Grounded Theory Methodology

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The overarching research goal for which grounded theory methodology (GTM) is used is to understand the basic social processes that underlie a phenomenon in socially or experientially relevant domains of human life (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is also a popular methodology adopted by qualitative researchers in social science disciplines and medical and health sciences. In psychology too, its popularity and use are gaining momentum as literature documenting detailed procedures about conducting grounded theory research is readily available (Chamberlain, 1999).

Since its inception in 1967, signified by publication of The Discovery of Grounded Theory by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, the orientation of GTM has been to generate a theory from data (socially experienced realities, symbolic constructions, and communicated meanings; Henwood, 2006) rather than vice versa as done in social science research involving hypothesis testing. However, even Glaser and Strauss developed differences of opinion over whether the generation of a theory from data is purely a process of induction. As Charmaz (2000) pointed out, Glaser’s stance is that of positivist epistemology, but Strauss (with his co-author, Juliet Corbin) moved a step further toward postpositivism by pressing for giving a voice to the participants despite adhering to the assumptions of an objective external reality (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz, a student of Glaser and Strauss, moved sharply away from the assumptions of pure induction and explicated the inevitable role of the researcher’s experiential and theoretical inclination in shaping the procedures of data collection, analysis, and reporting. Today there are diverse assumptions and procedures about how a grounded theorist may move from data to theory.

Charmaz (2006, 2008) pointed out that despite the presence of diverse approaches within GTM, there are some common and basic methodological procedures involved in these approaches. These are coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation.

Grounded Theory Methodology: Brief Historical Overview

GTM occupies a prominent status in the history of development of qualitative research. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) pointed out, Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) book played a pivotal role in the “qualitative revolution” in that it provided a strong case for developing theory from people’s experiences using an inductive approach rather than the deductive one represented in hypothesis-testing. The methodology underwent significant changes over the next 40 years due to implicit or explicit epistemological stands taken by Glaser, Strauss, and other seasoned qualitative researchers (e.g., Kathy Charmaz and Adele E. Clarke) who have been using, modifying, and advancing GTM for decades.

As noted above, the epistemological stands of Glaser and Strauss may be understood as positivist and postpositivist respectively. Charmaz (2000, 2008) and Clarke (2005) followed social constructionist and postmodernist standpoints, respectively. Thus, from a historical perspective, a gradual paradigm shift in GTM has occurred. The acceptance of multiple paradigmatic or epistemological standpoints within GTM is evident in Bryant and Charmaz’s (2007) book, The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory. In a similar vein, Morse et al. (2009) have described the new set of methodologists whose work...
represents the use of diverse paradigms in GTM as the second generation grounded theorists, thereby making a strong case for legitimate status GTM to be open to diverse epistemological standpoints.

Basic Methodological Procedures
As Figure 1 indicates, the basic methodological procedures involved in diverse approaches to GTM center around coding, memo writing,
theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. However, grounded theory research begins with the researcher’s motivation to explore and understand the processes underlying human experiences or lived realities. It is this motivation that leads a researcher to formulate research questions (and to be open to re-formulating them if memos indicate a need for it). Charmaz (2000, 2006) and Henwood (2006) have accentuated the need for a researcher to explicate the epistemological stand (and the meta-theoretical framework for analysis that is in accordance with it) to address the research questions. Charmaz (2006) and Smith (1995) have described the process and ethics of interviewing that help in generating rich data for inquiry. Concerning the nature and size of samples, Charmaz has maintained that the concern in sampling is to generate in-depth and multiple views of participants’ experiences and actions for the purpose of producing meaningful analytic categories rather than population representativeness. Thus, sampling in GTM is more than simply a phase before data collection. Initial purposive sampling may lead to theoretical sampling as the researcher’s analysis of codes in memo writing may lead to questions or a research direction for which more data from the same or a new set of participants may be required. For an illustrative example of theoretical sampling, see Figure 1 in the entry on Ethnography.

**Coding and Memo Writing through Constant Comparison**

When the initial data are ready to be analyzed, the process begins with coding. Charmaz (2006, p. 43) defined coding as “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data. Coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in data to making analytic interpretations.” Charmaz also pointed out that GTM involves at least two types of coding. These are initial (or open) coding and focused (or selective) coding. Other types of coding are axial and theoretical coding. See Charmaz (2006) for detailed examples of all types of coding including theoretical coding that may help specify possible relations among focused codes.

Coding and memo writing are twin processes in GTM as the latter helps in analyzing and comparing codes developed during data analysis. Charmaz (2006, p. 72) elaborated on this process:

Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing. Putting things down on paper makes the work concrete and manageable – and exciting. Once you have written a memo you can use it now or store it for later retrieval. In short, memo-writing provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials, to develop your ideas, and to fine-tune your subsequent data gathering.

Charmaz also urged the researcher to develop a habit of writing memos continually because, as she pointed out, it “keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you increase the level of abstraction of your ideas. Certain codes stand out and take form as theoretical categories as you write successive memos” (p. 72). As is clear, the twin processes of coding and memo writing are facilitated by constant comparison, which as Charmaz (2000, p. 515) noted, means “(a) comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences), (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time, (c) comparing incident with incident, (d) comparing data with category, and (e) comparing a category with other categories.”

**Theoretical Sampling and Theoretical Saturation**

Memos, in an advanced stage of analysis, reflect how constant comparison has resulted in development and refinement of categories.
This is also a stage when researchers raise the question of theoretical saturation, which is whether gathering more data would help develop further insights into the properties of the categories (or theoretical categories) developed so far. If the answer is yes, they sort their memos to create, with the help of their categories and sub-categories, a theoretical structure that is taken to be a finding of the research. On the other hand, if researchers find that the answer is no, they proceed to theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2006, p. 84) put it aptly: “Just note where you stand on firm ground and where you make conjectures. Then go back to the field and check your conjectures.” It must also be noted that theoretical sampling takes the researchers to the field not only to address questions to explore properties of some categories, but also new emergent questions that might have arisen about the overall phenomenon under study.

GTM: The Use of Iterative, Interpretive, and Abductive Logic

So far we have learned that GTM is an iterative and interpretive process. Importantly, Charmaz drew attention to another element: abductive logic, which entails being open to the idea of employing unanticipated theoretical perspectives to make sense of “surprises, anomalies or puzzles in the collected data” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 157). It is this abductive logic that may also facilitate a re-analysis of collected data from a new interpretive framework that has potential to carve out new meaningful insights about a phenomenon. For example, as Charmaz (2006) reported, in the early 1980s she completed work that helped understanding of the linkages between stigma, loss of self, and suffering. But some years later she could re-visit the audio tape containing her data and the codes with a resolve to explore the relation between moral status and suffering – something about which she was subliminally or intuitively aware while doing her initial work. Similarly, Priya (2010) re-analyzed ethnographic data collected for an earlier study (with the goal of studying the suffering and healing experiences of survivors of an earthquake) to understand how research relationships in qualitative research may facilitate participants’ healing, a process about which he had intuition while conducting fieldwork but that was not the goal of the research then.

Evaluation Criteria for Scientific Rigor

Charmaz (2006) identified four criteria for rigor in grounded theory studies: credibility; originality; resonance; and usefulness. Credibility involves developing intimate familiarity with the context and focus of the study and engaging in evidence-based procedures of analysis after appropriate data are collected. Henwood (2006, p. 82) expressed a similar concern about making “transparent how the analysis has involved extensive efforts to work with the data.” She also accentuated the need to explicate the appropriate sampling strategy adopted for research.

Originality addresses the concern about whether the study has helped develop new insights about the phenomena. It also asks whether the findings “challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts, and practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182).

Resonance is the concern that the findings should depict the lived experiences of participants and Charmaz has also asked whether the findings make sense to the participants themselves. Usefulness is a concern about the contributions the study has made to the domain of knowledge that may be used by researchers as well as laypersons. Henwood (2006) also added that the researchers’ reflections on wider implications of their findings would aid the process of synthesizing findings of research conducted in the domain.

Finally, both Charmaz and Henwood asserted that the report should explicate a theoretical or paradigmatic stand and include relevant contextual information for the cited extracts from data to help
readers judge for themselves the claims in the findings.

SEE ALSO: Ethnography; Qualitative-Quantitative Research Approach Distinction

References


Further Reading