

## **Grounded Theory, Nick Campion**

In conventional social science research, the researcher formulates a hypothesis and then sets out to test it. The researcher is not supposed to go on a 'fishing trip', collecting information. Grounded Theory (GT), on the other hand, proposes that the researcher gathers data and only then allows a hypothesis or research question to develop.

As Denscombe put it,

'in marked contrast to the researcher who sets out to test a theory, the researcher who follows the principles of grounded theory needs to approach the topic without a rigid set of ideas that shape what he or she focuses upon during the investigation. Rather than basing an investigation upon whether certain theories do or do not work, the researcher embarks on a voyage of discovery.'

(Denscombe M., *The Good Research Guide*, Buckingham: Open University Press 1998, p. 215.)

Grounded theory was devised by B.G. Glaser and A.L. Strauss. After their success with *Awareness of Dying*, Glaser and Strauss decided to write a book on methodology. The *Discovery of Grounded Theory* was intended to invite and motivate people to use the newly developed methodology. Unlike later works, it does not provide much advice on how to put the theory into practice. Broadly, the goals of Grounded Theory were to

- Legitimize qualitative research. Having a reference book by established authors helped students defend qualitative studies which were not widely accepted at the time.
- Criticize 'functionalists', for whom behaviour was more important than personal experience: i.e., they measured and quantified behaviour, but could not deal with the complexity of the human condition.
- Demonstrate the possibility of building theories from data, instead of interpreting data in line with theory, reversing orthodox scientific convention.
- Formulate hypotheses based on data, rather than use data to verify hypotheses.

## **Method**

(NB – I don't have full citations for all the quotes which follow – sorry!)

I can create grounded theory methodology, I can write grounded theory, and I can teach grounded theory, BUT, I cannot control how grounded theory methodology is used. [...] forcing and preconceptions are still permitted to insert themselves at various junctures in the studies. [...] Not all of the researchers can "get thee to a mentor"

[..., Glaser 1995, pp. 3, 5]

Grounded Theory (GTM) is a

"general method of comparative analysis" to discover theory with four central criteria, i.e. work (generality), relevance (understanding), fit (valid), and modifiability (control). GTM is "one of the interpretive methods that share the common philosophy of phenomenology". It is a "do-it-yourself methodology" where no research assistant, no research grant, no dues, and no secret handshakes is needed :-)

Glaser 1978, p. 116, Glaser and Strauss 1967, pp.1-2; Stern 1994, p. 213

Generally: the researcher collects data without discrimination – everything can be data – and, by immersing themselves in it, allow abstract theories to develop. This is highly

phenomenological – focusing on the phenomena with no preconceptions. However, this is not as loose as it sounds. GT theorists have constructed a fairly strict system.

First data is gathered.

All data is fundamental to GT, which means that everything that gets in the researcher's way when studying a certain area is data, not only interviews or observations: anything is data that helps the researcher generate concepts for the emerging theory. Field notes can come from informal interviews, lectures, seminars, expert group meetings, newspaper articles, internet mail lists, even television shows, or conversations with friends.

It is even possible, and sometimes a good idea, for a researcher with much knowledge in the studied area to interview him or herself, treating that interview like any other data, coding and comparing it to other data and generating concepts from it. This is the ultimate application of reflexivity.

Hypotheses are generated by constantly comparing conceptualized data on different levels of abstraction, and these comparisons contain deductive steps. GT does not aim for the "truth" but to conceptualize "what's going on" using empirical data. GT thus allows for the systematic generation of theory. According to Glaser himself (1998), 'GT is multivariate. It happens sequentially, subsequently, simultaneously, serendipitously, and scheduled' (Glaser, 1998). The researcher is not looking for linear causes or simple effects.

### **So: the process is as follows**

1. Gather data using any mode of research
2. Coding of data using numbers or letters to identify data which are similar or relate to each other.

A key part of the process is the codification of data to look for consistent themes. Open or substantive coding is conceptualizing on the first level of abstraction. Written data from field notes or transcripts are conceptualized line by line.

In the beginning of a study everything is coded in order to find out about the problem and how it is being resolved. The coding is often done in the margin of the field notes. This phase is often tedious since you are conceptualizing all incidents in the data, which yields many concepts.

These are compared as you code more data, and merged into new concepts, and eventually renamed and modified. The GT researcher goes back and forth while comparing data, constantly modifying, and sharpening the growing theory at the same time as she follows the build-up schedule of GT's different steps.

Selective coding is done after having found the core variable or what is thought to be the core, the tentative core. The core explains the behaviour of the participants in resolving their main concern.

The tentative core is never wrong. It just more or less fits with the data. After having chosen your core variable you selectively code data with the core guiding your coding, not bothering about concepts with little importance to the core and its subcores. Also, you now selectively sample new data with the core in mind - theoretical sampling - a deductive part of GT.

Selective coding delimits the study, which makes it move fast. This is encouraged while doing GT (Glaser, 1998). Selective coding could be done by going over old field notes or

memos which are already coded once at an earlier stage or by coding newly gathered data. Theoretical codes integrate the theory by weaving the fractured concepts into hypotheses that work together in a theory explaining the main concern of the participants. Theoretical coding means that the researcher applies a theoretical model to the data. It is important that this model is not forced beforehand but has emerged during the comparative process of GT. So the theoretical codes just as substantive codes should emerge from the process of constantly comparing the data in field notes and memos.

### **3. Memoing**

The writing of speculative notes and ideas. One might use record cards, or post-it notes, for example.

Theoretical memoing is 'the core stage of grounded theory methodology... Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analyzing data, and during memoing'. (Glaser 1998).

Memoing is also important in the early phase of a GT study such as open coding. The researcher is then conceptualizing incidents, and memoing helps this process. Theoretical memos can be anything written or drawn in the constant comparison that makes up a GT. Memos are important tools to both refine and keep track of ideas that develop when you compare incidents to incidents and then concepts to concepts in the evolving theory.

In memos the researcher develops ideas about naming concepts and relating them to each other. In memos you try the relationships between concepts in two-by-two tables, in diagrams or figures or whatever makes the ideas flow, and generates comparative power. Without memoing, the theory is superficial and the concepts generated not very original. Memoing works as an accumulation of written ideas into a bank of ideas about concepts and how they relate to each other.

Memoing is total creative freedom without rules of writing, grammar or style (Glaser 1998). The writing must be an instrument for outflow of ideas, and nothing else. When you write memos the ideas become more realistic, being converted from thoughts in your mind to words, and thus ideas communicable to the afterworld. In GT the preconscious processing that occurs when coding and comparing is recognized.

The researcher is encouraged to register ideas about the ongoing study that eventually pop up in everyday situations, and awareness of the serendipity of the method is also necessary to achieve good results.

### **4. Sorting**

In the next step memos are sorted – the key to formulation of the theory for presentation to others. Sorting puts fractured data back together. During sorting lots of new ideas emerge, which in turn are recorded in new memos giving the memo-on-memos phenomenon. Sorting memos generates theory that explains the main action in the studied area. A theory written from unsorted memos may be rich in ideas but the connection between concepts is weak.

### **5. Writing**

Writing up the sorted memo piles follows after sorting, and at this stage the theory is close to the written GT product. The different categories are now related to each other and the core variable. The theoretical density should be dosed so concepts are mixed with description in

words, tables, or figures to optimize readability. In the later rewriting the relevant literature is woven in to put the theory in a scholarly context.

Finally, the GT is edited for style and language and eventually submitted for publication.

GT can be divided into 2, 'deep' and 'shallow' (after Green politics)

#### A. Deep GT (not recommended)

Acc to Glaser, GT gives the researcher freedom to generate new concepts explaining human behaviour. This freedom is optimal when the researcher refrains from taping interviews, doing a pre research literature review, and talking about the research before it is written up. HOWEVER, not recommended that you do this as a MA student (walk before you can run).

Glaser argued that literature search Studying the literature of the area under study gives preconceptions.

Taping and transcribing interviews is common in qualitative research, but is counterproductive and a waste of time in GT which moves fast when the researcher delimits her data by field-noting interviews and soon after generates concepts that fit with data, are relevant and work in explaining what participants are doing to resolve their main concern.

Talking about the theory before it is written up drains the researcher of motivational energy. Talking can either render praise or criticism, and both diminish the motivational drive to write memos that develop and refine the concepts and the theory (Glaser 1998).

Positive feedback makes you content with what you've got and negative feedback hampers your self-confidence. Talking about the GT should be restricted to persons capable of helping the researcher without influencing her final judgments.

(Criticism: deep GT is rigid and dogmatic)

#### B. Shallow GT (acceptable)

Use undogmatic, flexible, GT method and allow the material from literature, taped and transcribed interviews, conversations, etc. to speak for itself.

### **General Considerations**

Some would argue that GT is not a qualitative method but a general method that can use any kind of data. However, although working with probabilities, most GT studies are considered as qualitative since statistical methods are not used, and figures not presented.

GT resembles what many orthodox researchers do when they retrospectively formulate new hypotheses to fit data. However, in GT the researcher does not pretend to have formulated the hypotheses in advance since preformed hypotheses are prohibited.

In most research projects, people are units of analysis, whereas in GT the unit of analysis is the 'incident' -i.e., not the person as a part of a group but what they do/experience as an individual

GT is therefore not concerned with data accuracy, as in descriptive research, but is intended to generate abstract concepts.

The results of GT is not the reporting of facts, but

1. probability statements about the relationship between concepts, or
2. an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses developed from empirical data

A GT is never right or wrong, it just has more or less 'fit', 'relevance', 'workability' and 'modifiability': i.e., how far does it help us understand people? The goal of a GT is to discover the participants' main concern and how they continually try to resolve it. The questions in GT are typically 'What's going on?' or 'What is the main problem of the participants and how are they trying to solve it?' or 'What are they feeling?' If the research goal is accurate description then another method should be chosen since GT is not a descriptive method. It aims to generate concepts that explain people's actions regardless of time and place.

The descriptive parts of a GT are there mainly to illustrate the concepts.

- Fit: how closely emergent concepts fit with the incidents they are representing.
- Relevance. A relevant study deals with the real concern of participants, evokes "grab" (captures the attention).
- Workability. The theory works when it explains how the problem is being solved with much variation.
- Modifiability. A modifiable theory can be altered when new relevant data is compared to existing data.

### **Grounded Theory terminology**

A concept is the overall emergent theory and includes the categories which are conceptual elements standing by themselves, and properties of categories, which are conceptual aspects of categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The core variable explains most of the participants' main concern with as much variation as possible. It has the most powerful properties to picture what's going on, but with as few properties as possible needed to do so.

A popular type of core variable can be theoretically modelled as a basic social process that accounts for most of the variation in change over time, context, and behaviour in the studied area.

### **Criticism**

My criticism of GT Theory: GT theorists have constructed a methodology which seems to me (my personal opinion – NC) to be overly dogmatic, counter to the principles of the method and the result of a desire to appear scientific.

### **Resources**

#### **Books**

Glaser, B.G and A.L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

Glaser, B.G., Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory (Mill Valley CA: Sociology Press, 1978).

## **The Grounded Theory Institute**

<http://www.groundedtheory.org/>

<http://www.groundedtheory.com/>

## **The Grounded Theory Review**

<http://www.groundedtheoryreview.com/>

## **Book lists**

<http://kerlins.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch/bibliography/groundedtheory.html>

Allan, George, 'A critique of using grounded theory as a research method', Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, Volume 2 Issue 1 (2003) 1-10.

<http://www.ejbrm.com/vol2/v2-i1/issue1-art1-allan.pdf>

Anon, 'Resource Papers in Action Research: Grounded theory: a thumbnail sketch'  
<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/grounded.html>

Borgatti, Steve, 'Introduction to Grounded Theory

<http://www.analytictech.com/mb870/introtoGT.htm>

Glaser, Barney G., 'Constructivist Grounded Theory?', Forum Qualitative Social Research, Volume 3, No. 3, September 2002. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-02/3-02glaser-e.htm>