Grounded Theory

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Glossary

Constructivist grounded theory – A twenty-first-century revision of Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss’s classic statement of grounded theory. This theory adopts grounded theory strategies without the positivist epistemological underpinnings of the original statement. Instead, constructivist grounded theory (1) is founded on a relativist epistemology, (2) views the method as interactive as well as comparative and inductive, (3) takes into account the multiple and shifting standpoints of the researcher and the researched, (4) builds on the method’s pragmatist heritage, and (5) emphasizes reflexivity.

Theoretical sampling – A grounded theory strategy that involves sampling for the development of the researcher’s emergent theory. Grounded theorists engage in theoretical sampling to fill out the properties of their theoretical categories, to refine relationships between categories, and to identify variation and difference in their emerging theories. Theoretical sampling is only used to develop or test categories late in the analytic process; it is not an initial sampling procedure for beginning data collection.

Grounded theory has two related meanings: (1) a set of systematic methodological strategies that constitute a distinct method for conducting research and analyzing inductive data and (2) the product of this process, the completed theoretical analysis of these data. Here, we focus on the method and the construction of the product, typically a grounded theory that illuminates a substantive area of research interest. Grounded theory strategies consist of systematic, but flexible, guidelines for data gathering, coding, synthesizing, categorizing, and integrating concepts for the explicit purpose of generating middle-range theory. Most fundamentally, grounded theory strategies invoke comparative methods for analyzing data and entail an iterative process of simultaneous data collection and analysis. Grounded theorists engage in emergent analysis to direct their subsequent data collection, which, in turn, they use to develop and check their emerging ideas.

This paper discusses the history and development of grounded theory; compares the contemporary version of the method, constructivist grounded theory, with positivist versions; outlines its main methodological strategies; and suggests its future directions. The originators of grounded theory, sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), explicitly developed analytic strategies for constructing theory from qualitative data; hence, they proposed grounding emergent theories in the data. Thus, the resulting grounded theories explain the data that give rise to them, rather than being separate from the collected data or imposed on them.

History and Development of Grounded Theory

The development of grounded theory reflects its historical location in the 1960s and the intellectual standpoints of its founders. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defended qualitative research at a time when quantitative methods had gained dominance in sociology and throughout most of the academy. Many of Glaser and Strauss’s quantitative contemporaries saw qualitative research as useful only for exploratory research or for constructing more precise quantitative instruments, if they saw any value in it at all. Vibrant University of Chicago qualitative traditions of life-history research and field studies had significantly informed the discipline throughout earlier decades in the twentieth century but had become imperiled by the 1960s.

At that time, qualitative researchers attempted to defend their practice through the framework of quantitative inquiry with its emphases on reliability and validity. Qualitative sociologists focused on making their studies objective through the accuracy and thoroughness of their data collection. Novices had few methodological texts available to guide their work. Instead, they learned about conducting qualitative inquiry primarily through mentoring and immersion in fieldwork.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) took up the methodological debates of their day and answered criticisms of qualitative inquiry in their initial statement of grounded theory, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. They realized that other researchers could use the methods they had developed in their studies of the social organization of dying. In this book, Glaser and Strauss explicitly confronted their discipline and also implicitly revealed the traditions that each brought to the research process. Strauss
brought his University of Chicago background to grounded theory with its Chicago School traditions of naturalistic inquiry, pragmatist assumptions, and symbolic interactionist perspective. Thus, Strauss emphasized field research, viewed individuals as active agents, saw interaction as open ended, took into account language and meaning, and focused on action, all of which informed grounded theory.

Simultaneously, Glaser brought systematic methods, an explicit logic, and a concept-indicator model to grounded theory. Glaser's training at Columbia University in rigorous quantitative methods influenced his goal to create an analogous codification of qualitative methods like his mentor, Paul Lazarsfeld, had established in quantitative inquiry. Glaser supplied much of the logic and language of grounded theory and built the method on assumptions of externality, neutrality, and parsimony.

The two originators converged on five main points. Both of them:

1. emphasized constructing emergent theories with new ideas;
2. contended that qualitative research could generate theory;
3. viewed grounded theory as a method for conducting rigorous, processual analyses;
4. advocated using comparative methods throughout the analytic process; and
5. intended to provide specific tools for theory construction.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged the nature and purpose of sociological theory and attempted to demystify what theorizing entailed. By the 1960s, theorizing in sociology had become the purview of a few elite scholars who seldom based their theoretical notions on empirical research. The division of labor separating empiricists and theorists had widened into a chasm. Most theorists aimed to pursue qualitative research and to claim grounded theory as their method of choice. Most of these students treated grounded theory as a justification for conducting inductive qualitative research. Even if they adopted several grounded theory strategies, they seldom used them as Strauss and, particularly, Glaser had envisioned. Glaser and Strauss's work inspired generations of graduate students in the social sciences and professions to pursue qualitative research and to claim grounded theory as their method of choice. Most of these students treated grounded theory as a justification for conducting inductive qualitative research. Even if they adopted several grounded theory strategies, they seldom used them as Strauss and, particularly, Glaser had envisioned. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) book made rallying claims and proposed explicit methodological strategies, although the latter remained opaque to most readers. Glaser's (1978) book, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, made the methodological strategies more explicit but his dense writing, dearth of clear definitions, and lack of an index reduced the book's effectiveness as a research resource for most readers who had not studied with him.

process of theory construction inherent in grounded theory in favor of conceptual description and preconceived techniques. When stripped of their acrimony, several of Glaser's main charges were correct. The first two editions of *Basics of Qualitative Research* seemed procedural and prescriptive and lacked the emphases on flexible guidelines and emergent inquiry in the earlier works. Most researchers, however, remained untroubled by the apparent discontinuities between the *Discovery* book and Strauss and Corbin's texts (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007).

Charmaz's (2000) and Bryant's (2002) critiques took grounded theory in new directions. They each viewed both Glaser's (1978, 1992) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) versions of grounded theory as tied to positivist epistemologies. Unlike earlier critics of grounded theory, Charmaz and Bryant each argued that researchers could adopt the methodological guidelines of grounded theory without importing positivist assumptions with these guidelines. The guidelines could be used from a variety of epistemological starting points and initial theoretical standpoints, as is evident in educational studies. Thus, Charmaz and Bryant aimed to retain key grounded theory strategies but to reposition them in twenty-first-century epistemologies and ontologies. Publication of Charmaz's (2006) book, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, offered an accessible explication of how to conduct a grounded theory study founded on a different set of epistemological principles. The subsequent *Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007) covered the range of versions of grounded theory from positivist to constructivist and showed the varied ways in which grounded theory informs the contributors' thinking and research practice.

**Comparing Constructivist and Positivist Grounded Theory**

Constructivist grounded theory builds on the original statements and strategies that Glaser and Strauss (1967) first articulated. The contrasts in epistemology between constructivist and positivist versions of grounded theory, which we outline here, are greater than those between constructivist grounded theory and Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) postpositivist versions (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). Grounded theory is an evolving method, not simply because of different methodologists' visions but because Glaser (e.g., 1998, 2003) and Corbin (Corbin and Strauss, 2007) have revised their earlier versions of the method. Nonetheless, Glaser has maintained a highly consistent logic and epistemology over four decades.

In brief, constructivist grounded theory arises from a relativist epistemology, challenges positivist assumptions in earlier versions of grounded theory, and aligns the method with interpretive inquiry. It treats grounded theory strategies as flexible guidelines that serve as heuristic devices. Constructivist grounded theory has roots in social constructionism, takes action as a central concern, builds on the pragmatist legacy of Anselm Strauss, and assumes that the researcher is part of the research process. Subsequently, constructivist grounded theorists engage in reflexivity throughout the research process, which fosters attending to the varied standpoints of both the researcher and the researched. Constructivists argue that all knowledge flows from standpoints, both those preceding inquiry and occurring within it.

The relativism inherent in constructivist grounded theory assumes multiple, layered realities that shift and change under different conditions. Realities may then be elusive and the researcher's actions become part of them. Fact and value merge. Constructivist grounded theorists define facts through the values that allow them to see. For example, a nuanced understanding of poverty may alert an educational researcher as to how its invisible consequences affect the relative effectiveness of program initiatives in the schools. A middle-class researcher without this sensitivity may not see the same facts as the first researcher.

The relativity of constructivism contrasts with the objectivism inherent in positivism. Grounded theorists, who adhere to positivism, treat reality as unitary and, for the most part, self-evident. Fact and value are separate in this view. Positivist grounded theorists attempt to find objective facts in an external reality and question the subjectivism that may enter constructivist grounded theory through the researcher's choice of topics and methods, such as intensive interviews. Constructivists attempt to recognize the subjective origins of method – and knowledge – rather than to erase their existence. Thus, constructivists try to place subjectivity in its social locations and examine it reflexively.

Constructivist and positivist grounded theorists take divergent positions on data collection. Constructivist grounded theorists advocate gaining an insider's view of the research problem, setting, and participants, which means gathering extensive rich data about research participants' lives and worlds through sustained interaction rather than limited interviews or isolated visits. The depth and extent of data facilitate the researcher's efforts to go beneath the surface and enter the liminal world of research participants' implicit actions and meanings. Constructivists follow the pragmatist prescription of paying attention to language as a way to learn participants' implicit meanings and to understand their actions. For constructivists, the detailed work involved in gaining an insider's view allows discovering variation in the studied process and identifying difference in the analyses. Gathering extensive rich data is also the first step toward making the subsequent research product credible.

In contrast with constructivists, positivist grounded theorists do not attend closely to data collection. They
believe that detailed data distract researchers from discovering and pursuing the analytic focus. Hence, several proponents argue against transcribing interviews, a step most qualitative researchers see as a given. Positivist grounded theorists emphasize gathering only enough data to explicate their emergent category or categories. These researchers tend to take language and meanings for granted without examining their implicit meanings and relationship to action.

The objectives of constructivist and positivist grounded theory differ, particularly those in Glaser’s (1978, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) version of grounded theory. He aims to identify variables, make parsimonious generalizations, and offer useful explanations, all of which transcend the particularities of historical and social locations. Constructivist grounded theory, in contrast, aims for interpretive understanding and situated knowledge. This approach locates the research process and product in its historical, social, and situational contexts. Hence, situated knowledge takes into account positionality and particularities (Clarke, 2005) and informs the researcher’s interpretations of the data.

Given the relativity and reflexivity that constitute constructivist grounded theory, it follows that constructivists view data as co-constructed with research participants, whether these data consist of interviews or documents or anything else. The co-construction of an interview may be readily discernible as interviewer–respondent interactions proceed. Nevertheless, co-construction occurs with other forms of data as well. We may not construct documents, but how we read them depends on our view of their purposes and, moreover, the questions and frames we bring to them.

As Bryant and Charmaz (2007) point out, grounded theory has become a general method albeit with several versions. It reaches multiple disciplines and fields and stretches across the globe. Several grounded theory strategies, particularly qualitative coding and simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, have become generalized as routine practices in qualitative inquiry. Other qualitative researchers may not use specific grounded theory methodological strategies as grounded theorists do, but nonetheless adopt aspects of them. Many educational researchers adopt grounded theory coding strategies for synthesizing data and defining themes but not for theoretical analyses of processes.

Despite its differences from other versions of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory practice shares much in common with them. All versions of grounded theory:

1. begin with an inductive logic;
2. emphasize the analytic process;
3. endorse explicit analytic guidelines, although we differ on which guidelines we adopt;
4. aim for abstract conceptualization to advance theory construction;
5. engage in an iterative process to advance the analysis; and
6. intend to encourage innovation.

Perhaps ironically, the recent explication of constructivist grounded theory has advanced all variants of the method because it concretely showed how to employ grounded theory logic and strategies.

### Grounded Theory Strategies and Educational Research

The grounded theory method consists of flexible, yet distinct, strategies that distinguish it from other qualitative approaches. Educational researchers have adopted and adapted certain strategies, particularly grounded theory coding, to fit their research problems and practice. A major contribution of educational researchers is to integrate grounded theory strategies with ethnography, case studies, and often multisite case studies that use several types of data collection.

The relationship between extant theory and grounded theory construction and the place of the literature review remain contested by both grounded theory critics and its proponents. Classic grounded theorists eschew relying on extant theory and enjoin researchers to delay the literature review until they develop their own analyses. Both strategies are intended to help researchers avoid preconceiving their ideas by forcing data into extant concepts.

The constructivist response to these strategies is consistent with grounded theory practices in educational research that draw upon earlier ideas but subject them to empirical inquiry, such as Coburn and Talbert’s (2006) use of sense-making and institutional theory while starting with descriptive codes with little interpretation. Constructivist grounded theorists argue that researchers:

1. already possess a fund of knowledge and experience before they begin;
2. may draw on broad ideas from their experience or discipline as starting points for data collection but not as ending points analysis;
3. should remain open to the empirical world; and
4. must subject all ideas about it to rigorous scrutiny, including their own emerging theoretical notions.

Constructivists position their research in relevant literatures and explain how it advances knowledge. This approach fits theoretically driven studies in education, which begin inquiry from theoretical positions, such as Thornberg’s (2008) inclusion of domain theory in moral education, Qin and Lykes (2006) starting with feminist theory, and Valadez’s (2008) use of structuration.

The specific methodological strategies of grounded theory support analyzing processes. Three main strategies
comprise the grounded theory method: coding, memo-
writing, and theoretical sampling. Coding means applying
a short-hand label to sort, synthesize, and conceptualize
data. It involves two stages: initial coding, which empha-
sizes gaining an analytic handle on the data by defining
them, and focused or selective coding, which entails using
the most frequent and/or significant initial codes to sort
and synthesize data. Memo-writing consists of writing
about tentative ideas and emergent categories and in-
cludes the crucial intermediate stage of writing between
coding data and writing the first draft of a paper. Theo-
retical sampling is the strategy that grounded theorists use
after developing some tentative conceptual categories to
fill out these categories, although most do not take their
studies into explicit theory construction.

During initial coding, grounded theorists look for pro-
cesses in the data and attempt to show processes through
choosing words as codes that describe what people are
doing and what is happening in the settings. Educational
researchers often pursue practical problems, which their
codes reflect. Eich (2008) aimed to discover the elements
of effective student leadership development programs
and began by coding for program attributes, actions, and
outcomes.

Glaser (1978) described grounded theory as sociology
of gerunds because these words depict actions. Using
gerunds helps researchers to see what people are doing
and what is occurring. Furthermore, coding with gerunds
helps researchers to identify a significant process that
conceptualizes and integrates the studied phenomena.

Qin and Lykes (2006) not only capture the grounded
theory emphasis on a significant process in their study,
‘Reweaving a fragmented self’, but they also show how
specific subprocesses, such as ‘integrating traditional values’
(p. 185) and ‘breaking the web’ (p. 187), and ‘rethinking
‘the homeland’ ” (p. 191) become analytic categories that
contribute to this overall process. Qin and Lykes delineate
the conditions under which Chinese women students’
understanding of themselves (1) had become fragmented
before leaving China, (2) became fragmented after com-
ing to the United States, and (3) became rewoven into a
transformed self. Qin and Lykes’s use of grounded theory
reflects constructivist principles of using a theoretical
perspective as an initial lens to look at data, acknowledging
standpoints and starting points, maintaining reflexivity
throughout the research process, and subjecting their theo-
retical notions to rigorous scrutiny. They end their analysis
by challenging grand meta-narratives of feminist theory.

Initial line-by-line coding is a heuristic device that
leads the researcher to study each line of data to discern
the action it indicates. When researchers code in gerunds
and keep their codes short, precise, and analytic, as Qin
and Lykes’s categories indicate, they can discern relation-
ships between codes and begin to see larger processes
unfold.

This type of coding differs from most qualitative cod-
ing because the latter typically defines general topics and
themes, rather than actions and processes. Furthermore,
grounded theorists compare data with data, as Eich com-
pared the attributes and actions of programs with each
other. The next stage of coding, focused coding, takes the
comparative process a step further. Here, researchers use
the most frequent and/or significant codes to sort and
synthesize data. Hence, focused coding prompts research-
ers to scrutinize data through the lens of selected initial
codes and thus puts these codes to test.

Memo-writing proceeds from the start and becomes
more analytic and directed as inquiry ensues. Initially, a
researcher’s memos might consist of hunches, questions,
and areas to explore during subsequent data collection.
Gradually, researchers write more analytic, abstract memos
on their emerging theoretical categories. A major purpose
of memo-writing is to explore the potential of selected
focused codes as tentative categories. Subsequently, re-
searchers define these codes by the properties they see in
the data. These definitional aspects are crucial. The defined
properties do not inhere in the data. Rather, researchers
define them through interacting with the data during the
analytic process as well as during actual data collection.
Through memo-writing, a researcher can break a tentative
category open as well as articulate the conditions under
which it develops or changes, its relationship to other cate-
gories, and its consequences. Memo-writing allows construc-
tivist grounded theorists to explore research participants’
tacit as well as overt meanings and actions.

Writing memos keeps the researcher active in the
analytic process as well as alert to unanswered questions
about the data. These memos demonstrate the links
between the researcher’s emerging theoretical analysis
and the data. Not only does a memo capture the research-
ner’s ideas about a tentative category, but it also contains
and weighs evidence for this category. Memo-writing
encourages the researcher to make systematic compari-
sions between data as Thorenberg (2008) compared chil-
dren’s responses to moral questions for their similarities
and differences.

As an intermediate but imminently correctable stage
of writing, memo-writing shortens the distance between
coding and writing first drafts. Advanced memos provide
the substance for framing papers and chapters and, when
taken collectively, may indicate a logical ordering. If
grounded theorists define a major process in the data,
their explication of the process can order the memos.

By engaging in memo-writing, researchers often find
that they need more data to illuminate their categories or
to find variation in the studied process. Hence, they return
to their research participants and gather more data or
build further questions into subsequent data collection.
In short, they engage in theoretical sampling to fill out the
properties of their categories. Perhaps because the term
theoretical sampling borrows language from quantitative research, it is the most misunderstood of the grounded theory strategies. Theoretical sampling is a sampling that develops the researcher's emergent theoretical analysis; it is not representational or initial sampling. Having developed a set of categories is prerequisite for conducting theoretical sampling. In short, theoretical sampling provides a means for researchers to check, elaborate, and assess their emerging categories and to obtain the data to help them demonstrate how their analytic categories fit together. Thus, conducting theoretical sampling buttresses researchers' claims to making their studies grounded.

Future Directions

Grounded theory offers educational researchers a method that complements varied forms of qualitative data collection and that will expedite their work. Adopting more grounded theory strategies will enable educational researchers to further the theoretical reach of their studies and to make tacit meanings and processes explicit. Constructivists have not only re-envisioned grounded theory, but also revised it in ways that make the method more flexible and widely adoptable than its earlier versions.

In the past, grounded theory has often been viewed as separate from other methods. Now, the constructivist version makes the usefulness of combining grounded theory with other approaches more apparent, as is evident in grounded theory studies in education. Grounded theory can make ethnography more analytic, interview research more in-depth, and content analysis more focused. Several computer-assisted qualitative data analysis programs are built on grounded theory, and this method can add innovation to mixed methods research. Grounded theory emphasizes focusing data collection and checking and developing analytic ideas. Hence, grounded theory offers the tools for building strong evidence within the analysis and for explicating processes. Consequently, grounded theorists in education have a bright future for making powerful arguments in areas such as curricular studies, educational leadership, and educational policy.

See also: Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis; Ethnography; Interpretive Research; Interviews and Interviewing; Life History; Mixed Methods; Participant Observation; Pragmatism; Qualitative Data Management; Validity: Mapping Diverse Perspectives.

Bibliography


Further Reading


**Relevant Websites**

http://sbs.ucsf.edu – Anselm Strauss website.
www.dahsm.medschool.ucsf.edu – University of California, San Francisco: School of Medicine.