

Following suit: Why some choose to remodel the grounded theory methodology in China?

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Abstract

Given the rapid surge in the number of studies claiming the adoption and use of the grounded theory (GT) methodology in China over the past two decades or so, we can now confirm that virtually all studies haven't been at all conducted in accordance with the GT methodology including its variants, let alone the classic one extended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). We are fascinated by the behaviours of those who have chosen to remodel the original GT methodology (Glaser, 2003), a pattern of which is ascertained as "following suit." It explains the solution finding process in relation to their central concern of having their work legitimised. Three overlapping and yet, distinctive sub-dimensions of "following suit" have also been identified, which are named as "fitting-in," "window-dressing," and "pretexting". The notion of "following suit" has its general implications elsewhere and in other methods too, as we have also noticed. And we are alert to the probability that some may use the criterion of "modifiability" of GT (Glaser, 1978) as a pretext of remodelling the GT methodology in the pursuit of their own agendas.

Keywords: grounded theory, remodelling, China

Introduction and scene-setting

In this methodological paper, which is the second instalment of "GT in China," we discuss the intriguing phenomenon of remodelling the GT methodology (Glaser, 2003) specifically in this country. We set out with the initial aim of documenting some disinformation with regards to GT, hoping that our fellow countrymen will be able to become more critical of the extant body of methods literature available. During the course of this joint exercise which will be progressing into the years to come by both experienced and novice researchers, a general pattern of "following suit" constituting three overlapping and yet, distinctive dimensions, to wit "fitting-in," "window-dressing," and "pretexting" has been identified in relation to the remodelling of the GT methodology (Glaser, 2003) as a direct result of our observations and analysis in China.

The focus of this paper is placed explicitly upon the remodelling of the GT methodology (Glaser, 2003) which we have been observing over the years in China. Thus, the purpose is to highlight the central concern of those who have opted to re-configure the methodology and the behavioural pattern surrounding the very concern of getting one's work legitimised. We are convinced that our work contributes to the general body of knowledge as far as GT is concerned, by digging deep into the arguments for and against the remodelling of GT from this part of the world. It is worth emphasising at the outset that this methodological paper itself has never been intended to be a product of a GT study, a point of which we would like to make clear for not misleading the readers in any shape or form. Furthermore, we have written this paper deliberately in a style as it is, the novice GT researchers can, therefore, be able to compare this paper with other ones that have claimed the use of GT including its variants.

In this particular methodological discussion on remodelling, we have intentionally engaged with two novices (i.e. Li & Shi) who are in the process of doing their own GT studies for the master's and doctoral dissertations, respectively. Given that the GT methodology itself is a motivational package (Glaser, 1998), we trust that their participation in the discussions and contribution, however teeny-weeny, to the actual writing of this paper has somewhat planted the seeds (Glaser, 1998) in the young generation here.

We would like to begin by stating our own methodological stance in terms of what grounded theory is and is not. "*Grounded theory is a general methodology for generating theory*" (Glaser, 1978, p.164, emphasis in original). It is not a qualitative methodology, nor a quantitative one, since it "systematically relate[s] qualitative and quantitative research to obtain the best of both methods for generating grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 261). Undeniably, it has been GT's methodological position since its very conception and origination. As part of the scene-setting, we would also like to re-iterate that Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "principal aim is to stimulate other theorists to codify and publish their *own* methods for generating theory." (p. 8, emphasis in original) Given that, we find Charmaz's (2006) notion of "grounded theory ethnography" (p. 22) deeply worrying, as the fundamental principles of the original GT methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) haven't been adhered to in her attempt to re-configure the GT methodology. By the same token, we welcome Corbin's own admission concerning the changes in grounded theory. She has indeed acknowledged the fact that "[t]hroughout the years, what was initially grounded theory has evolved into many different approaches to building theory grounded in data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. viii). In other words, these "different approaches to building theory grounded in data" (p. viii) are not necessarily the original GT methodology that we are able to identify ourselves with. Having said that, we would like to recognize Strauss's contribution to the origination of the methodology (Glaser, 1991) as well as Strauss's (1987) own confession that in "his" grounded theory style concerning its "main elements" (p. 22), "research phases and the operations" (p. 23), and "[b]asic operations" (p. 25), he "reproduced almost wholly from Barney Glaser's *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 1978, with some editing and supplementation. . . . For more detailed statement of these technical aspects of the grounded theory mode of analysis, readers are advised to consult *Theoretical Sensitivity*." (p. 22)

The notion of "following suit" and its dimensions

Definition of "following suit"

The notion of "following suit" represents an overall pattern of behaviour arising from our observations and analysis in nearly two decades that a massive proportion of researchers in China have decided to adhere to the non-GT practices at varying degrees, despite the fact that they all have claimed the adoption and use of GT (including its variants). It is also apparent to us that there is a wide spectrum of awarenesses relating to their choices of GT,

ranging from not knowing anything at all about GT to consciously pursuing the agendas contrary to GT. The notion of “following suit” and its dimensions (i.e. fitting-in, window-dressing and pretexting) are all directed towards the legitimisation of their work, which is a central concern of those we have watched.

Fitting-in

“Fitting-in” refers to the sub-behavioural pattern of “following suit.” By “fitting-in,” it is meant that some have intended to comply with the existing practices in their respective research fields. Knowingly or unknowingly, these practices have nevertheless departed significantly from the original GT methodology. For instance, some have consciously opted for the remodelled versions of GT, given that these variants (e.g. Strauss/Corbin) are the most, if not the only, accepted ones in their own academic circles. Likewise, some prefer to use the qualitative data analysis software in their studies simply because failing to do so is at odds with the popular practice of their colleagues’. On a more general level, the widely-held view that “GT is a qualitative method” reinforces the “fitting-in” or vice versa, leaving it largely unchallenged on the part of the researcher.

We appreciate the fact that some colleagues do have reservations about adopting the full GT methodology originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and articulated by Glaser over the past 50 years or so. And we are grateful that they have indeed made it explicitly clear to us, choosing and using the remodelled GT (i.e., Strauss & Corbin, 1990) actually serves them favourably otherwise. This means they are able to get their academic qualifications and subsequently, jobs, not “rocking the boat” within their academic circles, etc. Otherwise, they would risk losing virtually everything and have to deal with a bleak prospect largely on their own. Put simply, the cost of adopting and using the original GT methodology in its entirety is too high for those unformed researchers, especially in some academic circles in which the remodelled GT has been adopted for quite some time. And unsurprisingly, challenging the status quo comes with a heavy price tag and specifically, the likely consequences of being alienated, marginalised and in some cases that we are aware of, bullied.

A classic example of fitting-in is thus the adoption of qualitative data analysis software. Odd enough, many researchers have learnt the use of the software prior to the GT methodology itself or any other methods. This means that the actual contents in those software tools dictate the breadth and depth of one’s knowledge of his or her method in-use. It has been realised over time that the developer of qualitative data analysis software does not actually know the original GT, to say the least. And for those novice researchers who have chosen to use the software anyway, it is reckoned that it is time saving, easy to manage, convenient and the fact that everyone else is using it. The mainstream view that GT is a qualitative research method and therefore, qualitative data analysis software is an indispensable part of the former, also plays a role in influencing the use of the software for enhancing rigour which qualitative research often lacks. It is also believed that some academic journals and their reviewers may have a preference towards the use of qualitative data analysis software, encouraging the prospective authors to adopt and use the software as a result.

An extraordinary scene with regards to “fitting-in” which is unique outside the English-speaking world, is the role of this popular belief it plays in translating the GT text (i.e., “Discovery of Grounded Theory” [Glaser & Strauss, 1967] Routledge edition). According to a recent analysis carried out by WANG Chunfeng (personal communications, Jan. 10th 2023), a PhD candidate in Nursing, of the Chinese translation of the text, the original GT methodology extended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has been, in this case, distorted and mis-interpreted. And the fact that both terms “qualitative analysis” and “qualitative research” have been used

interchangeably in the Chinese translation, disregarding the originality of the English text, is indeed a serious cause of concern in itself. On numerous occasions, the phrase "qualitative analysis" has been replaced by "qualitative research" in the Chinese text. Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) notion of "systematically relat[ing] qualitative and quantitative research to obtain the best of both methods for generating grounded theory" (p. 261) has been twisted as "obtaining two best methods for generating grounded theory," implying one GT method for qualitative research and another one for quantitative research. All these instances indicate the Chinese attempt, similar to that of Bryant and Charmaz's (2007), of fitting the GT methodology into the view that "GTM is a qualitative research method" (p. 26).

Window-dressing

Window-dressing encapsulates another sub-behavioural pattern in which some researchers have deliberately disguised their work as GT that are in effect, irrelevant to GT whatsoever. The case of window-dressing is upsetting, given the severity of it in China in particular. As we have investigated, nearly all studies under the disguise of GT and its variants (e.g. Strauss/Corbin and Charmaz) haven't been at all conducted in line with their claimed GT variants, let alone the classic one of Glaser's.

One form of window-dressing is the mere adoption and use of the term "grounded theory" itself. One of our colleagues, Dr. TAN Fuqiang, a researcher in creative industries, has pointed out that all what they have been pursuing is just the "skin" (i.e. the term itself) of grounded theory (personal communications, Nov. 4th, 2022). He has also further elaborated on his observation that the mere adoption and use of the term "grounded theory" by some researchers is in essence, a way of competing for fame in academic publishing. In so doing, they believe that it would make their publications appear to be more novel, sophisticated, scholarly, hence more publishable and citable. (personal communications, Jan. 3rd, 2023)

Another form of window-dressing is the use of coding procedures singularly in their adoption of the remodelled GT (e.g. Strauss/Corbin). As we have found out in our analysis, other research procedures (e.g. theoretical sampling) are in actuality, non-existent in virtually all studies in China, despite of their claims to the contrary.

And the most extreme form of window-dressing is academic misconduct including plagiarism in this rat race. The entire research into pain experience which was, in actuality, a study of Corbin & Strauss's (2008), has been plagiarised by the Chinese.

Pretexting

In the English-speaking world, there exists the methods literature which actively promotes and encourages the remodelling and the selective use of the GT methodology. And as far as the Chinese are concerned, we have watched some incredible episodes here in which some have, in turn, cited this particular segment of the literature in English as a pretext of legitimising their own mis-using and abusing of GT. The notion of "pretexting" captures this noteworthy aspect of "following suit."

The Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012) is one of the English sources cited by the Chinese. Gioia et al. (2012) claimed that they had come up with a methodology and named it using the last name of the first author, Gioia. It is particularly entertaining to contemplate that the Gioia methodology is "a systematic approach to new concept development and grounded theory articulation" (p. 15), and yet "[t]hroughout the research process, we work to adhere to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) guidelines for conducting *proper* grounded theory research" (p.28, emphasis added). One of Gioia's colleagues, Corley (2015)

later contradicted himself by openly opposing the idea of “strictly adhering to the original ideas extended by Glaser & Strauss (1967)” (p.600). Having said that, the Chinese (e.g. He & Liu, 2022) then turned a blind eye to the contradictions in the arguments made by Gioia et al., (2012) and Corley (2015) and subsequently cited Corley (2015) to substantiate their insistence on not having to follow the original GT methodology created by Glaser and Strauss (1967). He and Liu (2022) further argued that “modifications and renewals” (p. 1277) were therefore even desirable, having been prompted by Corley (2015).

It is also worth sharing that another colleague of ours, Dr. GAN Tian (personal communications, Sept. 25th, 2022) has detected the fallacy of pragmatism (Creswell, 2014), a popular school of thought among the Chinese, which suggests the free choice of techniques and procedures researchers make (Creswell, 2014). As far as grounded theory is concerned, Creswell (2014) has completely disregarded the original text (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the fact of grounded theory as a methodological package in its entirety (McCallin, 2003), citing that “In GT, I side with the more structured approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990) rather than the less structured Glaser, who has become an outspoken critic of Strauss in recent years (see Glaser 1992)” (Glaser, 2003, p. 157).

In this joint research exercise, we have also challenged, subsequent to our previous investigation (Chen et al., 2022) into Bryant’s (2019) misinterpretation of theoretical coding, Charmaz’s (2006) notion of grounded theory ethnography and her assertion that “[i]n their original statement of the method, Glaser and Strauss (1967) invited their readers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way” (p. 9). With regard to the list of questions raised by Charmaz and her colleagues (Morse et al., 2009) in their quest to change the GT methodology, the Chinese (e.g. Jia & Heng, 2020) have yet again been unquestioning with regards to the GT literature in English, citing Charmaz and her colleagues’ (Morse et al., 2009) list of questions, in addition to Suddaby’s (2006) mingling of the original GT methodology with its remodelled variants, as a licence to distort the GT methodology on their part. The myriad of distortions on the part of the Chinese (e.g. Jia & Heng, 2016) include unsurprisingly, their insistence of only using the primary data in GT studies, doing the sampling in a non-theoretical sampling style, and so on and so forth.

Discussions and concluding thoughts

On the very subject of remodelling (Glaser, 2003), we are particularly cautious of, and quite frankly, very much against any attempt to change the methodology for which all of us have fought so hard in our respective fields and studies. The principle we uphold is that any changes proposed to modify the GT methodology itself have to be kept in line with the tenets of the methodology originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Unfortunately, as we have all observed, this hasn’t at all been the case. In a nutshell, our perspective is whether or not it might be subject to any further changes or modifications is a question of maintaining authenticity and originality of the GT methodology. And to be totally honest, we are highly alert to the possibility that some with various agendas may use the criterion of “modifiability” in the GT methodology (Glaser, 1978) as a pretext of changing it in their own directions.

Given our training in and insistence on adopting the original GT methodology extended by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and subsequently explicated by Glaser (1978), we have been at times falsely accused of not being equally critical especially of Glaser’s writings. On the contrary, we have constantly encouraged ourselves and others to critically scrutinise the writings of Glaser’s. One of the authors (LI) has done so precisely. Let’s hear what she had to say: “In the book “Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs Forcing,” Glaser (1992) touched upon the generation of categories by suggesting “comparing incident to incident and/or to concepts” (p. 40). Whereas in “Theoretical Sensitivity,” Glaser (1978) suggested

comparing indicator to indicator and indicator to concept. "Theoretical Sensitivity" (Glaser, 1978) was written before "Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs Forcing" (Glaser, 1992). Why Glaser changed the term 'indicator' to 'incident'? I am a bit confused" (personal communications, June. 8th, 2022). She was then re-directed to another paper written by Glaser (1965) and came back subsequently, sharing with us that: "I have recently finished reading Glaser's (1965) paper on constant comparative method and re-read Chapter 4 of 'Theoretical Sensitivity'. It seems that I now have a better understanding of the question I put forward before . . ." (personal communications, Aug. 26th, 2022). We have therefore agreed with LI on her own research and analysis and felt hugely excited by the mere fact that she had been critical of Glaser's (1978, 1992) texts and then sought explanations in her self-directed learning of GT.

Having said that, there is an abundant amount of GT literature out there and it is exceedingly challenging for novice researchers to evaluate these materials, regardless of the language(s) in-use. Through our observations over these years, we have witnessed some degree of blind acceptance of GT materials on the part of the researchers. By analysing the behavioural pattern of "following suit" and its three dimensions from the data we have collected in China, we have contributed to the general methodological discussion concerning the remodelling of the GT methodology (Glaser, 2003), i.e. non-adherence to the GT practices. The notion of "following suit" and its dimensions have general implications, as we have observed in other parts of the world and in other methods. Researchers elsewhere too have opted for the lack of adherence of the GT practices originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for an array of reasons including the absence of critical skills on their own part and the dictates of others in this field. To summarize, our stance has been consistently firm throughout the years with regards to the learning and using of the GT methodology. One has to read the methods literature only in English first (whether one likes it or not, English is the working language internationally), has sound knowledge of the original GT methodology vis-a-vis any changes proposed subsequently, and more crucially, learns the GT methodology by actually doing it him/herself (Glaser, 1998) simultaneously. On top of those, one may also have to consider whether one's area of research (including the problem area) dictates his or her choice of the method or vice versa. It goes without saying that the adoption of the original GT methodology of one's own choosing in any given research project does require faith, people skills and guts, since the strict adherence to the methodology originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) may distress lots of colleagues unintentionally.

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