

## **Becoming Independent: The Life-Changing Experiences of GT Researchers in China**

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### **Abstract**

The popularisation of Glaser's grounded theory (GT) methodology in China over the past two decades or so has seen some faithful use of classic (Glaserian) GT in several areas (i.e. psychology, culture of rule of law, and nursing) amid the overall misuse and abuse of the methodology. And arising from these endeavours are some life-changing experiences of GT researchers leading towards their academic independence. These individual experiences cover three intertwining aspects, namely inspiration and empowerment of Glaser and his methodology, developing a critical mind, and growth in personal character.

**Keywords:** grounded theory, Glaser, China

### **Introduction**

Over the past two decades or so, Glaser's grounded theory (GT) methodology has been hugely popularised in China. Glaser's books are now available in the National Library of China. And Glaser's virtual participation in seminars and other types of events that took place in China helped the GT researchers better appreciate the methodology and Glaser's own perspective on any derailment of the methodology originated by himself. Having said that, the overall GT research landscape in China is not vastly different from elsewhere in the world. It is observed that the term "grounded theory" has been generally misused. The study of the original texts of the GT methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) is, to a great extent, disregarded. And ironically, what has emerged from China are some self-proclaimed "innovations" including the localisation of GT; thus, the extreme distortion of the original GT methodology (e.g., Chen, 2015; Chen & Wang, 2020; Jia & Heng, 2016, 2020), let alone widespread plagiarism and academic misconduct (e.g., Chen & Wang, 2020; Jia & Heng, 2016, 2020; Wu & Li, 2020) as we have discovered here. This essay outlines the life-changing experiences of some Chinese GT researchers and the journey towards academic independence. In particular, it highlights the following three intertwining aspects of the experiences arising from our own GT research endeavours: inspiration and empowerment of Glaser and his methodology, developing a critical mind, and growth in personal character.

### **Inspiration and Empowerment of Glaser and His Methodology**

Glaser's methodology, per se, has been an immense source of inspiration for those who have been minus-mentored (Glaser, 1998) at their own research institutions. Chen (2020), once a minus-mentored doctoral candidate thinking of quitting her doctoral programme, stated that

Glaser himself, his methodological ideas and experiences are highly critical to the most challenging part of her life, i.e., her doctoral study (personal communications, 18 January, 2022). Fei (2008) shared this view when reflecting upon his experience of being seriously challenged by not having a clearly-defined research problem at the outset of his doctoral project. Similarly, Feng (2022) appreciated Glaser's

life-long work in bringing us such a unique methodology...[and] unceasing academic efforts on GT . . . The words you have written for GT n[ovice] researchers deeply inspired me and helped me complete my paper in two years, which I would never forget in my life.(personal communications · 18 January, 2022)

One of the common challenges that classic (Glaserian) GT researchers often have to address is convincing others that Glaser's GT is perfectly do-able, despite the fact that their colleagues may have a preference towards other methods with the label "GT" on them. In order to overcome this particular challenge that some of us have encountered, Glaser has kindly supported the novice researchers by producing letters of endorsement to, for instance, confirm that the use of secondary data (i.e., a fictional novel) as the sole data type is entirely acceptable in Feng's (2021) study (personal communications, 25 June, 2020). He also empowers Chen's (2020) research into family bereavement, having lost the only child in the Chinese families, describing it as an "excellent topic for a [GT] study" (personal communications, 19 September, 2019).

### **Developing a Critical Mind**

A natural outcome of Chinese classic GT researchers having been inspired and empowered by Glaser and his methodology is the development of a critical mind, an integral feature of academic qualities. As part of her classic GT learning, Wang (2022) has been constantly trained to develop her critical skills that are not always deliberately taught in Chinese universities. Therefore, a significant part of Wang's (2022) GT training covers the critical reading of the methods literature vis-a-vie the original texts and her own grappling with a seemingly messy body of literature.

For instance, Wang (2022) found Bryant's (2019) misinterpretation of both literature review and theoretical coding in GT deeply disturbing:

[u]se of the literature – initially to establish the basis for the research, but far more importantly, to refer to and engage with therelevant literature as an additional and critical form of data against which interim or later analyses can be positioned – this is what is referred to as theoretical coding. (p. xxvi)

She has also discovered some in-text citation inaccuracies in Charmaz (2006), having cross-checked Glaser (1978) and other texts: "[f]ocused coding is the second major phase in coding. These codes are more directed, selective, and conceptual than word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding (Glaser, 1978)..." (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). It casts serious doubt on who had come up with the notion of "word-by-word...coding" in the first place? If it is someone else's, i.e., Strauss's, (1987) idea, why not cite it in order not to cause further confusion?

Bryant and Charmaz's (2007) work is also critiqued when they suggest that

Glaser strongly maintains that GTM (grounded theory methodology) can use all forms of data: qualitative and quantitative. Glaser has consistently made this argument over the years, but it is worth noting that the full title of Glaser and Strauss's book was *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.*" (p. 2)

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) have regrettably chosen to disregard Glaser and Strauss's (1967) explicit assertion, in the very text, that

[a]lthough the emphasis on qualitative data is strong in our book, most chapters also can be used by those who wish to generate theory with quantitative data, since the process of generating theory is independent of the kind of data used." (p.18)

This is indeed "worth noting" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 2) to borrow Bryant and Charmaz's exact phrase. Furthermore, Bryant and Charmaz (2007) argued that "Glaser (2003) recently changed his stance on the grounded theory quest to discover a single basic social process" (p. 9). Wang (2022) has then revisited the original texts and discovered that the notion of "the basic problem and basic social process" (Glaser, 1978, p. 45) has been at the centre of the GT methodology since the very beginning with no change whatsoever.

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) further argued that

Chapter VII of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* concerns 'theoretical elaboration of quantitative data', and so does lay the basis for Glaser's valid contention that GTM can use all kinds of data. But we would still hold to the generally accepted view that GTM is a qualitative research method, even if it can incorporate quantitative data: this characteristic is also true for many other qualitative methods" (p. 26).

According to Wang's (2022) analysis, the very origination of the GT methodology by Glaser and Strauss (1967) addresses "how can we systematically relate qualitative and quantitative research to obtain the best of both methods for generating grounded theory?" (p. 261). It is absolutely not about "incorporat[ing] quantitative data" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 26) in a qualitative research method as suggested by Bryant and Charmaz. To the contrary, the goal of GT is to "systematically relate qualitative and quantitative research to obtain the best of both methods for generating grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 261). As far as quantitative research is concerned, Glaser and Strauss (1967) firmly indicated that "[t]o be sure, there are many styles of quantitative analysis with their own rules. Our focus here is an illustration of how these numerous other styles can also be flexibly adapted to generating theory" (p.187). To recap, "[g]rounded theory is a general methodology for generating theory... It is useful in any field that wishes to generate [a]n inductive theory from systematically collected data, whether qualitative or quantitative" (Glaser, 1978, p.164, emphasis in original).

### **Growth in Personal Character**

Given the passage of time during which we read Glaser's writings, conduct GT studies, and network with GT colleagues around the globe, our level of understanding of the methodology has been undoubtedly increased. The third aspect of life-changing experiences of Chinese classic GT researchers is the growth in personal character arising from coping with multiple challenges and expectations (sometimes, conflicting), working under stress, and being minus-mentored GT researchers (Glaser, 1998). It is evident that the growth in personal character has led us to become more independent in our respective fields.

It is very unusual for a student like Feng (2021) to conduct a full GT study at the master's level. In her recent experience, she then had to cope with a multitude of challenges with support from different sources who witnessed her learnt ability to work under stress. Being the first master's level ever to conduct a full-fledged GT study in China, Feng (2021) found herself in an uncharted territory and has to navigate largely on her own over an extended

period of time permitted for her study. Feng's (2021) own supervisor had no knowledge of GT at all but has agreed for Feng (2021) to explore GT in whichever direction that she wants to go.

Chen's (2020) experience of doing a GT study as a minus-mentored (Glaser, 1998) doctoral candidate highlights a significant part of character building in academic research. Chen had to choose between following the footsteps of her supervisor by adopting a remodeled GT (Glaser, 2003) or to trust and follow her own instinct. Chen chose to adopt Glaser's original methodology with a set of reasons well documented in her thesis. Quite understandably, she has had a real uphill battle to explain, convince, and defend her choice of methodology. Chen (2020) was surely not alone in searching for her autonomy. As Glaser (2005) put it,

[t]his puts a call on one's seniors, on faculty and the social structure of departments to allow the PhD candidate to do his own thing, irrespective of faculty and supervisor desires to have the candidate work on their ideas...it puts a call on supervisor control and ownership of the candidate's work in favour of giving him/her full freedom and license. It is a claim that the candidate must stand for irrespective of senior or supervisor obstruction and efforts to the contrary." (23 August, 2005)

Wang (2022) described her experience of finishing a classic GT study in the doctoral project as a self-renewing one, having observed changes in her levels of thinking and learning capabilities. Both aspects are also part of the challenges she has encountered during the doctoral research. Contrary to Chen (2020), who was minus-mentored (Glaser, 1998), Wang (2022) was fortunate enough to make decisions in GT entirely on her own. The only thing that Wang (2022) has to justify is the use of classic GT and other methods in four separate studies which constitute the whole project. In other words, she has to cope with the institutional expectation that doing a GT study alone is not sufficient and GT's stance of not having to know about her area of research beforehand (Glaser, 1978), having previously conducted the other three studies before GT in her doctoral project.

In writing this essay with some genuinely mixed feelings, I am reminded of those good old days with Glaser at seminars (in-person and virtual), over telephones, and in email exchanges. To conclude, these three aspects of life-changing experiences of ours are highly valuable to ourselves. They are also fairly unique in the sense that we wouldn't have necessarily had these experiences, if we had chosen other methods in our studies. We all admit that we have learned a great deal from Glaser himself and his GT methodology which has subsequently shaped us into who we are. The strength and power that Glaser's GT methodology has given us will be passed on to more people, as hoped by Chen (private communications, 18 January 2022). The GT field in China today, as well as elsewhere, has been filled with a range of other methods all with the label "GT" on them. As we have briefly highlighted in this essay, it is utterly unacceptable that in these other methods branded as GT, there exists some serious flaws pertaining to in-text citation (e.g., "word-by-word" coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57), misinterpretation (e.g., theoretical coding in Bryant, 2019, p. xxvi), and sheer disregard of the original text of Glaser and Strauss (1967) (e.g., "GTM is a qualitative research method" [Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 26]). It, therefore, requires the researchers to sharpen and exercise their judgment by simply (re)visiting the original method and carrying out GT research as intended by Glaser since its origination.

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