

Book Review: Remodeling GT once again

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Barry Gibson and Jan Hartman (2014) *Rediscovering Grounded Theory*
London: Sage

In their book entitled *Rediscovering Grounded Theory*, Barry Gibson and Jan Hartman (2014) aim to present grounded theory in a new way with the intention of “forward looking preservation” (p. 237). They claim that *Rediscovery* is an outcome of many conversations in a London pub over the last eight years. The authors tackle both method and methodology as they meticulously describe the context of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and take an authoritative stand on many of the controversies surrounding remodeling of the method in recent years. *Rediscovering* also includes substantial how-to sections corresponding to chapters in Glaser’s *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978). *Rediscovery* adds explanatory depth in its discussion of the context of grounded theory, but fails to keep many of its promises.

Rediscovery is far reaching. Included in the first part are chapters entitled, *What Kind of Theory is Grounded Theory*, *Constructivism in Grounded Theory*, *Disentangling Concepts and Categories in Grounded Theory*, and *Coding in Grounded Theory*. These chapters describe the context of the method, discuss the controversies, and present Gibson and Hartman’s positions on contentious issues. The second part of the book consists of chapters that aim to help grounded theorists with procedures such as developing theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, coding, memoing, and writing theory. To their credit, the authors continually acknowledge the originators of the method.

From the outset, Gibson and Hartman give credit to Glaser and Strauss. *Reinventing* acknowledges that grounded theory opened exciting opportunities for a new generation of researchers and perhaps even opened doors into new areas of inquiry (p. 29). As a new method, grounded theory’s emphasis was on inductively generating theory from data, rather than deductively verifying hypotheses. I agree with Gibson and Hartman that knowledge of the origin of a method and its terminology is imperative to rigorous research. *Rediscovering* acknowledges that Glaser and Strauss “discovered” grounded theory. *Rediscovery* also places classic grounded theory firmly within the zeitgeist of discipline of sociology at the time and describes its roots in the Departments of Sociology at Columbia University and the University of Chicago.

As Gibson and Hartman meticulously describe the history of the method, they also discuss changes from the original (classic) method that were developed by others in subsequent years. This “evolution” of grounded theory has been embroiled in controversy over what Glaser describes as “remodeling” of the method. Remodeling was begun by Strauss and Corbin and later by Charmaz and many others. *Rediscovering* clearly focuses on the original method as described in *Discovery*. Yet in an effort reminiscent of Rodney

King's famous plea, "can't we all just get along," Gibson and Hartman suggest that newer versions of the method, particularly Chamaz's constructivist version, depict a positive evolution. They go so far as to encourage alternative versions of grounded theory, stating that "methodological pluralism in grounded theory is something that should be welcomed" (p. 237). Paradoxically, the authors mention a more recent move toward the blending of grounded theory with other traditions, acknowledging that there is a risk that too many modifications will threaten to make the method "incoherent and contradictory" (p. 98).

Gibson and Hartman move beyond the discussion of the professors and universities that inspired Glaser and Strauss to delve into the modern etymology of the terms used in grounded theory. They closely examine common terms in grounded theory such as *concept*, *category*, and *indicator*. *Rediscovery* looks to Strauss and Corbin and others for distinctions between concept and category, delineating concepts as the basic building blocks of theory and categories as concepts grouped together—recognizing that categories are also "conceptual." In the end, they offer three distinctly different definitions of concepts and categories and a limited definition of term *core category*. They also examine various definitions of indicators, including distinctions between those that are expressive and those that are predictive.

Part two of *Rediscovery* is a how-to guide for novice grounded theorists. In the ten chapters (142 pages) of this section, Gibson and Hartman recount and expand upon classic grounded theory procedures as described in *Discovery* and *Theoretical Sensitivity*. In this section that is essentially a chapter-by-chapter expansion of *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Gibson and Hartman describe their own interpretation of ways to develop theoretical sensitivity and to theoretically sample, code, memo, and write grounded theory. To illustrate salient points, the authors chose eight exemplars of what "good grounded theory should look like" (p. 109).

Clearly, Gibson and Hartman have done the hard work of meticulously investigating grounded theory. They provide a comprehensive examination of classic grounded theory and present controversies that have emerged in the last forty years. The book will be useful to experienced grounded theorists who wish to gain a better understanding of the origins of method. It will also be useful to those who are interested in examining the controversies that have arisen over remodeled versions of grounded theory. However, the book may not be helpful to novice grounded theorists and PhD students.

As they carefully examine myriad opinions and contradictory definitions and methods, Gibson and Hartman have created ambiguity, which may confuse and overwhelm those seeking to learn the method, especially if there are no mentors available. In fact, many of the terms and procedures described in *Rediscovery* are contradictory to those found in classic grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss and later by Glaser. Following are two examples: First, Gibson and Hartman state that there are three major phases of grounded theory, one of which is selective coding (p. 163); whereas, Glaser, in *Theoretical Sensitivity* describes theoretical sampling as distinctively different from selective sampling (which is not used in classic grounded theory). Second, Gibson and Hartman give a common definition of core category, but fail to explicate the most important feature of the core category as described by Glaser—that it demonstrates how participants continually

solve their main concern.

I enjoyed reading *Rediscovery* because I am an experienced grounded theorist, interested in reading about all aspects of grounded theory. However, I find the book to be unnecessarily dense. It is not an easy read. Take for instance the section on theoretical coding. Gibson and Hartman devote nearly two pages to the topic without offering a clear definition. In contrast, Glaser is very clear that theoretical codes “conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). Glaser’s definition is clear, whereas Gibson and Hartman’s discussion obfuscates. Gibson and Hartman propose that, “The real test of our approach of clarification... is to make doing grounded theory clearer...” (p. 98). They fail their own test of clarification.

Although the authors are careful to continually refer to the work of Glaser and Strauss, *Rediscovery* mixes the method as described by many, gives contradictory definitions, and veers from the tenets of classic grounded theory. Gibson and Hartman accept the ideas of some and reject others, including Glaser and Strauss at times. They make pronouncements and act as arbiters of the method, essentially proposing yet another version of grounded theory. This ambiguity could serve to confuse and mislead a novice grounded theorist, who might assume the book correctly describes the classic method.

In conclusion, *Rediscovering Grounded Theory* is a scholarly compilation of ideas surrounding grounded theory. Gibson and Hartman carefully researched the origins of the method and the controversies surrounding recent remodeling. However, they present dense material that combines disparate ideas in a way that lacks cohesiveness and parsimony and contributes yet another version of the method. *Rediscovery* actually remodels once again. I recommend the book to those who are interested in an in-depth examination of the origins of the method. I do not recommend the book to inexperienced grounded theorists wishing to learn the method. Novices would be better served to read the original books by Glaser and Strauss and Glaser.

References

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