

The Grounded Theory Family Tree: A Living, Growing Testament to the Life and Work of Barney Glaser

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Abstract

Grounded theory has a rich history which starts with its co-developers Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, each of whom had an impressive research pedigree. Their famous study on death and dying led to the publication of the seminal book *Discovery of Grounded Theory*. For years they taught cohorts of students grounded theory. These students contributed to the growth of the grounded theory family tree. Glaser started Sociology Press to publish his numerous books on grounded theory. He also founded the Grounded Theory Institute and the *Grounded Theory Review*, which facilitated the growth of grounded theory, as did his troubleshooting seminars. The Grounded Theory Institute Fellows and the editors and peer reviewers of the *Grounded Theory Review* have each contributed to the growth of grounded theory.

Keywords: Glaser, grounded theory, family tree, growth

A book called *A Stranger in a Strange Land* (1993) by Leonora R Scholte tells the story of my ancestors' journey from their motherland to a new land. As I look at the life and work of Dr. Barney Glaser, I see a similar journey, a similar story, at least on a conceptual level. While Glaser co-developed grounded theory within the field of sociology in the United States, his story and work extended beyond sociology and spread to other fields and around the globe. Just as *A Stranger in a Strange Land* tells the story of my ancestors' journey, this article depicts some points and figures in the historical lineage of grounded theory that have impacted my life and work.

Glaser and Strauss

Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser each had an impressive research pedigree. Anselm Strauss had a qualitative background influenced by pragmatism (see James, Dewey, Cooley, and Mead) and ethnographic traditions at the University of Chicago, where he studied (Heath & Cowley, 2004). However, symbolic interactionism and the work of Blumer were the most influential on Strauss. According to Simmons (personal communication, April 1, 2022), "Anselm was more of a symbolic interactionist than a grounded theorist, in my experience and view." Glaser had a quantitative background and was influenced by the work of his dissertation committee members, Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert K. Merton, and his dissertation chair Hans Zetterberg at Columbia University (Holton, 2011). Glaser credited Lazarsfeld's work with inspiring the development of four important methodological components within grounded theory: index formation, interchangeability of indicators, constant comparative analysis, and core variable analysis (Holton, 2011, p. 207-208). Laz-

arsfeld's work on research methodology was also a significant influence. From Merton, Glaser (1998) learned theory construction (produced based on logic, not data) and theoretical coding. What he learned from Merton built upon the *l'explication de text* (line by line analysis of text) that he learned at the Sorbonne University of Paris, France (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Zetterberg's "focus on the practical value of social theory and the importance of empirical research as the basis for theory development" (Holton, 2011, p. 210) also shaped the future development of grounded theory. From these mentors, Glaser merged the ideas of theory development and research methodology to make a unique contribution to the research world.

When Strauss recruited Glaser to work on a funded research study on death and dying at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), they married the strengths of each of their backgrounds. The research study moved beyond the limitations of the research approaches that dominated sociology in the 1960s. At that time, theory verification dominated research. In their now-famous study of death and dying, Strauss used his strength in qualitative research to head up data collection, which primarily took the form of field notes from interviews and observations. Glaser focused on methodological aspects of data analysis that built on the ideas he had started to develop at Columbia (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

In 1965, Glaser published the first article explaining what would later be called grounded theory. In this article, he introduced a new form of data analysis which he called constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. Constant comparative method of qualitative analysis became the form of data analysis used within grounded theory and foundational to the method. Constant comparative method of qualitative analysis, as developed by Glaser, forms the roots of the grounded theory family tree. Glaser and Strauss's use of constant comparative method of qualitative analysis and the articulation of the grounded theory method in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) became the trunk of this family tree. However, not only was their work the birth of grounded theory, but it also became a significant influence in the historical development of qualitative research. Babchuk (2010) stated, "there may not be a single publication that has exerted more influence on the contemporary qualitative landscape than Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*" (p. 384).

Early Growth

While Glaser and Strauss' publications were widely acclaimed, the growth of grounded theory was slow initially. Glaser and Strauss each taught seminar courses on grounded theory to sociology and nursing students at UCSF for the next ten years. Stern (2009) referred to the "graduates as a virtual Who's Who of grounded theory pioneers" (p. 9 as cited in Babchuk, 2010), which include Cathy Charmez, Adele Clark, Odis Simmons (previously Bigus), to name a few who will be further mentioned in this article. However, Glaser and Strauss' respective training also led them to view and implement grounded theory in different ways. While Glaser and Strauss were not originally aware of their different perspectives, Simmons (personal communication, n.d.), as one of their students in the early 1970s, shared that he quickly became aware of their different perspectives and even shared this with Glaser at the time. Stern (1994, p. 212) had similar observations stating,

"students of Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s and 1970s knew that the two had quite different modus operandi, but Glaser only found out when Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* [italics added] came out in 1990" (as cited in Melia, 2010). However, the differences became evident to Glaser and Strauss and the rest of the world with Strauss and Corbin's publication and Glaser's subsequent reply in *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs. Forcing* (1992). Glaser left UCSF shortly after the publication of this book. Continuing with the tree analogy, grounded theory now had two main branches, and we will continue to follow Glaser's branch.

Expanding Growth

As Glaser continued to write about grounded theory, he started his own publishing company, Sociology Press (<http://sociologypress.com>), in 1970. He wanted to make sure that his books stayed in publication to remain accessible to researchers around the world. Glaser went on to publish numerous books on grounded theory, often in response to modifications he saw other researchers making that departed from the design or in response to questions he received from researchers working on grounded theory studies. Running his own publishing company allowed Glaser direct access to those purchasing his books as he often personally answered the phone to take orders. Many purchasers were surprised to find out that they were talking directly to Glaser as he started probing them about their research. As interest in grounded theory spread worldwide, Glaser's work was translated into other languages, including Mandarin, Polish, Italian, and Swedish (Grounded Theory Institute, 2021).

During this time, qualitative research grew, and more researchers began using and writing about grounded theory. Some of these researchers made modifications to the original method. This led to other branches of the tree, such as Kathy Charmaz's work on constructivist grounded theory and Adele Clark's work on situational analysis. However, these branches are not the focus of this article which will continue following the growth of classic grounded theory.

In 1999, Glaser started the Grounded Theory Institute (<http://www.groundedtheory.com/>) to continue to help people learn about grounded theory. Glaser also began the *Grounded Theory Review* (<http://groundedtheoryreview.com/>), an interdisciplinary, open access, peer-reviewed journal that features the work of classic grounded theorists worldwide. Three influential women, Judith Holton, Astrid Gynnild, and Alvita Nathaniel have served as editors of the *Grounded Theory Review*. They have helped further the research of grounded theory worldwide, adding new branches to the "family tree" and continuing Glaser's lineage as they have mentored new grounded theorists through the process of publishing their work. This work is also supported by the peer reviewers of the *Grounded Theory Review*, which include Tom Andrews, Barry Chametzky, Olavur Christiansen, Naomi Elliott, Gary Evans, Astrid Gynnild, Evelyn Gordon, Agnes Higgins, Judith A Holton, Tina L. Johnston, Vivian B. Martin, Anna Sandgren, Helen Scott, Susan Stillman, Michael K. Thomas, Hans Thulesius, and Kara Vander Linden (Grounded Theory Review, n.d.). They each represent their own part of the "family tree" and canopy of classic grounded theory spreads.

Glaser also began offering troubleshooting seminars that were designed to help doctoral candidates with whatever their next step was in the process of completing their grounded theory dissertations. Through these troubleshooting seminars, many doctoral students and researchers worldwide received help and support not only from Glaser but from many of the Grounded Theory Institute Fellows, which include Tom Andrews (Cork, Ireland), Toke Barfod (Roskilde, Denmark), Barry Chametzky (Pennsylvania, USA), Ólavur Christiansen (Faroe Islands), Foster Fei (China), Wendy Guthrie (Scotland), Astrid Gynnild (Bergen, Norway), Markko Hamalainen (Helsinki, Finland), Judith Holton (Canada), Tina Johnston (Oregon, USA), Andy Lowe (Thailand), Vivian Martin (Connecticut, USA), Antoinette McCallin (Auckland, NZ), Alvita Nathaniel (West Virginia, USA), Anna Sandgren (Sweden), Helen Scott (UK), Odis Simmons (Washington State, USA), Michael Thomas (Illinois, USA), Hans Thulesius (Vaxjo, Sweden), Kara Vander Linden (California, USA), and Isabelle Walsh (France) (Grounded Theory Institute, n.d.). As these names demonstrate, grounded theory has spanned the globe. These Grounded Theory Fellows each represent their own part of the “family tree” and Glaser’s lineage.

Growing Family Tree

To illustrate some of the contributions made by the Grounded Theory Institute Fellows, we can look at the work of Judith Holton, Isabelle Walsh, Vivian Martin, Astrid Gynnild, Helen Scott, and Tom Andrews. Judith Holton’s impact can be seen first in her leadership of the *Grounded Theory Review*, as previously mentioned, and in the number of articles, she has published on grounded theory, many of which were co-authored with Glaser. Glaser also encouraged her to write a book about grounded theory, which she co-authored with Isabelle Walsh, the leading quantitative grounded theorist. Their textbook, *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data* (2012), is one of the best on grounded theory. Vivian Martin and Astrid Gynnild’s edited book *Grounded Theory: The Philosophy, Method, and Work of Barney Glaser* (2011) is a collection of articles and essays by researchers taught by Glaser “from nine countries and four continents” about “a mentor, his method, and the application of its principles” (p.1). It addresses many misunderstandings about the method. Through Grounded Theory Online, Helen Scott and Tom Andrews offer troubleshooting seminars modeled after those offered by Glaser to help grounded theory researchers progress in their research (Grounded Theory Online, 2022). While I have highlighted these Grounded Theory Institute Fellows to demonstrate how they continue to help grounded theory grow, the Grounded Theory Institute Fellows have each made their own contributions to the growth of grounded theory.

Of the Grounded Theory Institute Fellows, Odis Simmons worked with Glaser for the longest. Their relationship developed as they commuted back and forth to UCSF from Mill Valley. During these drives, they discussed grounded theory, and many of the ideas discussed later appeared in Glaser’s books (Simmons, personal communication, January 5, 2004). Glaser even credits Simmons with helping develop some of the content (see *Theoretical Sensitivity*, chapter 5). Almost immediately following his own learning of grounded theory, Simmons began teaching grounded theory and mentoring others in using the method. Over the last 50 plus years, Simmons has taught and mentored hundreds of students and researchers on how to conduct grounded theory studies. For many years before his retirement, he led the Grounded Theory/ Grounded Action concentration at

Fielding Graduate University. His seminar-style approach followed that of Glaser and Strauss' early days, and many of the graduates of the Grounded Theory/Grounded Action concentration have gone on to publish and teach classic grounded theory. He also attended and assisted Glaser at many of his troubleshooting sessions. Glaser even commented that no one has taught grounded theory more than Simmons (Glaser, personal communication, 2004). For many years, Glaser encouraged Simmons to write his own book about mentoring and teaching grounded theory. Prior to his death, Glaser read the manuscript for Simmons' book *Experiencing Grounded Theory: A Comprehensive Guide to Learning, Doing, Mentoring, Teaching, and Applying Grounded Theory* (forthcoming). Simmons' book will continue to help researchers worldwide learn how to conduct, mentor, and teach grounded theory furthering the growth of the grounded theory family tree.

Through Simmons, I was introduced to grounded theory nearly 20 years ago when he led Grounded Theory/Grounded Action concentration at Fielding Graduate University. I began teaching grounded theory under Simmons' guidance even before graduating with my doctoral degree. For over 15 years, I have been teaching grounded theory within doctoral programs and chairing and serving on grounded theory dissertations. I have also created the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies (<https://www.mentoringresearchers.org/>), a United States-based non-profit, to support grounded theory researchers worldwide through the Glaser Center for Grounded Theory. We train, mentor, support, and connect grounded theory researchers worldwide (Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies, 2022). Glaser's grounded theory has become the work I get to teach, mentor, write about, and do every day. I feel honored to be part of the grounded theory family tree and watch how it continues to grow. May it be a living, growing testament to the life and work of Dr. Barney Glaser.

About the Author

Dr. Kara Vander Linden is an interdisciplinary researcher, educator, mentor, and lifelong learner. She is the founder and president of the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies and the Director of the Glaser Center for Grounded Theory. She teaches research and supervises classic grounded theory dissertations at Saybrook University. She is a peer reviewer for the *Grounded Theory Review*, *BMC Nursing*, and *Nursing Open*. Dr. Vander Linden earned a doctorate in education from Fielding Graduate University (Santa Barbara, CA) with specializations in classic grounded theory and higher education. She earned a master's in special education from the University of North Carolina (Charlotte, NC) and a Bachelor of Arts in mathematics from Queens University (Charlotte, NC).

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.