books. I remind them that a core variable is the variable that accounts for the most variation in the data, the thing to which most everything in the data relates, the issue or problem that research subjects are processing, or in more vernacular terms, "what people are working on." I then discuss a few brief examples, usually from *Examples of Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1993), which by then they should have read. I also remind them that a grounded theory is a theory that explains a discovered core variable and that you don't know what your research is specifically about, beyond your general topic area, until you discover and settle on a core variable.

As we continue coding the interview, the questions, "Can there be more than one core variable?" and if so "How do you choose between them?" virtually always come up. My response is that of course more than one potential core variable may be represented in a given set of data, but usually one will stand out more than others because it accounts for the most variation in that particular data. However, if the data suggests other core variables that for whatever reason you find more appealing, you can begin to collect data more selectively around that core variable. But, you should pursue only one as a core now and, if

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they are related, downgrade the others to properties (or whatever) of your currently chosen core. They can always be studied and worked up as core variables later. So, if more than one core variable is indicated in a set of data how does one choose? There is no set formula for choosing. You choose the one that is the most interesting to you, the one that has the most potential professional payoff, the one that you think may have the most grab to others, or whatever.

Once all learners confirm that they grasp what a core variable is and the role it plays in grounded theory, I encourage them to look for potential core variables in the interview we are analyzing. I point out that sometimes you “sense” the core variable before you can articulate it because as you read and code the data it is forming in your preconscious. I advise them to keep looking for and pondering indicators in the data that point to “what people are working on.” This phrase serves as a nice, easy reminder for them to stay tuned into discovering potential core variables.

At first, it is common for learners to “see” concepts they have read in the literature related to their particular professional practice or ubiquitous popular psychology concepts such as “self-esteem,” “separation anxiety,” and such.<sup>13</sup> To this I usually have two responses. The first is I ask them to identify the major indicators they see in the data for the concept. The indicators they identify are usually vaguely connected or require large inferential leaps. This enables me to introduce the idea that in grounded theory, you want to minimize inferential leaps because a concept is simply a “name” for a pattern indicated in the data. I caution them that they should also avoid already established terms/concepts because they will burden their theory with extant conceptual baggage because readers will import their understandings of these concepts into the theory. This may prompt readers to view the work in a verification rather than discovery frame, seeing it as being grounded more in existing literature than having been systematically derived from data. This will diminish its unique value and contribution to the literature.

At this point, I add that good grounded theory concepts

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<sup>13</sup> This may be an indicator of the extent to which psychology concepts have worked their way into common language.

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should have imagery, grab, and fit. With a few examples, learners tend easily to understand imagery and grab. Fit doesn't appear to be as easy for them to grasp. To help them understand the meaning of fit, I begin by telling them that the closest to it in conventional research is the concept of "validity," with which they are usually familiar. I emphasize that in grounded theory a concept serves only as a name for a pattern or phenomenon indicated in the data and, similar to validity, it must fit the pattern as closely as possible. I remind them that their readers will not have access to their data, so the word that has been selected to represent a pattern in the data effectively is the data. Poor fit between the pattern and the concept will at least partially un-ground the theory. This is why it is important to avoid inferential leaps that introduce extraneous meanings between indicators and concepts. The data should be allowed to speak for itself. I also point out that the fundamental purposes of elevating data to a conceptual level is that it prevents you from having to continually describe and re-describe patterns in the data and it allows you to transcend description and move to the theoretical level by enabling you to discover and articulate relationships in the data.

I often see first draft theories in which word choice is a problem in several ways. The first is that the selected words conjure up a different imagery than what they purport to represent. The second is that they are awkward or clumsy, making the conceptualization seem affected. The most common version of this comes from over gerunding, particularly applying gerunds to properties, conditions, and such that aren't actions, i.e. portraying phenomena in verb form that should remain in noun form. When I see this, I remind the learner that only actions should be portrayed in gerund form and even then, not necessarily, because too many gerunds in a theory make it feel forced, unnatural, and "cute." So, only higher level action concepts should be portrayed in gerund form.

Because I see so many first draft theories in which word selection is problematic, I developed an assignment for use early in the learning process to address the problem. The assignment is designed to get learners to think more deeply about nuances of meaning in words that they might otherwise use interchangeably. It also serves as an exercise in comparative analysis. It has helped. The assignment consists of having learners do a comparison of similarities and differences between matched pairs

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of words that are generally synonymous, such as “purpose/function,” “strategy/technique,” “safety/security,” “justification/excuse,” and so forth. A few learners have initially objected to the assignment because, as one person put it, “It’s “kindergartenish.” However, after completing it, learners invariably comment on how “eye-opening” it is. Even the person who uttered the kindergartenish remark said afterward, “I never realized that I use the language so loosely.”

At this point, I also introduce learners to the value of in vivo concepts. I point out to them that people name and jargonize experiences and phenomena that are of importance to them in the contexts of their daily lives. This is particularly common in occupational contexts. These in vivo concepts are good clues as to what people are working on. If they aren’t actually the core variable, they will likely point to the core variable, so paying attention to them is worthwhile.

When I am satisfied that all group members have a basic grasp of the difference between description and abstraction, the rudiments of how to code, and the function of core variables in grounded theory, I give them their next assignment, which is to conduct, transcribe, and code an open-ended interview to further develop the core variable that emerged from the interview we have been coding. Although Glaser (1998) makes a case against recording interviews, for learning purposes, I find that it is beneficial to have learners record and transcribe their first several interviews. The interviews that result from this assignment serve as a basis for a discussion of interviewing techniques at the next group session. This enables me to take a close look at their interviewing techniques and skills and discuss ways in which they can be improved. They also provide comprehensive data in which every theoretically relevant indicator can be coded, for coding practice and to enhance theoretical sensitivity. I let learners know that “We are overdoing it, for learning purposes.”

Depending upon the size of the group, as we move through the sequence, I have them conduct and code two or three interviews related to the core variable discovered in the first (provided) interview. So, for example, if a group is comprised of six learners and they each conduct three interviews, we will have eighteen interviews as a data bank.



### Memoing and theoretical sampling

When learners conduct open coding of the first (provided) interview and discover the core variable, I have them re-code the interview and code selectively for things that they think might be related to the core variable. In the course of doing this, ideas for theoretical sampling begin to emerge. I seize this opportunity to discuss the purpose of theoretical sampling and give examples of how it promotes the discovery of new variables and concepts and therefore engenders the emergence of a deeper, richer theory.<sup>14</sup> As we code, I encourage learners to generate ideas for theoretical sampling around our discovered core variable and incorporate them into their interviewing assignments.

When learners begin to acquire a reasonable grasp of open and selective coding, conceptualizing, core variables, and theoretical sampling, I introduce the topic of memoing and give them their first memoing assignment. I emphasize that grounded theory memos are about concepts and the relationships between them, particularly their relationship to the core variable. They are not mere descriptive summaries of the data. I instruct them to write some memos about the concepts that we have generated from our coding exercises. I tell them to “just do it” and write fearlessly, using my usual mantra about moving them to the next level. Their first attempts at memoing tend to be more descriptive than conceptual/ideational. Often they are entirely descriptive. But, whichever, having something in writing allows me to example the difference between descriptive and conceptual/ideational memos by using excerpts with which I can transform a few descriptive memos into conceptual memos. Once they grasp this, I instruct them to go through their memos and sort out the descriptive memos from the conceptual memos and when possible transform them into conceptual memos. I instruct them to identify (interview, page, and line numbers, or some such thing) good examples in the data of each concept or concept-related idea, so that they can recover them for use in their final write-up. This also helps them keep their memos grounded in data. If they write a memo for which they don't have relevant examples this cues them that they may be logically elaborating. If

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<sup>14</sup> I have found that an excellent example for helping learners understand theoretical sampling is the way in which Glaser and Strauss, in their dying study (Glaser & Strauss, 1965 & 1968), discovered their “social loss” concept by observing different reactions in hospital staff in relation to different categories of patients.

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they think not, I suggest that they selectively code or theoretically sample around the idea. This also enhances their understanding of the difference between conceptual and descriptive memos so they become more skilled at writing purely conceptual memos. I review their results at the next session. Sometimes we need to do another round or two of this before everyone gains a reasonable grasp of how to think and write conceptually and theoretically. This is usually the second big hurdle for them to overcome.

We continue interviewing, coding, theoretical sampling, and memoing until we have sufficient data and memo banks to move on. By then learners understand and have achieved at least base line proficiency with these skills. At this point, we are ready to move on.

### **Theoretical codes, sorting, and theoretical outline**

When I give learners this assignment, I reiterate that the purpose of theoretical codes is to relate substantive codes together in a way that explains the main concern of the research subjects. I also remind them that the purpose of a theory is to explain something, not just describe it. I instruct them to pay particular attention to potential hypothetical probability statements that capture and explain variations around the core variable because they transform a write-up from a conceptual description into an explanatory theory.

To initiate the assignment, I instruct learners to read carefully through the memo bank that we have compiled and attempt to sort it into categories, paying special attention to Glaser's theoretical coding families. I emphasize that, in grounded theory, sorting involves conceptual/idea sorting, not descriptive (data) sorting. I point out that if their memos are truly ideas about concepts and their relationships and they sort openly and patiently, their memos will naturally sort into a grounded theory. If they have difficulty with the sort because the memos contain excessive description, I suggest that they go back through the memo bank and separate out descriptive material then sort the conceptual material, identifying related examples from the data in the manner I mentioned above.

I have observed sorting to be particularly difficult for many learners. It is usually the third big hurdle for them to overcome. It is common for them to succumb to the temptation to logically

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elaborate an outline and then sort into it, rather than the reverse. In my experience, with novices, sorting is the most commonly skipped step in the grounded theory process. And, it usually shows because the outline used for the write-up has an unconvincing fit with the memos.<sup>15</sup> To help head this off, I emphasize that theoretical codes must earn their way into a theory, just like substantive codes, and that it is important to be patient, remain open, and let the sort emerge.<sup>16</sup>

As a theoretical scheme begins to emerge from the sorting process, more ideas emerge for memoing. Although in an actual grounded theory study ideas for more theoretical sampling and therefore more data collection may occur, because we are doing a study as a learning exercise we must remain within reasonable time limits. As a final exercise, I have learners write up just a portion of a theory or a theoretical overview. This is enough to give them the experience of a proper write-up. I instruct them to use the outline that emerged from their sorted memos (the portion relevant to what they choose to write-up) as the organizing scheme for their write-up.<sup>17</sup>

This completes the grounded theory coursework assignments, but it is only the first stage in the learning process because there is much yet to be learned from actually conducting one's own grounded theory project.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is probably because of academic backgrounds that emphasized descriptive and advocacy literature, neither one of which are helpful in building theoretical sensitivity, as well as having been instructed in other academic contexts to first create and outline, then write into it.

<sup>16</sup> For a succinct discussion of this, see Glaser (205b).

<sup>17</sup> I share with learners an ever-growing list of do's and don'ts about writing up a theory that is much too long to replicate here.

<sup>18</sup> The learning process for students in the Fielding/ELC grounded theory program continues through grounded action exercises (not discussed here) after which they move into dissertation groups which meet regularly and in which they receive faculty and peer support all the way through their research and write-up. The initial learning process and assignments give them sufficient experience, skills, and confidence to begin their research. It puts them at the starting line for the real thing. For readers who are teaching grounded theory to doctoral students and supervising grounded theory dissertations I recommend a similar support system.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Over the years I have observed that most students who want to learn and do grounded theory are doctoral students working on dissertations, albeit from a wide variety of disciplines. So my suggestions have been aimed towards doctoral level training. Doctoral programs are often very internally competitive. This can create learning barriers between faculty and students and students and students. As I suggested earlier, for many learners achieving the myriad skills and new ways of thinking required to learn grounded theory can be daunting. In my view it is important to avoid the “weeding out” atmosphere that is prevalent in many doctoral programs and create an atmosphere of collegial support and encouragement, with the aim of helping all students succeed. If learners fear grading and being judged, they are likely to proceed cautiously rather than fearlessly. Furthermore, if learners are reluctant to share ideas with one another because they fear having them “stolen” learning is inhibited, particularly in grounded theory. In teaching classic grounded theory, it helps to have students who are willing to stick their necks out and try new things. As Glaser suggests in the introductory remarks to his seminars, “atmosphering” is important. Failing to create and sustain the proper atmosphere can undermine even the best, most informed teaching content.

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## Theories in Progress Series

### Perpetual Identity Constructing

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#### Abstract

For academics who work within higher education, the difficulties in finding the space and time to learn, to reflect and to self-evaluate have increased due to multiple expectations and demands of an increasingly competitive business environment. This substantive theory of 'Perpetual Identity Constructing' proposes that when academics are presented with an opportunity to enhance their development, they experience a 3-stage process that facilitates their constructing a preferred sense of their academic identity. This theory of managing a predisposed identity, deconstructing and then reconstructing a preferred academic identity demonstrates the critical importance of institutional support for providing academics with needed space and time to realise their full potential.

**Key words:** Academic identity, possibility portals, learning spaces.

#### Introduction

In contemporary society, universities exist within a context of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000a). Supercomplexity refers to the requirement that the university must respond to an over-abundance of information in a world that is now characterised by:

[c]ontestability, changeability, uncertainty and predictability, these four concepts are surrounded by others such as change, turbulence, risk and chaos. Together, this set of concepts marks out the conceptual geography of our supercomplexity as an age of fragility... It is an age in which nothing can be taken for granted. In short all bets are off. It is an age of conceptual and



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thereby, emotional insecurity (Barnett, 2000a, pp. 414-416)

A consequence of this supercomplexity is uncertainty within higher education; 'the individual increasingly stands alone, looking for security in the face of uncertainty' (Annandale, 1998, p.19). The changing nature of higher education is a global phenomenon that has impacted the vast majority of academics with a 'weariness and resistance to what is perceived to be externally imposed shifts in the higher education environment' (D'Andrea & Gosling 2005, p.15). Lecturers are faced with increased class sizes, greater student diversity (McNay, 2005), more short term contracts and an ever-increasing research agenda (Boud, 1999). Consequently, academics have experienced so much difficulty in adapting to this rapid change that they no longer are sure of what is expected of them (Harris, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2000). Biggs (2003) suggests that those now working in higher level institutions originate from one of two groups: the older, more mature academics who express that they no longer recognise the environment in which they work and the younger academics on short term contracts who lack employment security and therefore would not consider attempting anything that may be out of kilter with the organisation's overall strategy. The difficulty in adapting to change is further compounded by the increased emphasis on accountability and a perceived lack of institutional support in pursuing needed change. The imposition of increased demands has led to a sense of powerlessness, particularly in terms of teaching and learning (Rowland, 2000).

The established research agenda within many higher level institutions has left many academics frustrated in regard to their positions and their roles. This is further heightened by organisational structures that fail to foster teaching and learning. This sentiment of frustration has been expressed by Scott (2002, p. 27):

In our knowledge intensive society, we are both teachers and researchers. The present separation between teaching and research damages both. You cannot communicate knowledge without adding to it and you cannot add to knowledge without communicating it. Every act of exposition, every dialogue with a student, has the potential for creating new insights; and all

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research findings must be communicated, the wider the better.

Often, teaching and learning is not high on the academic agenda due to the lack of space and time needed to be proactive in teaching and learning development. If such time and space were available, it might be perceived as better to concentrate one's energy on research. Under such conditions, efforts to construct a preferred academic identity are unlikely to succeed. Attempts to encourage competency development in teaching and learning are lost unless academics perceive some value in teaching and learning for career progression or permanency within the organisation. Without some clear indication of institutional support for their engaging in change and competency development, academics often default to maintaining the status quo. This argument is supported by several studies that show that academics often resist change and undermine it from occurring in many different ways (Trowler, 1998; Hannon & Silver, 2000; Henkel, 2000).

Constructing a preferred academic identity requires not only a personal commitment from each academic but also a reshuffling of institutional priorities; more is involved than simply deciding to change. However, it is increasingly difficult for academics to find the needed space or time to undertake such change as energies deplete under the pressures of intensified operational environments within higher education (Eriksen, 2001; Hassan, 2003). Thus, the ability to create space or time is not easy and the idea of slowing down the pace of work seems unrealistic. Speed is often associated with decisiveness and efficiency and slowing down or 'slow time' is viewed as being lazy or inefficient. For many academics, the fact that there is less and less time to accomplish requisite tasks has become a general constraint in which the future is less predictable, more uncertain, and long term planning rarely achieved due to frantic focusing on the here and now.

### **Research Design**

The goal of this research was to generate to a systematic, explanatory theory of academic identity construction within higher education. Grounded theory was selected because it provides a way of discovering theoretically complete explanations about particular phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; 1992; 2001; 2002; 2003a; 2005). Grounded theory is useful

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because there are many unanswered questions regarding the construction of academic identity in higher education and there appears to be no existing grounded theories that explain this phenomenon.

Participants were recruited from a cohort of academics from a higher education institution within the Republic of Ireland. A total of 27 in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted. During the initial phase of data collection, the first 15 interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcription was conducted as a learning process in doing grounded theory and due to a fear of not capturing all of the data. In the latter phases of theoretical sampling, the interviews were audio-recorded, but not transcribed. Extensive field notes and memos were written after each interview.

### **Context**

Academics, both recently employed and long standing from diverse disciplines at an Irish university, were invited to attend a Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning. Such invitations have become a compulsory requirement in some universities. The opportunity to attend served as a possibility portal; a conduit or vehicle that challenged the participants to come together and develop a common understanding of teaching and learning. By sharing personal experiences, which were often similar, they forged a collegiality that otherwise might not have occurred. This possibility portal provided significant learning space and 'slow time' to reflect on academic identity. In so doing, possibility portals may incite a change in thinking and identity for academics.

### **The Main Concern**

The main concern for academics is development time. The inability to find time perpetuates problems associated with identity construction. Indeed, academics express a sense of losing ground and being manipulated to best suit the organisation and the discipline to which they belong. They are unable to decide what becoming an academic and working in the realm of higher education means to them. Consequentially, academics are often steered down a particular road that is not of their choosing. Thus the ability to find a voice, to stand out against current organisational and disciplinary structures is not easy to achieve. Resolving this concern requires a perpetual constructing of

academic identity.

### **Perpetually Constructing**

Perpetually Constructing is a complex and demanding endeavour. In this three-stage basic social process (Glaser, 1978), academics must first manage their predisposed academic identities. They do so through the sub-processes of determining and conforming. Academic identity is then deconstructed through surviving, relinquishing and exposing and reconstructed through engaging and spacing.

The journey is unique for each academic. It is not a straight-forward, linear process executed within a specific time period. Instead, it is a cyclical process that is never quite completed as the need to constantly re-develop and re-learn is ever present. Even when a new identity is constructed, individuals still experience many wrong turns and errors in judgment as they continue to develop and grow professionally. Thus the stages of deconstructing and reconstructing identity are continuously present in the lifetime of the academic.

### **Managing Predisposed Academic Identity**

A possibility portal such as the postgraduate diploma course on teaching and learning in this study becomes a place where academics can confront pre-existing or predisposed academic identities; identities that exist prior to their entering into higher education and encompass all past experiences (childhood, religious beliefs, undergraduate and post graduate instruction). For the majority of academics, consciously defining one's 'self' may be a new experience requiring the surfacing of an identity formed in the subconscious, reinforced by the organisation or discipline. Such possibility portals aid academics in reflecting on their practice, their positions within their disciplines and within the wider structure of their organisations.

#### **Determining**

Determining relates to the developmental process of consciously shaping academic identity to core beliefs and choices that have been made in the process of becoming an academic and in defending and understanding those choices. Core beliefs evolve and develop throughout life, with moral and ethical aspects influenced by significant others in their lives; they set the foundation for thoughts, actions, choices and behaviours. These

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beliefs become significant in constructing academic identity as professional practice within higher education needs to align with individual core beliefs to mitigate the potential for cognitive dissonance. Each individual's life experiences differ and this has a significant influence on how 'centered' they will feel when confronted by discipline-specific or institutional attempts to construct a generic sense of identity. When core beliefs are so challenged, academics face the difficulty of attempting to conform to both disciplinary or organisational goals as well as their own.

### **Conforming**

Conforming concerns what it means to be an academic within one's discipline. Disciplinary identity creates a sense of belonging and safety and entails a strong personal commitment to 'a way of being'; of being subliminally moulded into an accepted way of thinking. Academics make a personal commitment to a professional discipline as students and gradually become immersed into frameworks of belief that shape their academic identities. However, conforming can be troublesome when an individual's beliefs conflict with those of the profession or culture of the higher education institution to which they are attached. Thus, conforming can be a struggle for academics as they contemplate a new set of core beliefs against a fear of the potential choices that they make.

Higher level institutions are complex social structures in which the nature of academic work is changing rapidly resulting in increased pressure and less security. Tensions exist in trying to conform to a prescribed institutional identity and in trying to combine this institutional identity with disciplinary and individual identities. While academics may change intrinsically as a result of entering into a possibility portal, the lack of support and recognition from colleagues, management or the university outside such portals often makes it hard to sustain the desired change. The perceived need for conforming provides further evidence of the constant conflict that academics may experience as they try and assert themselves against constraining boundaries and their attempts to conform and/or confront such barriers.

### **Deconstructing Academic Identity**

The next stage in perpetual identity construction is that of deconstructing academic identity. It occurs when academics have

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entered a possibility portal and begin to deconstruct previous knowledge and understanding of what it means to be an academic. Deconstructing academic identity is difficult, as it undresses or exposes preconceptions which have been strongly held, often without question. When a possibility portal opens up a world of new possibilities, established and carefully constructed academic identities are challenged. Academics then explore potential alternative selves. In doing so, they must relinquish the comfortable understanding of their former academic selves, which can be troublesome and disconcerting. Uncertainty and fear can become apparent as individuals battle to understand what it means to be an academic. Frequently, individuals must negotiate their paths alone without support, encouragement or career progression opportunities within the university's prescribed framework. Doing so involves surviving, relinquishing and exposing.

### **Surviving**

Although academics value their autonomy, surviving as academics may require sacrificing and/or forgoing opportunities. For example, they may be consciously aware of and anticipate negative responses when bringing any significant innovation, particularly in the area of teaching and learning, to colleagues and students. Furthermore, the time required to develop such innovations may negatively impact career progression as time to implement a new teaching philosophy competes with research time. Consequently, the identities that academics seek to create must be sustainable and in synch with what is expected. Thus, needs and desires to survive often entail having dual identities in which they are viewed as having excellence in teaching and in research. However, sooner rather than later, academics begin to recognise that consistent success in both domains may not be possible and that they may have to relinquish expertise in one area.

### **Relinquishing**

Relinquishing requires choosing between teaching or research as high achievement in both areas is not always possible. Academics must also relinquish or surrender a locus of control; for example, the enthusiasm that one acquires as new knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning are gained from exposure within possibility portals can translate into perceived difficulties when one becomes cognisant of the realities

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of the everyday world of work and the barriers that may prevent one from turning new knowledge into something productive and sustainable. Therefore, relinquishing can be disillusioning, as academics perceive the need to reconcile their 'notions of grandeur' which have been fostered through possibility portals with the harsh realities of practice. If academics wish to relinquish their existing identities and to replace them with something new, then they must accept that new practices are more worthwhile than those in existence. Thus it is reasonable for academics not to change if they are not going to receive recognition.

Some academics associate the process of academic reconstruction with losing a part of their identities. This sense of loss, however, is unfounded, as academics do not lose their identities but rather build on the foundation of a prior existence transforming their academic identities into something better. Relinquishing brings with it a fear of exposing and being subjected to unnecessary ridicule and vulnerability.

### **Exposing**

Changing identities can be equated to exposing one's vulnerabilities; to feeling unprotected and defenceless as uncertainties increase in moving from an existing state of ease to one of susceptibility. The existing state of ease is one in which academics can continue with the same unquestioned identity that they have constructed over time and which may never be disputed. Alternatively, academics can begin a process of self-questioning and self-reflection regarding their existence within the realm of their discipline and their organization. This new knowledge, however, can be troublesome as it is often incongruent with previous knowledge and encourages academics to reconstruct their professional identities. If the work environment is suitably aligned or open to possible change in current practices, then knowledge that is challenging can be surmounted and the intended transformations are more likely to occur.

### **Reconstructing Academic Identity**

Reconstructing brings individuals closer to achieving transformed academic identity, where they are provided or supported in developing a protected and nurturing space in which to reinvent themselves using new knowledge and understanding.

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Important to this stage are engaging, and spacing.

### **Engaging**

Academics need opportunities to debate the ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000a) of the higher education environment before they can begin to appreciate the necessity of perpetually reconstructing their roles. Engaging opens up the possibility that change can be positive and not feared. Engagement occurs as a result of possibility portals which provide space and time for such discovery. When academics are socialised into the world of higher education, there is often an explicit understanding that they are proficient in all areas of academic life. More often than not, this proves not to be the case and the process of change can be difficult particularly when it is not in concert with disciplinary and organisational demands. This incongruity can only be determined through exposure and engagement with possibility portals where they begin to see that perpetual construction of their identities is simply part of academic life. Once academics begin to engage in the prospect of potential change and the need to continuously refit identities, reconstructing becomes enabling.

Enabling evokes power, as academics begin to realise the power that they have and how this power can enable them to make their own choices rather than those predetermined by external forces such as their discipline or institution. Thus enabling encourages individuals to develop their full potential. Enabling creates a confidence and the assertiveness needed for change to be successful and sustainable.

### **Spacing**

The ability to develop a sense of self and to live with the complexity of choices made in terms of career progression and in developing important collegial and student relationships generates a need for space and time to explore these processes. Spacing refers to the placing of academics in a safe, physical space, removed from their everyday working life, where learning about the nature and purpose of higher education and what it means to be an academic can occur. Spacing encompasses an actual space, a social space and a safe space all of which are essential to maintain the intellectual health of academics.

Actual space is the physical environment; away from academic’s own department or at least an area that is free from



potential interruption. Different spaces often prompt new ways of viewing things and provide greater opportunities for thinking, reflecting and challenging one to think differently. Social space allows and encourages an openness and freedom of expression, where there are opportunities for dialogue and debate to naturally occur in a social and unconstrained way. These social spaces also need to be safe spaces. Safe spaces allow academics to expose any personal and professional uncertainties in a protective and encouraging environment free of subjective criticisms yet encouraging logical, objective and judicious perspectives. In essence, spacing provides the opportunity for academics to reconstruct identities in alignment with discipline and institutional pedagogies thereby allowing them to realise their potential.

### **Discussion of the Literature**

Barnett (2005) has argued that the function of higher level institutions has changed considerably in the last number of years causing a considerable shift in the role of the academic, with it becoming more diverse and uncertain. Consequently, academics have experienced much difficulty in adapting to such rapid change as they are no longer sure of what is expected of them (Harris, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2000). Some educational theorists argue that core beliefs play a significant part in influencing and shaping academic identities (Pajares, 1992, Comb, 1999). However, most studies focus on the area of academic/teacher beliefs and in doing so, do not place sufficient emphasis on the importance of core beliefs as possible reasons for renitence to change, or at least they fail to look at core beliefs as an appropriate starting point to encourage construction of academic identity and attitudes. Indeed, it might also be suggested that most studies view core beliefs as an inert concept that perhaps cannot be altered whereas this grounded theory argues that if one is to consider core beliefs as closely intertwined with academic identity, then conversely it can be argued that individual core beliefs can be altered through an individual's gaining more knowledge and insight into academia and its significance for them as an individual.

The educational literature recognises the change that has occurred and continues to occur at an unprecedented rate within higher education and that academic freedom has been eroded due to an emphasis on accountability and quality control measures

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(Barnett, 2005). The literature supports this theory's concept of surviving in recognizing that academics are in a battle to survive with the constant changes that are occurring within the realm of higher education; however, the literature fails to discuss academic identity as a continuous process instead limiting discussion to the initial development of identity rather than how it can be improved or altered. Hey (2001, 1997), Skeggs (1997), and Reay (1997) suggest that time management preoccupies those working within higher education. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the demand and need for time without making the provision for space yet within higher education the importance of space is not valued as can be seen through organisational practices that frequently accord an inordinate amount of time to unnecessary meetings yet limit office space (Savin Baden, 2008).

### **Contributions from this Study**

This grounded theory uncovers a basic social process that explains how academics need to perpetually construct professional identities throughout their academic careers and offers the concept of possibility portals for creating the space and time needed if academics are to become self-deliberative and self-critical, with every possibility to reinvent themselves. Space and time can be further enhanced through possibility portals that are multi-disciplinary and that facilitate cross disciplinary alliances. Organisational management structures need to facilitate this perpetual constructing of academic identities through awareness of the factors that encourage this process. Finally, there is a need for each higher level institution to reshape the understanding of 'academic identity' and to support each academic in defining his or her own teaching and research agendas.

### **Limitations of this Study**

The grounded theory that is presented here is limited by my lack of expertise in the grounded theory process. This study was methodologically true to Glaserian grounded theory; and every attempt was made to be coherent and methodical. If I were to embark on another grounded theory study, I feel now that I would be more confident with the process and more patient concerning the emergence of the main concern and the development of the core category. The academics within this present study were university based and there is a need to cast the net more widely and gain a greater perspective on academics working within other forms of education to enrich and potentially

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modify the theory. There is a need to look at more types of possibility portals rather than just the Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning. Focusing on other possibility portals would also further enrich the theory.

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## **Book Review:**

Artinian, B. M., Giske, T., & Cone, P. H.  
(2009). *Glaserian grounded theory in nursing research: Trusting emergence*  
*Reviewed by Antoinette M. McCallin, RN, Ph.D.*

This new research book focuses on Glaserian grounded theory and has been written specifically for nurse researchers. Although the many examples used to illustrate methodological issues are nursing related, the book will be of interest to grounded theory researchers across disciplines. The lead author, Professor Barbara Artinian, has researched using the method and supervised masters and doctoral students for over twenty years. The insights that come from her experience are combined with a strong commitment to endorsing classic grounded theory. The core category of the book could be identified as, "staying true" as per Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978, 1998).

The publication is impressive with multiple examples of grounded theory research that are critiqued rigorously yet sensitively. The end result is a resource that will be welcomed by students and supervisors alike. Differences between classic grounded theory, the axial coding model, and qualitative data analysis are addressed albeit succinctly. While purist Glaserian grounded theorists may be disappointed to see discussions on conceptual mapping, modes of grounded theory, and clinical intervention research, the key message is that researchers should strive to remain true to Glaser's grounded theory.

This book is easy to read. Research issues are presented in a matter-of-fact manner. Rich practical examples and thoughtful responses promoting classic grounded theory abound. The writing is sincere yet unpretentious. The inclusion of wide-ranging research examples is a strength, which will be appreciated by grounded theory researchers keen to learn more about methodology. Practical matters that arise in any research project are considered along with the challenges of methodological application. Any deviation from classic methodology, as occurs in the instance of conceptual mapping, is addressed openly. Cone and Artinian acknowledge that they "differ completely from



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Glaser" (2009, p. 43) in identifying conceptual maps. These maps are seen as a useful tool for research students who are visual learners. While the conceptual map is possibly similar to Glaser's diagrams, which may have a place in theory development (Glaser, 1978), it is offered as tool to move researchers from description to conceptualisation. There is a provision though: creating a map steeped in description is definitely not recommended. The purpose of mapping is to raise thinking to clarify the relationships between concepts in the emergent theory.

The chapter differentiating classic grounded theory from the Strauss and Corbin version is effective. Artinian (2009) suggests that "the emergent method of coding and writing memos about the emergent process is very different from the axial coding method described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in which every category is fully dimensionalised" (p. 21). The example of axial coding is particularly interesting, as the frustrations of situational description, the complete missing of participant relevance, are discussed. What is helpful is that the example is taken a step further to show readers how a grounded theory researcher can return to the classic method and "lift" the data to generate a theory that is relevant, fits and works. Artinian confirms her commitment to classic grounded theory, emphasising the importance of putting preconceptions aside, and staying true to the data, so that the participant resolution of the main concern is allowed to emerge.

Another chapter, "Bending the directives of Glaserian grounded theory in nursing research" might make the purist classic grounded theorist nervous. You are encouraged to read on, however. In this chapter the common issue of staying true to grounded theory when members of dissertation committees do not understand the methodology, is addressed. Cone and Artinian argue that: "Through all phases of the research process, careful attention was given to classical GT methodological issues and Glaser's reasoning behind each. Sometimes his directives were clear and were followed closely; others were not so clear and needed careful exploration of the thinking that led to the rules to follow them accurately" (2009, p. 35). Once again, as is typical of this book, arguments are thoughtful. There are few surprises, although the strategy to satisfy committees about reviewing the literature without doing a literature review is highly creative, and looks promising. Students designing grounded theory projects will find this chapter invaluable.

One more interesting contribution in the book is the theory of preparative waiting that is presented firstly in descriptive mode, and later in theoretical mode using balancing as the theoretical code. The first example is straightforward whereas the second example is more difficult to follow, possibly due to language inconsistency. Nonetheless, the illustrations demonstrate the different levels of thinking and abstraction. This is important because Artinian recognises that some students have problems with conceptualisation. While conceptualisation skills can be taught, there are always students attempting to use grounded theory who cannot think in the abstract. If at all possible those students should be redirected elsewhere (Glaser, 1998). Reality management is less straightforward. Because conceptualisation problems do not always become apparent until a student is well down the track in the research process, supervisors need retrieval strategies to manage such situations. Artinian et al (2009) offer some solutions by providing many examples of theory that vary from what they call the descriptive mode (describing a specific situation), to the gerund mode (the core category is a basic social process), to the emergent fit mode (extension of an existing theory). While the supervisory preference is that the student will conceptualise, the accurate labelling of description as description is surely better than passing off knowledge as an abstract theoretical explanation when analysis is at a lower level. The book goes some way to address this delicate issue and provide options for supervisors and students.

The final section of the book on interventionist grounded theory is quite different to previous discussions of classic grounded theory. According to Artinian “the purpose of the intervention mode is to test and modify an existing theory while improving clinical practice” (2009, p. 320). In nursing, evidence-based research dominates knowledge generation (Mateo & Kirchoff, 2009) and the highest level of knowledge comes from a randomised control trial. Grounded theory does not lend itself to that type of development, hence this particular application. According to the author, interventionist grounded theory is a form of evaluation research that follows Glaser’s call for “grounded abstraction generates application” (2007, p. 106). It is debatable if Glaser intended that grounded theory be developed into this type of study. So while the interventionist application may be a liberal interpretation of grounded theory application, I

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have some sympathy for nurse researchers who want to use the methodology and are required to do so in a way that is responsive to the highly political context of research.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book to researchers, grounded theory students and supervisors. The strength of the book is its unreserved adherence to fundamental principles of Glaserian grounded theory. It is a valuable resource for experienced and novice grounded theorists alike; its numerous examples providing practical illustrations for researchers keen to learn more about methodology.

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