

Grounded theory methodology - has it become a movement?

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EDITORIAL

Grounded theory methodology – has it become a movement?

There is an ongoing debate regarding the nature of grounded theory, and an examination of many studies claiming to follow grounded theory indicates a wide range of approaches. In 1967 Glaser and Strauss's "The Discovery of Grounded Theory; Strategies for Qualitative Research" was published and represented a breakthrough in qualitative research; it offered methodological consensus and systematic strategies for qualitative research practice. The defining characteristics of grounded theory include: simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, construction of analytic codes and categories from data (not from preconceived logical hypotheses), use of the constant comparative method/analysis that involves making comparisons during all steps of the analysis, developing theory during each step of data collection and analysis, memo-writing to elaborate categories, etc., theoretical sampling aiming toward theory construction (not representativeness), and conducting a literature review after performing the analysis and developing theory. When developing a theory, identification of a core category is central for the integration of other categories into a conceptual framework or theory grounded in the data. Most grounded theories are substantive theories because they address delimited problems in specific substantive areas.

Another aspect that is important to highlight is that the problem that is focused on in grounded theory is called the main concern; the solution to this main concern is hence the core category. These are the foundations of Glaserian grounded theory, sometimes also called classic grounded theory.

About 20 years later Strauss (1987) moved grounded theory toward verification and, together with Corbin as a co-author, this direction was furthered. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) version of grounded theory also favours new technical procedures rather than emphasising comparative methods. This direction in grounded theory is sometimes called Straussian grounded theory.

Dey's (Dey, 1999) research offers a variation on grounded theory. While his approach is grounded in the Glaserian version, had borrows from Strauss and other researchers' approaches when it fits his purpose.

By 1990 grounded theory was critiqued for its positivistic assumptions, as it had gained acceptance from quantitative researchers. However, some researchers moved grounded theory away from the positivism of Glaserian and Straussian grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978).

Charmaz is one of these researchers. She moved from conceptual theory in grounded theory towards a constructivist mode of grounded theory. Charmaz retains most of the defined characteristics, but takes a more subjective and reflexive stance. The outcome of a constructivist grounded theory is presented as a narrative including categories, but not as a theory (Charmaz, 2006/2008).

Schatzman (1991) developed a dimensional analysis as a response to the limitations he saw in grounded theory. Dimensional analysis, like grounded theory, was designed for theory generation directly from data. Schatzman appreciated the power of constant comparison, but it did not fulfil the needs of a deeper understanding; the analysis/perspective needed to be viewed in a much more expansive and complex way. Schatzman was convinced that taking perspectives into account when doing the analysis was necessary.

Clarke re-grounded grounded theory by including assumptions of feminism and poststructuralism to create a fusion (Clarke, 2005). Influences from symbolic interactionism as well as from constructivism were incorporated in this fusion of grounded theory. Clarke presents a situational analysis for grounded theorists.

The grounded theory approaches presented above show us how grounded theory has been developed and expanded; as readers we can easily follow the pathway along which grounded theory methodology has progressed, yet still recognize its foundations.

In addition to the above, we find publications claiming to perform a modified grounded theory, or that state they are be inspired or influenced by grounded theory. The question is, are they really performing grounded theory at all?

Since the original publication of "The Discovery of Grounded Theory; Strategies for Qualitative Research", many different approaches to doing grounded theory have emerged. Is there one single method for grounded theory? I would like to answer that question in the affirmative. There is one

method, but one that takes many directions that are assumed to share common foundations. It should perhaps also be noted when using grounded theory that we need to be clear in which direction within grounded theory we are working. The defined characteristics of grounded theory must be present, or at least most of them, if an approach is to be called grounded theory. Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis is essential, rather than data being first collected and then analysed. Fundamental techniques such as theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, hierarchical coding processes and identification of a core category should be used by the researchers. As such, hence the philosophical, epistemological and methodological approaches can vary. These aspects have been very well presented and reflected upon by Hallberg (2006). Hallberg has also pointed out that ontological and epistemological standpoints are embedded in the different directions of grounded theory and need to be reflected upon by those conducting grounded theory.

These defined characteristics give the reader a hint and an understanding that grounded theory methodology is being used—and not just qualitative analysis. Grounded theory methodology is about research questions, data collection, analysis and generating theory; it is not solely data analysis.

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