

Book Review: Leaving Rules that Enforce Preconception

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Barney Glaser (2013) *No preconceptions - The grounded theory dictum.*

Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press

Given that the dictum of *no preconception* is not new in GT, why did Glaser focus his attention so much on it to write a whole book on this topic? The dictum has been declared over and over again, for example in the chapter on *Generating Theory* in the seminal work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the chapters on *Reading the Literature* and *Forcing the Data* in Glaser's (1998) book entitled "Doing grounded theory." It might be reasonable, then, for a reader to ask why this book is needed and whether the dictum should not just be followed. The answer is that not allowing preconceptions to influence research is one of the greatest challenges and maybe even "the most difficult procedure of all" (Glaser, 2013, p. 133). Therefore, it is important to take it seriously; expanding on the issue is commendable and a welcomed contribution to the literature on classic GT.

In the first chapter of this book by Glaser (2013), the question why "no preconception" is a dictum in grounded theory (GT) methodology is answered. GT was discovered in a research field heavily focusing on testing hypotheses and verifying theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and emerged as a complement through the conscious focusing on limiting preconception and discovering theory from the data. While both academic rules and the methodology of GT are there to facilitate excellent research, academic rules require the researcher to focus on learning from previous research and theories while GT procedures are used to handle previous research as possible preconceptions.

The aim of the book was to minimize preconception and Glaser (2013) wrote about "the importance of this book to try to stem the flow of preconceptions intruding in GT and affecting GT research" (p. 95). Thus, the dictum is *no preconception* and this is done, as repeatedly emphasized in the book, by applying "the rigorous steps" (Glaser, 2013, p. 2) of GT.

Preconception rules the world and is explained as an important aspect of everyday life and in every step of the research process including the formulation of a problem area, the substantive coding, the theoretical coding integrating the concepts, and the impact on the entire GT process (Glaser, 2013). The method for the book is presented in chapter 7 together with some of the memos Dr. Glaser received from colleagues on preconception. In the last chapter, the reader finds a theory by Kwok, McCallin & Dickson entitled "Working through preconception: Moving from forcing to emergence." This theory highlights the difficulties in staying open and is followed by an appendix written by Dr. Thulesius on his experiences derived from being a GT mentor. To minimize the preconceptions, Dr. Glaser is *incentivizing* the no preconception and *equipping* for emergence.

Incentivizing no Preconception

In the book, Glaser (2013) encouraged researchers to stay open and endure the initial and fundamental confusion in the research process while using the comparative method; he promises that it will be rewarding. The presented incentives—motivating for staying open and suspending preconception—are attached to positive emotions and values including: *freedom from deduction, energy by autonomy, joy of discovery, and motivation from generating theory free of preconception.*

Equipping for Emergence

Glaser (2013) equipped the reader for emergence by encouraging us to trust in the constant comparative method and in emergence. Emergence may sound as if it is something for which we need to wait, but while we wait, Glaser (2013) emphasized that we should employ the “rigorous steps” (p. 2) of GT and the constant comparative method without delay. Although counterintuitive to culture and life ways, Glaser (2013) stated that suspending preconceptions is easy early in the GT process. The researcher can trust that patterns will emerge; many GT researchers exist who can confirm the rewards of trusting the method (Pergert, 2009). Indeed, some confirmations are included as memos in the book. Thus, trusting the method and using the constant comparative method, will result in emergence.

However, no research is done in isolation; most researchers are a part of, and dependent on, the academic world. Therefore, the inherent conflict for supervisors and PhD students in trying to be faithful to the classic GT methodology in such a system that is ruled by preconception is presented.

Academic rules versus GT methodology

Through his contrasting of academic rules and GT procedures, Glaser (2013) suggested that to truly handle preconception, one must leave academic rules and knowledge and go back to staying completely open for the time of doing the GT. He wrote that “It is often quite hard for the novice PhD candidate to do a classic GT dissertation without violating his local academic preconceptions from start of the research to its finish” (Glaser, 2013, p. 72). As readers, we are encouraged to be cunning; to give “lip service” (Glaser, 2013, p 56) to the preconceived and then, when we have reached our goal, to forget all about it. This approach is unappealing, though it is probably what I did myself. I would like to think that it is possible to be faithful to the method while writing academically correct and exceptionally good proposals. In the appendix to Glaser’s (2013) work, Dr. Thulesius recommended to the reader to “write up some conceptual description in your proposal or application to make it more competitive and true to the GT perspective” (p. 166-167). Such advice is sound, as I want to believe that we just need to communicate in a language that is understandable in the academia.

I think that, with this book, Glaser (2013) contributed with a multi-dimensional view on preconception, not only being a consequence of the initial literature review but being present in every step of the research process, enforced by academic rules.

Comprehensive view on preconception

Glaser (2013) has demonstrated and explained how preconceptions may be enforced at every step of the research process in using regular academic procedures. First preconception may occur in *the problem*—when a literature reviews is done to define the problem area; enforcing theories, and professional concerns. That literature reviews should not be performed before the start of research is a well-known GT rule that is probably possible to pursue, using the advice of Glaser and Thulesius presented above. Second, preconception may occur in *the questions*—in using interview guides covering all the professional concerns including face sheet information, such as gender, preconceived as relevant. I would assume that semi structured interviews are the most common in GT studies, but Glaser once again showed how predefined questions, based on previous research, risk introducing preconception. Third, preconception may occur in *the data collection*—in using sound recorders that risk delaying the early start of the constant comparative analysis. Fourth, preconception may occur in *the analysis*—in using computers that collect more interchangeable indicators than necessary, resulting in too much conceptual coverage and counteracting the precocious processing. The two last issues will be discussed below. Furthermore, Glaser (2013) did not mince his words when it came to the multi-version views of GT and especially the forcing of frameworks, epistemologies and theoretical perspectives, as for example the Constructivist GT of Charmaz (2006). Finally, preconception may occur in *the presentation*—in using analogies and diagrams that force conjecture, leaving the grounding in data. I had heard before that diagrams should not be used because it is impossible to control how people interpret them. In this book, Glaser (2013) argued that there is a risk that diagrams introduce the reader's preconceptions, which I think is worth considering.

Even though I do appreciate this extensive presentation of risks for preconceptions at every step, I also agree that it is not easy to follow, especially in the academic world. While Glaser (2013) is trying to free the researcher from the preconceptions of academia to become an open and autonomous researcher, he is presenting a quite strict position on how to reach that freedom throughout the entire GT process. I have chosen to briefly comment on two of these aspects that I believe that many researchers in academia struggle with, including the use of software in analyzing and the place of sound recording in data collection in GT.

The use of Software

Glaser (2013) stated that using computer software as a tool in analyzing hinders the preconscious processing. I believe that we all have different experiences and our creativity works in different ways, as does our preconscious processing; some of us are more computer literate than others. I have used a software program for coding; that is, I did the coding myself and the program helped me to collect all the interchangeable indicators of the same codes together. Furthermore, different codes could easily be merged together and with just one click I could go back to the ground data. However, I could see a danger for preconceiving the integration of concepts when using the coding trees for organizing before it had emerged (Pergert, 2009). I think that it is important to be aware of risks with computer programs but also to be open to the fact that they might work very well for some steps of the process of analyzing for some researchers.

The use of Sound Recorders

In a previous book by Glaser (1998), the strong arguments against sound recording have been made: it prevents delimiting data collection and is unnecessary. In this book (2013), a new argument is presented and that is the risk for preconception because of the delay in the early start of the constant comparative method. I find myself trying to balance these different rules; to do academically accepted research and at the same time be faithful to the rules of classic GT. I have a student who used sound recording for interviews but at the same time took field notes to be able to analyze directly after the interviews without having to wait for the transcriptions. During her first six months of doing interviews and analyzing she felt very confused and as she was coding she was worried that it was only her own preconceptions. When her core category emerged she was able to go back to the first interviews to do a secondary analysis and she was delighted that she had recorded the interviews. Many academic arguments exist for sound recording, for example field notes could be viewed as biased and influenced by the researcher's preconceptions (Pergert, 2009). Furthermore, in the book on Doing GT, Glaser (1998) wrote that sound recordings could be an advantage, for example, when the data collection is not performed by a single researcher but in a research team.

Maybe, my shortcut in trying to please everyone in balancing the rules of academia and classic GT is in fact a detour? Thulesius wrote in the appendix to Glaser (2013) that the dictum is there to help the researcher to stay open and not to restrict. However, some kind of compromise is needed to use classic GT in academia, not only to get PhD students admitted but also to get funding and to publish. While I like how Glaser (2013) argued for what should be done to prevent preconception to intrude in classic GT research he has left it quite open to the researcher to decide how to balance the procedures of GT and the rules of academia.

Conclusion

A choice of path is presented in the book (Glaser, 2013) when experiencing lack of control and confusion: to bail out by preconceiving—being safe, being knowledgeable and in control, or to trust the constant comparative method resulting in preconscious processing and emergence. In other words, the research would be experiencing the “full power of GT” (Glaser, 2013 p. 18. While Glaser wants to free us to be open and autonomous researchers, he presented a strict view on how research should be done. But, even if different experiences exist regarding the manner in which the balance between academic demands and the demands from the GT methodology should be handled, the dictum of no preconception is fundamental to classic GT, and definitely awarding. “Most researchers will when coding and analyzing go through the eureka effect of discovery and from then on suspending preconceptions becomes routine.” (Glaser, 2013, p. 11).

References

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