

Reflections on the first Grounded Theory Seminar: A tribute to Dr. Barney, G. Glaser

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I first met Dr. Barney Glaser in April 2002 in Paris, France the evening before the first CGT seminar. At that preliminary gathering I met Dr. Barry Gibson for the first time, who knew Barney. Amongst the PhD students I met was Vivian Martin and Anna Sandgren and we are still in contact. Given the high cost of hotels in Paris, I had to stay some distance from where the seminar was being held. I underestimated the time of getting to the Holiday Inn (the venue) and missed the beginning of the seminar. As a result, I missed Barney's introduction and was unaware of the format of the seminar. He did not do then what he did in future seminars and that is what he refers to as atmospherizing, which sets the stage for conceptual discovery by creating a safe environment for participants to learn and have their issues dealt with in a non-threatening way (Gynnild 2011). This became an integral part of all seminars and I use it just the same in seminars that I have been involved in to set the tone. Almost as soon as I sat down, Barney turned to me and asked me to present where I was up to in my study and what I needed help with. Without having any idea what he was looking for, I presented what I had ready. It was enough to get me the help that I needed. He gave me very positive feedback and helpful tips. This is a defining feature of the seminars, where the aim is to get students to what Barney often referred to as the next level in their study. I learned a lot from that seminar because, like so many students, I was a minus mentoree at the time. I was at the beginning of my second year of a PhD 3-year programme and about to collect data. Over the course of the two days of the seminar, Barney gave a general introduction to classic grounded theory (GT) and what I learned from this seminar is outlined below.

Everything is organised in the social world—even disorganisation. This implies systems of organisation, be they macro or micro. GT is a methodology for discovering these systems. Later, Barney was to write briefly about this when he maintained that there is a social reality and that the goal of GT is to enable the natural social organisation of substantive life to emerge (Glaser 1998). This is entirely consistent with the nature of social reality in social constructionism as discussed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) that everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by people and subjectively meaningful to them. At the seminar Barney said that if anything, GT is based on structural realism, but he did not expand on this. However, this is not to be confused with the view of reality evident within the positivist tradition.

In preparation for the seminar, Barney asked us to think about what we needed help with. For example, if that was coding then bring some data for everyone to code.

From the beginning, Barney encouraged us to drop what he termed as citizenship. Of course, this was a new concept to us as were many of the things that he subsequently outlined and discussed. This meant that we were to suspend who we were socially, such as father, friend, nurse, and become analysts for the duration of the seminar. This is very much what Helen Scott and I have continued to emphasise in our seminars to discourage students from analysing data from their own professional perspective, that is, to use concepts emerging from the data and not the received concepts of their profession. It means to code data as an analyst/researcher and not as a nurse, sociologist, psychologist, to name but a few. It is surprisingly effective. Disciplinary interpretations as to what a methodology is or should be, has limited understanding of GT and has contributed to thinking of it as another qualitative method rather than one that stands alone (Glaser 1998; McCallin et al 2011). Always in the seminar, Barney emphasised its very important properties such as empowerment, confidence building, and seed planting. He emphasised the development of autonomy both in his seminars and in his writing. He felt that GT gave students and researchers the autonomy to generate their own concepts and theories and not to be influenced by whom he termed theoretical capitalists (Glaser 1998). This is consistent with the PhD and Doctorate programmes, whose main aim to develop and train someone who can become an independent researcher. This is something that some supervisors of doctorate and PhD students do not encourage or seek to develop (Andrews et al 2017). The advice of Guthrie and Lowe (2011) is worth considering when it comes to navigating the PhD process using GT, including the selection of supervisors who will move the GT process forward and a mutual understanding of the purpose of completing a research degree.

Barney also outlined the functions of the seminar. These include to build out confidence in using GT and become more autonomous. He always wanted students to become empowered and to assume autonomy. Over the course of the two days his aim was to inspire us and to give us the help that we needed. He wanted to "jargon us out" that is, to steep us in the language of GT. As he maintains in his writings (Glaser 1978; 1992) he says that learning GT is a delayed action curve, that is, it takes time to understand what is being said, which is why he wanted to engage in "seed planting." He also said that GT is learned through doing (Glaser 1978; 1998). Barney always used humour to keep the atmosphere light. A favourite of his was what he referred to as reverse humour; where something is so obvious that you say the opposite.

He emphasised time and again that conceptualisation is the goal and not description. In what was to become a hallmark of the seminars, Barney encouraged us to interrupt each other, but courteously, if we were describing in the interests of talking and thinking in concepts; learning how to conceptualise rather than describe. Throughout the seminar he always gave examples of concepts. One of his favourites was "vaguating out," a concept that came from a study of hippies in Haight Ashbury, San Francisco during the '60s. The researcher had intended to study how these people survived day to day with little or no money, but they would not talk to him about that because they were afraid of being found and returned home. It is a great concept and I use it all the time in seminars as an example as to how a concept is independent of time, place and people. Those such as politicians, engage in this behaviour all the time if they do not want to answer a direct question. Particularly in this first seminar, I remember that thinking about concepts as independent of time, place, and people in this way was a breakthrough moment. I had finally realised what this means. More recently in a review of "Awareness of Dying" theory, Andrews and Nathaniel (2015) found it to be still

relevant today as it was fifty years ago. This a great example of a theory being independent of time, place, and people. It can be used today for example, if a doctor contemplates disclosure of terminality to a patient, by using awareness theory, he may anticipate a very wide range of plausibly expected changes and consequences for himself, patient, family member, and nurses. He may judge how far and in what direction the patient's responses may go and how to deal with these responses (Glaser, 2021).

Barney continued by outlining and explaining some of the key properties of GT. He taught us to look for patterns, behaviours that are repeated over and over again; that there is no such thing as missing something because if it is there, then we will see it again. If just one person makes an unusual response, then just ignore it unless it becomes a pattern. He reminded us that an incident illustrates an indicator. He cautioned us that there is a lot of performance anxiety in doing GT. This is borne out in our own seminars and with my PhD students who worry about doing it right. This is especially so when it comes to data analysis and memos. Students constantly worry about how to become more conceptual. Part of the role of the GT seminar is to deal in a practical way with these anxieties and worries. Students are concerned if they digitally record interviews, use interview guides and if they wrote a literature review. I remind them as to why Barney cautions against an initial literature review or using interview guides. This is to ensure that they stay open; open to what is going on in a substantive area and to minimise preconceptions. Barney always said that students should do whatever it takes to conform to the requirements of the PhD and if that includes writing a literature review, then do so. This could be related to the substantive area. For example, in my own PhD I researched how nurses detect and report physiological deterioration in medical and surgical patients. I was required to do a literature review and wrote it in the substantive area of physiological deterioration in general and not how nurses detected it and the difficulties they had in getting patients the help that they needed (Andrews and Waterman 2007). This became a background chapter in the final thesis, something I recommend to my students and those attending seminars if this is a requirement.

He also reminded us that a GT is what participants are doing but they may not be aware of it. They may know the indicators of their behaviour but have not named the concept. Also, because researchers see many indicators and patterns of behaviour, they are in a position to conceptualise those patterns. Participants have multiple perspectives, and the GT researcher raises these to the to the abstract level of conceptualisation (Glaser, 2003). This is not to be confused with privileging the voice of researchers over that of participants or as Bryant and Charmaz (2010, p35) term it, truth claims privileging researchers' knowledge over research participants. In later seminars, Barney warned us against studying what he called tiny topics. For example, becoming a nurse in 1966 could be "becoming a professional" or just plain "becoming." GT is a full methodological package that enables researchers and students to go from "knowing nothing" to an "expert." It is not defined by the data it uses but is a general methodology.

An integral part of the seminar experience was always the one-to-one meeting with Barney, where he set aside time to meet individually with students. This was and continues to be valuable, where the focus is on the individual without the presence of other students. Barney always provided valuable insights into individual studies as well as clarifying anything that needed clarification. His aim was to ensure that students left

the meeting with their anxieties quietened. An anecdote: it was lunch time and I was scheduled to meet Barney shortly before lunch for a one-to-one. He suggested that if we have lunch together, I could have double the time. At the end of lunch at one of the local cafes, Barney just left, forgetting to pay for his lunch. I paid for the two of us. Luckily, we both ate very modestly!

Dr. Helen Scott and I continue to do seminars following the template that we inherited from Barney, because we have found it to be an excellent learning and teaching technique. He was always very inclusive and in later years he accepted students doing constructivist GT. This worked very well despite the differences between the two. We outline similarities and differences, but in a very constructive way and for the purpose of teaching. While we emphasise classic GT and structure “atmosphering” around this, the approach works very well as students do not feel that they are being criticised. This approach is mirrored in a research project that I was involved in, where researchers used different types of GT to collect and code qualitative data in the form of interviews (Gallagher et al 2015). In this study the main versions of GT were used (Classic, Constructivist, and Straussian). It worked because of mutual respect and the fact that the project was coordinated by one person. Coding was done by individual researchers but with an overview by me, using classic GT. It should not have worked but it did.

Helen and I have conducted several seminars online because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We had concerns whether something so interactive would work in such an environment, but it did. We thought that “atmosphering” relied on people to be physically present in order to be effective. However, it worked, and we managed to create a safe environment where students were able to share their research and worries with us. The seminar itself transfers very well to the online format and students seem to get the help they need. We conduct the seminars in exactly the same way as conceived and developed by Barney. Like him, we say that the opening session is not organised so that students can get used to tolerating confusion and organise the talk in their own way. We remind them that they may well leave the seminar confused, but that confusion means that they are on the brink of understanding. We also emphasise precognition, the idea that it takes time for things to settle in the mind and for things to emerge.

In conclusion, Barney originated a very effective way of teaching GT in the form of a seminar. He ensured that GT as originated was taught to the next generation of PhD students and researchers. He created a safe environment in which students felt that they were able to present their anxieties and worries about their research and about applying the methodology. He was always very generous with his time and resources. He gave away books to those who could not afford them. He facilitated the attendance of students who had little or no resources to draw on. He was always supportive and influenced countless of students and their subsequent careers. He had a big influence on me and taught me about GT. Through his encouragement I was successfully awarded the PhD and had a very successful lecturing and research career in University College Cork, Ireland as a result. I am sure that the same can be said of countless others. In more recent years other courses in GT as originated have been developed including Grounded Theory Online, the Institute for Research and Theory Methodology, and in an attempt to reconcile differences within the GT community, the International Grounded Theory Alliance. It is an honour and a privilege to continue his legacy. Rest assured Barney, your work continues.

About the Author

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