

Selecting the Methodological Path: A Beginner's Guide to Grounded Theory Approaches

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ABSTRACT

A grounded theory methodology is a qualitative approach to exploring and describing social processes based on the people's perspective and the researcher's philosophical position. Since the methodological approach is a consequence of the philosophical orientation of the researcher, it is imperative to consider the role of the researcher in the interpretation of the data, the place of the literature review in shaping the theoretical models, the research questions, and the approaches to the data analysis to be able to justify the choice of a specific type of grounded theory approach. Since the grounded theory is too broad a methodology, this article will help provide a novice-level researcher with structuring and developing a grounded theory methodology consistent with the essential elements of each grounded theory type.

Keywords: *Grounded theory; Classical grounded theory; Straussian grounded theory; Constructivist grounded theory; Theoretical sampling.*

Introduction

Grounded theory (GT) methodology, a qualitative research approach, is frequently employed to explore and describe social processes from the perspectives of individuals experiencing the particular social phenomenon under investigation (Birks & Mills, 2012). Widely applied in diverse academic disciplines such as education, psychology, and nursing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), GT encompasses three distinct schools: Classical Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Straussian Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2008). In essence, grounded theory seeks to comprehend the actions of individuals from their own viewpoint. It endeavors to unveil the core problem at the heart of a social phenomenon and subsequently elucidate how individuals address and resolve this issue through their behavior. The resolution process becomes the central variable under scrutiny. The main goal of the grounded theory is to uncover the principal phenomenon of interest and the underlying social processes that elucidate how individuals navigate and resolve their concerns. The methodology involves the generation of emerging conceptual categories, complete with associated properties, which are then synthesized into a substantive theory grounded in the empirical data. This dynamic process unfolds as researchers concurrently collect data, analyze findings, and engage in participant sampling. The methodology is inherently iterative, with researchers cycling through data collection, categorization, description of emerging phenomena, and revisiting earlier stages. Central to grounded theory is the constant comparative analysis, a pivotal procedure aimed at developing and refining theoretically linked categories and concepts. This involves a continuous comparison of generated categories against previously collected data, facilitating the identification of similarities, differences, and variations. As the data collection progresses, the process gradually hones in on emerging theoretical concerns. Commonly, in-depth interviews and participant observation serve as primary data sources, supplemented by relevant documents when applicable. Typically involving 20 to 40 informants, grounded theory literature stresses the importance of the simultaneous nature of data collection, analysis, and sampling.

This article is a comprehensive guide for novice researchers venturing into grounded theory, underscoring the researcher's pivotal role in data interpretation. It emphasizes the influential role of literature reviews in shaping theoretical models, research questions, and data analysis approaches, providing a robust justification for choosing grounded theory methodology.

The Birth of the Grounded Theory

In the 1960s, the grounded theory was conceived by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, who initially introduced this innovative methodology at the School of Nursing, University of California. Glaser and Strauss's seminal work, "The Discovery of Grounded Theory," marked the inception of this approach (Birks & Mills, 2012). However, owing to differences in their methodological perspectives, Glaser and Strauss opted for separate paths. Glaser pioneered Classical Grounded Theory, while Strauss, joined by nurse Juliet Corbin, developed Straussian Grounded Theory, earning the moniker of second-generation grounded theorists. Strauss and Corbin expounded their methodology in the controversial book "Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques," elucidating the foundational procedures for constructing substantive-level theory. In response to the divergence in their methodologies, Glaser formulated his distinct approach, outlined in the book "Emergence Versus Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis" in 1992. Emphasizing the essence of grounded theory, Glaser underscored its purpose in generating concepts and theories that account for and interpret behavioral variations within the investigated substantive area. Contrastingly, Strauss and Corbin envisioned grounded theory as a tool to describe the complete spectrum of a phenomenon's behavior, irrespective of its relevance or variation. This marked the evolution of the second-generation grounded theory. The emergence of a third generation of grounded theorists is attributed to Kathy Charmaz, a student of both Glaser and Strauss. Charmaz introduced Constructivist Grounded Theory, offering her distinct perspective on this methodological framework (Birks & Mills, 2012; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This expansion of grounded theory approaches has found extensive application across diverse academic domains, including sociology, education, and medicine. Since their inception, these three grounded theory approaches have been widely employed in academic research. Scholars and researchers in social and medical fields have conducted studies utilizing Classical, Straussian, and Constructivist grounded theory approaches, reflecting this versatile methodology's enduring influence and adaptability.

Theoretical Sampling

The significance of theoretical sampling in grounded theory methodologies extends beyond mere data collection; it is an intricate and iterative process designed to enhance the rigor and depth of qualitative research. Theoretical sampling, embedded in the core of grounded theory across various schools, operates as a dynamic tool throughout the entire research journey. The essence of theoretical sampling lies in its role as an ongoing data collection strategy conducted concomitantly with the analysis process. This deliberate and strategic approach aims to gather data and systematically validate and elucidate emerging concepts (Fassinger, 2005). At the heart of grounded theory studies, the process involves the meticulous selection of participants based on predefined criteria, followed by a thorough analysis of their contributions. This cyclic method persists until the critical point of data saturation is attained, signifying that no novel information is being uncovered. Theoretical sampling aims to reach theoretical saturation, where the corpus of data becomes saturated with insights, rendering further data collection redundant. This marks a crucial juncture in the research process, indicating that the emerging theory has comprehensively understood the phenomenon under study. The selection of participants in theoretical sampling is not arbitrary; instead, it is intricately linked to the evolving conceptualization of the study. The researcher, guided by the emergent concepts and categories, strategically determines whom to include in the study to enrich and refine the evolving theory. As the research approaches saturation, final sampling takes center stage. This phase is pivotal in confirming or refuting the nascent theory, ensuring its robustness and applicability. The continued collection and analysis of data during this stage serve as a comprehensive validation mechanism, further solidifying the credibility and generalizability of the grounded theory. In essence, theoretical sampling in grounded theory represents a dynamic, responsive, and systematic approach that captures the richness of data and contributes to the methodical development and refinement of a grounded theory, adding depth and nuance to the research findings.

Epistemological Perspective

Creswell (2013) underscores the pivotal role of epistemology in qualitative research, emphasizing its significance in effectively communicating the study to the audience. A researcher's philosophical stance fundamentally shapes the formulation of research problems, the framing of research questions, and the methodology employed to gather information and address those questions. Grounded theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism (Aldiabat & Navene, 2011), draws upon an empirical perspective of human interactions and behavior, interpreting these phenomena through the lens of symbols imbued with meaning or value (Blumer, 1986). Notably, researchers bring diverse philosophical perspectives to their approach to grounded theory (Singh & Estefan, 2018). Glaser (1978), aligning with a positivist philosophy in his Classical grounded theory, posits that a studied phenomenon reflects a social process. Positivism asserts the existence of an objective reality independent of human interaction, emphasizing an objectivist view that seeks independence from subjectivity (Hall et al., 2013). Classical grounded theorists, influenced by this perspective, adopt a passive approach to research, allowing data to manifest itself while maintaining the objectivity and impartiality of the researcher. Glaser (1978) contends that data remains uncontaminated when approached with objectivity and lack of bias.

In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (2015), influenced by the philosophical tenets of symbolic interactionism, argue for the construction of reality. They advocate for active researcher involvement in the theory development process, acknowledging the need for systematicity to prevent subjectivism. Consequently, Straussian grounded theory embraces the role of the researcher in shaping and constructing reality. Philosophical positioning significantly influences the choice of the grounded theory approach. For instance, a post-positivist researcher, in alignment with an objective view of reality, follows an integrated approach where the construction of knowledge is inseparable from the method to avoid subjectivity, reflecting the Straussian version. Charmaz (2006) introduces a distinct perspective with Constructivist grounded theory, viewing reality from multiple perspectives. According to Charmaz (2006), reality is dynamic and contingent on the researcher's interpretation. This approach encourages researchers to derive knowledge of reality through multiple interpretations, recognizing the impact of their previous experiences in shaping these interpretations. In this way, Constructivist grounded theory stands apart from the Classical and Straussian perspectives, embracing the fluidity and multiplicity inherent in constructing reality.

Role of the Researcher

Grounded theorists play a pivotal role in the interpretation of data, shaping their understanding of reality through this interpretive lens. Strauss and Corbin (1998) assert that the analysis and interpretation of data are integral to the grounded theory method, necessitating active involvement by the researcher. The Straussian grounded theory framework advocates for a dynamic interaction between the researcher and participants, emphasizing the researcher's pivotal role in theory development while maintaining a strategic distance from the data and analysis to mitigate subjectivity and biases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this approach, the researcher engages in participant interactions and constructing substantive-level categories at each stage yet employs a systematic approach to maintain objectivity. Contrastingly, Glaser (1978) posited that the grounded theory researcher functions as a distant observer and an independent investigator. This perspective underscores an objective relationship between the researcher and participants, aiming to discern true meanings without biases or undue influence on interpretation (Lauridsen & Higginbottom, 2014). Glaser and Strauss stress the importance of objectivity in theory development. In contrast to the emphasis on detachment in traditional grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) champions a Constructivist grounded theory approach. Here, the researcher actively participates in the theory generation process, viewing reality as a co-constructed outcome of interactions between the researcher and participants. In this perspective, the researcher and research process are inseparable, leading to a mutually discovered understanding of reality. While Glaser and Strauss prioritize objectivity, Charmaz highlights knowledge construction's collaborative and interactive nature in the Constructivist grounded theory paradigm.

Place of Related Literature

The role of the literature review is intricately tied to the choice of grounded theory methodology. Traditional grounded theorists, as advocated by Glaser (1978; 1998), emphasize the need to approach data collection without preconceived notions from existing literature, as such ideas can inadvertently shape the data. To safeguard against potential influence, these theorists avoid delving into literature within their areas of interest, prioritizing the freedom necessary for theory discovery. On the contrary, adherents of Straussian grounded theory, such as those outlined by Hall et al. (2013), advocate for a proactive engagement with literature at the outset and throughout the research process. This approach encourages researchers to leverage existing knowledge to get a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study. Corbin and Strauss (2015; 1990) underscore the significance of an early and ongoing literature review in the grounded theory framework. They posit that such reviews contribute to theoretical sensitivity, offer supplementary validation, serve as secondary data sources, guide theoretical sampling, and provide a framework for shaping research questions.

Similarly, constructivist grounded theorists, as per Charmaz (2006), are urged to review specific literature pertinent to their study thoroughly. Charmaz advocates for a dedicated section in the research paper to discuss and compile relevant literature, fostering openness and creativity in data analysis. In summary, the role of the literature review in grounded theory varies across methodological perspectives. While traditional grounded theorists avoid extensive literature reviews to preserve the purity of data collection, Straussian and constructivist grounded theorists actively embrace literature reviews as integral components of their research methodologies, leveraging existing knowledge to inform and enrich their investigations.

Research Questions

Much like the literature review, the nature of the grounded theory approach intricately shapes the formulation of research questions. The type of grounded theory chosen significantly influences the framing and structure of these questions. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), research questions within grounded theory should emanate from a broader sociological perspective, aligning with a comprehensive understanding of the social context. Glaser (1978) further specifies that practical research questions should encompass causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions, aiming to explore the phenomenon under study thoroughly. In the Straussian grounded theory approach, there is a distinct focus on identifying a specific phenomenon, and the corresponding research questions are tailored to elucidate

aspects of this targeted topic area (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The nature of these questions allows for extracting properties that can be generalized to a broader context, a hallmark of the Straussian grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Similarly, in the constructivist grounded theory approach, the attention remains on specific areas, but the scope of these inquiries is confined to the localized and specific context (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz's methodology encourages research questions that delve into the nuances of the local context, emphasizing the importance of capturing the intricacies inherent to the specific setting under investigation. In essence, the chosen grounded theory approach guides the research questions' specificity and determines the level of generalizability intended. Straussian grounded theory seeks broader applicability, reaching beyond specific contexts, while constructivist grounded theory concentrates on localized and specific contexts, aiming for a deeper understanding within those confines. The intricacies of grounded theory methodologies thus extend beyond data collection and analysis, fundamentally shaping the essence of the research questions posed in the pursuit of knowledge generation.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory is a constant comparison method, systematically comparing elements across different data sources to identify commonalities. It significantly emphasizes achieving a fit and evaluating how emerging concepts align with incidents. While approaches to grounded theory share coding terminology, they diverge in their execution and methodologies. In the Classical grounded theory approach, coding occurs at two levels: substantive and selective (open) and theoretical (Glaser & Holton, 2004). This approach utilizes coding to unveil patterns in data and uncover social problems. Substantive codes, such as open and selective codes, offer insights into the research topic. Open coding captures data by analyzing incidents and commonalities at Level I, Level II, and Level III. When a core category emerges, selective coding follows, focusing only on data related to the core category. Glaser (1998) outlines nine criteria for identifying a core category: centrality, recurrence, saturation duration, meaningful relationships, theoretical implications, considerable carry-through, complete variability, being a dimension of the problem, and potential for any theoretical code. Glaser (1998) also introduces 18 theoretical codes to help connect substantive codes, such as process, strategy, and the six C's.

On the other hand, Straussian grounded theory employs open, axial, and selective coding in a step-by-step procedure, wherein the axial coding links categories at the level of properties and dimensions, creating a paradigm that identifies linkages among conditions, actions, and consequences. The integration of findings occurs through selective coding, which leads to identifying the core category. Techniques include writing a storyline, using diagrams, and organizing memos. Open coding dissects transcripts into snippets, and axial coding establishes code connections using a paradigm model that guides systematic data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The Straussian grounded theory approach yields a full conceptual description, whereas the Classical version generates a theory that explains how fundamental social problems are processed in a social setting. However, critics, as highlighted by Charmaz (2006), argue that the Straussian approach stifles researcher creativity and emphasizes the importance of flexibility. Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory involves initial and focused coding, allowing for the researcher's interpretive creativity in presenting interview results through a descriptive lens (Charmaz, 2006). This approach has faced criticism for allegedly contradicting the true conceptual nature of participants (Glaser, 2002). Critics argue that the Constructivist grounded theory is a misnomer, asserting that a grounded theory is inherently not constructivist. Researchers document their ideas, themes, and emerging conceptual patterns in memos throughout the grounded theory analysis. These memos serve as a record of reflections on data and become crucial in the later stages of development, allowing researchers to comprehensively describe schemes, patterns, and relationships among categories.

Conclusion

This article review offers a pragmatic guide for novice researchers in selecting a grounded theory approach, emphasizing the importance of aligning the choice with the researcher's philosophical perspective. Acknowledging that the methodological approach is inherently tied to the researcher's philosophical stance, the review delves into critical considerations such as the researcher's role, the significance of the literature review, the formulation of research questions, and the approach to data analysis. The aim is to provide insights into how these factors contribute to justifying selecting a specific grounded theory approach from the three available types.

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