What is 'Theory' in Grounded Theory?

Kara L. Vander Linden, Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies

Abstract

Theory is often discussed in relation to research. However, despite its frequent reference, there is a lack of consensus on what theory is. This article briefly discusses some views of theory within sociology and the lack of consensus over what constitutes theory. This lack of consensus makes it important that grounded theorists not only explain what is meant by a theory being grounded in data but also what is meant by theory in grounded theory.

Keywords: theory, grounded theory, definitions, debate

Introduction

As a grounded theorist, I have often explained the "grounded" aspect of grounded theory, that the theory developed is grounded in data. However, more recently I have found myself exploring and explaining "what is theory?" as I have interacted with students and other faculty. As a research instructor, I teach about the role of theory in research, discussing the use of theory as a theoretical framework in qualitative studies, as the source of hypotheses to test in quantitative studies, and as the product of research when using the grounded theory method. However, Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) noted, "Although the word 'theory' is omnipresent in research texts, it is rarely defined precisely and systematically" (p. 488). As I have talked with other faculty, I have realized that we are not always talking about the same thing when we discuss theory. Similarly, many journals require researchers to connect their research to theory, and this requirement frequently appears in peer reviewers' feedback. These comments assume that there is a universally agreed-upon understanding of what theory is. However, as this article will demonstrate, there is not one universally agreed-upon understanding of what theory is; thus, it is important to also explain what we mean by theory as grounded theorists.

What is "Theory"?

Within academic and scholarly literature, there are often many different perspectives and opinions, and such is the case with the term "theory." The question "what is theory?" may seem simple at first, especially if you turn to dictionary definitions. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines theory as "a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles

offered to explain phenomena." The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something." In their brief literature review on how theory literature defines theory, Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) found that the most common and critical element discussed within the literature is that theory explains, which aligns with the dictionary definitions. Despite this common and critical element of theory, there is still much debate about what theory is within and across academic fields and disciplines.

Authors in various fields have written articles to tackle this question and discovered that the meaning of theory varies depending on the context in which it is used and how it is used (Abend, 2008; Gelso, 2006; Gregor, 2006; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021; Thomas, 1997). While some scholars claimed the definition of theory is ambiguous, others believed it is too narrowly conceived. Even within a single academic field, there is often a lack of consensus about what theory is. Since grounded theory emerged from the field of sociology, a need exists to look at what theory is according to scholars from within sociology.

Turner (1991) explained what theory is and some different perspectives on theory as follows:

> Theory is a 'story' about how and why events in the universe occur. Sociological theory thus seeks to explain how and why humans behave, interact, and organize themselves in certain ways. When stated in this way, few would disagree; but, as soon as we question *what kind* of story is to be developed by sociology, controversy and acrimony immediately surface. Sociologists in general, and social theorist in particular, do not agree on such basic issues as what kind of knowledge about human interactions and organizations can be developed, what procedures can and should be used in developing explanations, what ends or goals are to be served by sociological knowledge, or even what phenomena should be the topics of our explanations. (p. 1)

Turner captured the issue in trying to define theory with sociology.

Amend (2008) stated that we must begin by looking at the semantics of the word "theory." He explained, "Like the lexicographer, I want to give an empirical account of different ways in which a particular word is used by competent speakers of a certain language" (p. 177). He did this by classifying sociologists' use of the word "theory" into categories.

Through his work, he developed seven different categories of how sociologist use the term "theory" which he differentiated through subscripts. For example, according to a "reasonably large group of sociologists, . . . [theory] . . . is a general proposition, or logically-connected system of general propositions, which establishes a relationship between two or more variables" (Amend, 2008, p. 177), which Amend labeled as $Theory_1$. In contrast, he identified that to other sociologists "the study of and the students of the writings of authors such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Parsons, Habermas, or Bourdieu" (Amend, 2008, p. 197) is theory and labeled this type as $Theory_4$. As these examples show, there are significant differences between the seven categories of theory he discovered.

Amend (2008) concluded that when sociologists begin talking about theory, they may not even be discussing the same thing and may not even be aware that they are referencing different

things when using the term theory. Often what some sociologists consider theory is not always considered theory by other sociologists. Because a variety of different things are   all referred to as theory, it leads to miscommunication and confusion. Amend's work demonstrates the wide variation of what is considered theory within the field of sociology. If it is hard to develop an agreed-on definition of theory within sociology, then it is even more difficult when looking at what theory is across various academic fields and disciplines.

Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) also looked at the meaning of theory but did not limit it to their field of business. They asserted that defining theory as explanatory knowledge is too limiting and provided four rationales for this view. First, theory as (only) explanatory knowledge "is likely to encourage explanatory knowledge pursuits over others, as they are considered more important, superior and prestigious" (p. 488). Second, it may limit how we theorize. Third, theory as explanatory knowledge "is also likely to impede researchers and practitioners from developing multidimensional understandings of aspects of reality, as there is a tendency to take what is to be explained as given" (p. 489). Fourth, "the dominant meaning of 'theory' disfavours many forms of research that do not pursue the development of explanatory knowledge" (p. 489).

Given these arguments, Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) proposed a broader, more general definition of theory, recommending that all theories should contain the following structural elements. Theory needs "a *purpose*, indicating what it is for [and] should be directed to a *phenomenon*" (p. 491). Theory "must offer some form of *conceptual order* that makes productive distinctions and discriminations concerning this phenomenon, illuminating central features, such as its specific composition, structure, key characteristics and sequence or flow" (p. 491). Theory must also provide new "*intellectual insights* about the phenomenon [and] include *relevance criteria* that can be used to evaluate how effectively it performs its overall purpose, including its scientific or practical usefulness" (p. 491). Theory should also have "some form of *empirical support [and]* is always constrained by *boundary conditions*, such as what aspects of a phenomenon it includes and excludes and its range of application across specific situations and populations" (p 491). However, they also explained that the emphasis of each of these elements will vary across different types of theory. Thus, we might ask if we see these elements within grounded theory.

"Theory" in grounded theory

Given the level of debate regarding what constitutes theory, it is important that we, as grounded theorists, not only explain what we mean by grounded but also what we mean by theory. So, the question is, what do we mean by theory in grounded theory? Luckily, Glaser and Strauss (1967) addressed what theory is when they wrote, "The form in which a theory is presented does not make it a theory; it is a theory because it explains or predicts something" (p. 31). This definition aligns with the general explanatory definition of theory accepted across various fields and disciplines. Yet is this too general given the level of debate?

Glaser and Strauss (1967) provided further guidance on what theory is when they stated,

the interrelated jobs of theory in sociology are: (1) to enable prediction and explanation of behavior; (2) to be useful in theoretical advance in sociology; (3) to be usable in practical applications-prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner under-

standing and some control of situations; (4) to provide a perspective on behavior-a stance to be taken toward data; and (5) to guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of behavior. (p. 3)

Amend's (2008) categorizations of theory within sociology demonstrate that grounded theory is not universally accepted as the only form of theory. However, using this Glaser and Strauss's description of the jobs of theory and the structural elements that Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) proposed, we can explain what theory is in grounded theory.

Glaser and Strauss (1964) and Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) recognized the importance of a theory having a purpose. The purpose of a grounded theory is to explain patterns of behavior used to address a main concern or issue of the people within the topic area. Thus, theories developed using the grounded theory method address Sandberg and Alvesson's recommendation that theory should have a purpose.

To achieve its purpose a grounded theory needs to be conceptual, not descriptive. Concepts are the basic building blocks of theory. A concept is an abstract, generalized idea that is given a name to identify a pattern identified in a real-life phenomenon. For example, the concept of quiet quitting is a name given to a pattern of behavior where people do the basic job they are paid for and not more. However, a grounded theory is more than a group of concepts. It also explains the relationships among the concept in the form of tentative hypotheses. "Grounded theories are made up of interrelated tentative hypotheses that consist of concepts linked by theoretical codes" (Nathaniel, personal communication, September 20, 2022). The concepts and the relationships among the concepts, and the hypotheses that form a grounded theory are never preconceived, imagined, or conjectured. Grounded theorists identify the concepts, their relationship, and the hypotheses through the analysis of data (i.e., the grounded part of grounded theory). Thus, the "*conceptual order* that makes productive distinctions and discriminations concerning this phenomenon, illuminating central features, such as its specific composition, structure, key characteristics and sequence or flow" (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021, p. 491) is grounded in the data using constant comparative analysis in grounded theory. The systematic generation of grounded theory from data that has also been systematically collected clearly fulfills Sandberg and Alvesson's suggestion that theory needs "some form of *empirical support*" (p 491).

The relationship among the concepts, expressed as tentative hypotheses, helps the theory explain and predict patterns of human behavior by explaining on a conceptual level what is happening within data. A grounded theory is about what is happening, not what the researcher thinks should be happening. Thus, the theoretical explanations are useful for practitioners by providing them with an understanding and a theoretical foothold (Glaser & Strauss 1967) into what is happening within the area of study. Thus, the theory provides *intellectual insights* about the *phenomenon* being studied as Sandberg and Alvesson advocated for in theory.

However, for the theory to work, Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) advocated for the need for boundary conditions within theories. The boundaries of a grounded theory determine by where the theory applies conceptually rather than having descriptive boundaries. While at times, grounded theorist bound their theory within a specific topic area, ideally the boundaries of the

theory are concepts that are grounded in the data, which I refer to as grounded boundaries, rather than ones that are pre-determined by the topic area.

Finally, Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) articulated the necessity for "*relevance criteria* that can be used to evaluate how effectively it performs its overall purpose, including its scientific or practical usefulness" (p. 491). Glaser and Strauss (1967) recognized from the creation of grounded theory that it needed its own set of evaluative criteria.   They stated,

> The first requisite property is that the theory must closely *fit* the substantive area in which it will be used. Second, it must be readily *understandable* by laymen concerned with this area. Third, it must be sufficiently *general* to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations within the substantive area, not just a specific type of situation. Fourth, it must allow the user partial *control* over the structure and process of daily situations as they change through time. (p. 237)

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that despite all the debate around "what is theory?" grounded theory is theory. Using the structural elements proposed by Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) to produce a broader, more general definition of theory, we can see how grounded theory addresses these structural elements and may help grounded theorists discuss the theory component of grounded theory. This is not to say that grounded theory is the only type of theory. Amend's (2008) classification of sociological theory demonstrated that forms of theory may extend beyond that of grounded theory and Sandberg and Alvesson's broader, more general definition of theory. However, the grounded theory method does provide researchers with a systematic research method for generating theory across various academic fields and disciplines.

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