

# **Grounded Theory: some reflections on paradigm, procedures and misconceptions**

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## Abstract

There has been ongoing debate within the social sciences over the nature of epistemological claims made by both positivist and interpretivist researchers. Within the interpretivist paradigm there are numerous methodologies for constructing knowledge, each of which have their own underlying philosophies, practices, and methods of interpretation. Grounded theory is one such methodology. However, it is a methodology which is sometimes perceived as pseudo positivistic, defiling the canons of humanistic research which emphasises the subjective experience of the other. This paper discusses grounded theory, the missing methodology on the interpretivist agenda, and argues that it is an extension of the methods used by the symbolic interactionists. It discusses the underlying philosophy of the methodology and proceeds to present the key concepts associated with its application. Finally, the paper reviews and addresses some of the major criticisms of grounded theory in order to explicate it as a humanistic and interpretivist method of enquiry.

This paper is an early version of a chapter for a proposed book on grounded theory. It extends the discussion of grounded theory published in two academic papers by the author:

Goulding, C. (1998) Grounded Theory: the missing methodology on the interpretivist agenda *Qualitative Market Research: an international journal* 1(1)

Goulding, C. (forthcoming) Consumer Research, Interpretive Paradigms, and Methodological Ambiguities *European Journal of Marketing* 33(7/8)

## The author

Christina Goulding

The aim of Christina's research is the identification of motivations and experiences of the contemporary heritage consumer. It is an area that remains largely ignored from an integrated perspective, with studies in the field tending to concentrate largely in experiential factors through ethnographic or quantitative analysis. Utilising a socio-psychological theoretical framework the research aims to build theory that has both empirical grounding and theoretical relevance to an understanding of underlying motivations and subsequent meaning and experiences gained from visits to a cross section of museum and heritage sites.

# Grounded Theory: some reflections on paradigm, procedures and misconceptions

## Introduction

While methodologies such as ethnography, semiotics, and phenomenology are currently occupying prime position in the conversation about qualitative paradigms in social research, outside of the humanities, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) has largely been excluded from the discourse on interpretive and postmodern methodologies (Goulding, 1998). This may be partly attributable to the language of the method with its connotations of positivist practices, inherent in the use of such terms as open coding, axial coding, verification procedures and so forth. Such attempts to structure, order and interpret data are commonly seen to defile the canons of pure qualitative research where the primacy of the subjective experience of the participant takes precedence over the interpretation of the researcher. This paper argues that all too often impressions of the grounded theory method are premised on a number of misunderstandings regarding the aims of the methodology, its procedures, and the two distinct approaches to practising grounded theory associated with the original authors who over the years have diverged in their opinions. It attempts to explain the development of grounded theory and explicate the intellectual assumptions which underpin both the philosophy and application of the method. It offers an example of grounded theory research through the demonstration of the process of theory development. Finally, the paper examines some of the weaknesses of the method.

## Grounded Theory: evolutionary developments

The roots of grounded theory can be traced back to a movement known as symbolic interactionism whose origins lie in the work of Charles Cooley (1864-1929) and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). The concern of these scholars was to avoid the polarities of psychologism and sociologism. Psychologism is a view predicated on the assumption that social behaviour is explicable in genetic terms and by logical or neurological processes. Sociologism is the opposed fallacy which looks at personal conduct as if it were in some way programmed by societal norms. Cooley coined the term the 'looking glass self'. Accordingly, any distinction between individual and social groups is mistaken because a person's self identity grows out of their relationship with others. In other people our self is mirrored. Mead proposed that the most profound aspect of human conduct is symbolism, the greatest symbolism being language. Mead does not provide a Chomskian perspective of language (Chomsky, 1964), rather a view of how linguistic terms develop in an individual's career. By following rules we have to put ourselves in the position of others (Blumer, 1969). According to this paradigm, individuals engage in a world which requires reflexive interaction as averse to environmental response. They are purposive in their actions and will act and react to environmental cues, objects and others, according to the meaning these hold for them. These meanings evolve from social interaction which is itself symbolic because of the interpretations attached to the various forms of communication such as language, gestures, and the significance of objects. These meanings are modified, suspended or regrouped in the light of changing situations (Schwandt, 1994). From this viewpoint the investigator hopes to construct what the interactants see as their social reality and how objects or experiences contribute to the construction of this reality (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992).

Methodologically, the researcher is required to enter the worlds of those under study in order to observe the actor's environment and the interactions and interpretations that occur. The researcher engaged in symbolic interaction is expected to interpret actions, transcend rich description and develop a theory which incorporates concepts of "self, language, social setting and social object" (Schwandt 1994, p124). The developed theory should be presented in a form that creates an eidetic picture. Enduring examples can be found in the work of such scholars as Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1970). Using these principles as a basic foundation, two American scholars, Glaser and

Strauss, set out to develop a more defined and systematic procedure for collecting and analysing qualitative data. The method they developed was labelled *grounded theory* to reflect the source of the developed theory which is ultimately grounded in the behaviour, words and actions of those under study. They devised the method while researching the experiences of chronically ill patients, as a means of systematically collecting data which could be interpreted and developed through a process offering clear and precise guidelines for the verification and validation of findings. They deemed such a procedure necessary given the climate which prevailed. The 'academy' at the time largely regarded qualitative research as subjective, unsystematic, and above all, unscientific, and as such unworthy of serious recognition. Thus a method which could track, check, and validate the development of theory from a qualitative perspective was both timely and necessary.

## Grounded theory methodology

Grounded theory, in contrast to theory obtained by logico-deductive methods is theory grounded in data which have been systematically obtained through 'social' research. The development of grounded theory was an attempt to avoid highly abstract sociology and was part of an important growth in qualitative analysis in the 1960s and 1970s. The main impetus behind the movement was to bridge the gap between theoretically 'uninformed' empirical research and empirically 'uninformed' theory, by grounding theory in data. The development of grounded theory was part of a larger scale reaction against extreme empiricism, or 'Grand Theory', a term coined by Mills (1959) to refer pejoratively to sociological theories couched at a very abstract conceptual level. Mills similarly criticised abstracted empiricism or the process of accumulating quantitative data for its own sake. As a formal methodology, grounded theory was first presented by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. The book was premised on a strong intellectual justification for using qualitative research to develop theoretical analysis. It was written in part as a protest against what the authors viewed as a rather passive acceptance that all the 'great' theories had been discovered and that the role of research lay in testing these theories through quantitative 'scientific' procedures (Charmaz, 1983). Part of the rationale proposed by Glaser and Strauss was that within the field of sociology, there was too great an emphasis on the verification of existing theory and a resultant

*de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area one wished to research.....in social research generating theory goes hand in hand with verifying it; but many sociologists have diverted from this truism in their zeal to test either existing theories or a theory that they have barely started to generate*

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967 pp.1-2)

The emphasis behind grounded theory therefore became one of 'new' theory generation. In keeping with its principles, the theory evolves during the research process itself and is a product of continuous interplay between data collection and analysis of that data. Consequently, unlike many other methods, the grounded theorist does not wait until all the data is collected before analysis begins; rather, the search for meaning through the interrogation of data commences in the early stages of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Charmaz, 1983; Strauss, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994; Stern, 1994).

Given its emphasis on new discoveries, the method is usually used to generate theory in areas where little is already known, or to provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge about a particular social phenomenon. However, because this is a distinct feature of grounded theory there is a common belief that extant theory is ignored or avoided until the end of the analytical process. This is not necessarily the case, and has been misconstrued as meaning that the researcher must enter the field with a totally blank agenda. Glaser (1978) discusses the role of existing theory and its importance in sensitising the researcher to the conceptual significance of emerging concepts and categories. Knowledge and theory are inextricably interlinked and should be used as if they were another informant. This is vital, for without this grounding in extant knowledge, pattern recognition would be limited to the obvious and

the superficial, depriving the analyst of the conceptual leverage from which to develop theory (Glaser, 1978). Therefore, contrary to popular belief, grounded theory research is not 'a theoretical' but requires an understanding of related theory and empirical work in order to enhance theoretical sensitivity. On this note, it may be useful to clarify what is meant by a theory. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994) a theory is a set of relationships that offers a plausible explanation of the phenomenon under study. Morse (1994, pp. 25-6) extends this interpretation proposing that "a theory provides the best comprehensive, coherent and simplest model for linking diverse and unrelated facts in a useful and pragmatic way. It is a way of revealing the obvious, the implicit, the unrecognised and the unknown. Theorising is the process of constructing alternative explanations until a 'best fit' is obtained that explains the data most simply. This involves asking questions of the data that will create links to established theory." One of the key aspects of grounded theory is the generation of good ideas (Glaser, 1978). However, over the years the method has been reinterpreted with the disciplinary diffusion of its application, and divergence in thought regarding the conceptualisation of the method by the two original authors.

## Variations in approach

According to Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996) researchers in disciplines such as nursing, where the method is widely used, are now obliged to specify whether the grounded theory approach they employed was the original 1967 Glaser and Strauss version, the 1990 Strauss and Corbin rendition or the 1978 or 1992 Glaser interpretation. This is largely the result of the two original authors reaching a diacritical juncture over the aims, principles and procedures associated with the implementation of the method. This bifurcation was largely marked by Strauss and Corbin's 1990 publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory, procedures and Techniques* which provoked accusations of distortion and infidelity to the central objectives of parsimony and theoretical emergence (Glaser, 1992). In the face of this, grounded theory has split into two camps, each subtly distinguished by its own ideographic procedures. On the one hand, Glaser stresses the interpretive, contextual and emergent nature of theory development, while on the other, the late Strauss appeared to have become somewhat dogmatic regarding highly complex and systematic coding techniques.

A comparison of the original *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with Glaser's 1978 *Theoretical Sensitivity* and Strauss and Corbin's 1990 *The Basics of Qualitative Research* demonstrates the subtle but distinct differences in perceptions of the method between the two authors since its inception. Not only are there differences in style and terminology, but Strauss's version of the method has been reworked to incorporate a strict and complex process of systematic coding. Glaser's reaction to these developments was vociferously documented in the publication *The Basics of Qualitative Research* (Glaser, 1992) which is a critique of the popular and widely used Strauss and Corbin's 1990 work. Pages 1-2 detail letters from Glaser to Strauss imploring him to withdraw his text for revision on the basis that what it contained was a methodology, but it was not grounded theory. He stated in fact that it ignored up to 90 % of the original ideas and proceeded with the accusation that:

*Strauss's book is without conscience, bordering on immorality.....producing simply what qualitative researchers have been doing for sixty years or more: forced, full conceptual description.*

(Glaser, 1992 p.3)

Other grounded theory researchers have reiterated this, arguing that Strauss has modified his description of grounded theory from its original concept of emergence to a densely codified operation. To Glaser, the Straussian school represents an erosion of grounded theory (Stern, 1994) and is possibly responsible for the impression that grounded theory uses qualitative research to quantify findings. Nonetheless, this is a misconception. Grounded theory has a built-in mandate to strive toward verification through the process of category saturation, which means staying in the field until no further evidence emerges. Verification is done throughout the course of the research project, rather

than assuming that this is only possible through follow up quantitative data. The developed theory should also be true to the data, it should be parsimonious. This is a point of departure between Glaser, who argues that the theory should only explain the phenomenon under study, and Strauss, who insists on excessive use of coding matrixes to conceptualise beyond the immediate field of study.

## The Application of grounded theory

Given the differences in approaches to the method, most texts and articles on the subject advocate reading the original '*Discovery*' as a starting point. Whilst it may have dated somewhat since its publication, the guiding principles and procedures are explained in detail and endure as the essential guidelines for applying the method. It is also important to note that its original intent was a methodology specifically for sociologist. In recent years, the diffusion across a number of disciplines such as social work, health studies, psychology and more recently management, has meant the adaptation of the method in ways that may not be completely congruent with all of the original principles. However, despite conflicting perceptions over methodological transgressions and implementation, there remain a set of fundamental nomothetic principles associated with the method.

## The grounded theory process

### 1. The identification of an area of interest and data collection

Initially, as with any piece of research, the process starts with an interest in an area one wishes to explore further. Usually researchers adopt grounded theory when the topic of interest has been relatively ignored in the literature, or has been given only superficial attention. Consequently, the researcher's mission is to build his/her own theory from the ground. However, most researchers will have their own disciplinary background which will provide a perspective from which to investigate the problem. Nobody starts with a totally blank sheet. A sociologist will be influenced by a body of sociological thought, a psychologist will perceive the general phenomenon from either a cognitive, behavioural, or social perspective, and a business academic may bring to bear organisational, marketing, economic, or systems concepts which have structured their analysis of managerial behaviour. These theories provide sensitivity and focus which aid the interpretation of data collected during the research process. The difficulty in applying grounded theory comes when the area of interest has a long, credible and empirically based literature. Grounded theory may still be used, but literature in the immediate area should be avoided so as not to prejudice or influence the perceptions of the researcher. Here the danger lies in entering the field with a prior disposition, whether conscious of it or not, of testing such existing work rather than developing uncoloured insights about the area of study. In order to avoid this, it is generally suggested that the researcher enter the field at a very early stage and collect data in whatever form appropriate. Unlike other qualitative methodologies which acknowledge only one source of data, for example the words of those under study as in the case of phenomenology, grounded theory research may be based on single or multiple sources of data. These might include interviews, observations, focus groups, life histories, and introspective accounts of experiences. With grounded theory, researchers should also avoid being too structured in their methods of collecting information. For example, an interview should not be conducted using a prescribed formal schedule of questions. This would defeat the objective which is to attain first hand information from the point of view of the informant. Nonetheless, this is easier in theory than in practice. Informants usually want some guidance about the nature of the research and what information is sought. Totally unstructured interviews therefore cause confusion, incoherence, and result in meaningless data. Structured interviews, on the other hand, may be merely an extension of the researcher's expectations. The art lies therefore in finding a balance which allows the informant to feel comfortable enough to expand on their experiences, without telling them what to say.

### 2. Interpreting the data and further data collection

As the data are collected they should be analysed simultaneously by looking for all possible interpretations. This involves utilising particular coding procedures which normally begins with *open*

*coding*. Open coding is the process of breaking down the data into distinct units of meaning. As a rule, this starts with a full transcription of an interview, after which the text is analysed line by line in an attempt to identify key words or phrases which connect the informant's account to the experience under investigation. This process is associated with early concept development which consists of "identifying a chunk or unit of data (a passage of text of any length) as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon" (Spiggle, 1994 p.493). In addition to open coding, it is important to incorporate the use of memos. Memos are notes written immediately after data collection as a means of documenting the impressions of the researcher and describing the situation. These are vital as they provide a bank of ideas which can be revisited in order to map out the emerging theory. Essentially, memos are ideas which have been noted during the data collection process which help to reorientate the researcher at a later date.

### 3. Theoretical sampling

A further feature of the method relates to the sampling of informants. Sampling is not determined to begin with, but is directed by the emerging theory. Initially, the researcher will go to the most obvious places and the most likely informants in search of information. However, as concepts are identified and the theory starts to develop, further individuals, situations and places may need to be incorporated in order to strengthen the findings. This is known as 'theoretical sampling' which is "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find it, in order to develop the theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is 'controlled' by the emerging theory" (Glaser, 1978 p.36).

In addition to theoretical sampling, a fundamental feature of grounded theory is the application of the 'constant' comparative method. As the name implies, this involves comparing like with like, to look for emerging patterns and themes. "Comparison explores differences and similarities across incidents within the data currently collected and provides guidelines for collecting additional data.....Analysis explicitly compares each incident in the data with other incidents appearing to belong to the same category, exploring their similarities and differences" (Spiggle, 1994 pp.493-4). This process facilitates the identification of concepts. Concepts are a progression from merely describing what is happening in the data, which is a feature of open coding, to explaining the relationship between and across incidents. This requires a different, more sophisticated, coding technique which is commonly referred to as 'axial coding' and involves the process of abstraction onto a theoretical level (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### 4. Concept and category development

Axial coding is the appreciation of concepts in terms of their dynamic interrelationships. These should form the basis for the construction of the theory. "Abstract concepts encompass a number of more concrete instances found in the data. The theoretical significance of a concept springs from its relationship to other concepts or its connection to a broader gestalt of an individual's experience" (Spiggle, 1994 p.494). In turn, once a concept has been identified, its attributes may be explored in greater depth, and its characteristics dimensionalised in terms of their intensity or weakness. Finally the data are subsumed into a core category which the researcher has to justify as the basis for the emergent theory. A core category pulls together all the strands in order to offer an explanation of the behaviour under study. It has theoretical significance and its development should be traceable back through the data. This is usually when the theory is written up and integrated with existing theories to show relevance and new perspective. Nonetheless, a theory is usually only considered valid if the researcher has reached the point of saturation. This involves staying in the field until no new evidence emerges from subsequent data. It is also based on the assumption that a full interrogation of the data has been conducted, and negative cases, where found, have been identified and accounted for.

## An illustration of the grounded theory method

While there are many papers which describe and explain what grounded theory is and how to use it, one of the most common requests of the two original authors (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is for *illustrations* of the process to show how theories are developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). An obvious response to this is to direct enquiries to published reports, papers or theses. However, as with any methodology, within the final body of the work, the actual processes of coding, reduction and concept development become subsumed and invisible in the final interpretation and presentation of the analysis. Therefore, the main aim of this section is to demonstrate the application of the method by drawing upon examples from the author's research into consumer behaviour and the meanings derived from visiting heritage sites. By way of illustration, the development of a concept is outlined by first presenting a section of an interview transcript and part of a memo relating to it. Second, the process of abstraction is discussed in relation to the development of *one* concept, that of nostalgia, the properties of this concept, and, finally, its dimensions.

What follows is a section taken from a transcript of an interview with a female visitor to a living industrial museum in Shropshire. She was aged approximately eighty, was visiting with an organised group and was not a regular visitor to museums. The interview took the form of a semi-structured conversation, allowing her to elaborate on themes and issues that she felt were important to her experience at the museum. She also talked about her life outside of the museum, her family, and the past. One of the important factors that emerged was that of familiarity with a number of artefacts at the museum. These in turn induced nostalgic memories. The concept of nostalgia is described in the literature as being a 'rose tinted' form of remembrance, or a longing for the past set against an unfavourable perception of the present (Davis, 1979). The concept was identified by taking the whole script and conducting a line by line analysis, as indicated in the text. The interview transcript was then broken up and emerging themes grouped together. In this case the themes relating to perceptions of the past and present have been merged to provide a picture of the nostalgic reaction.

### Informant: on the appeal of the museum

*we like these sort of places, you know, old houses, gardens, all the people dressed up in the old costumes. The old ways of working...and you can buy nearly everything they make. You can stop and talk to the workers, have a chat.....they've got time.....like it used to be. That's how it was years ago, people used to leave their doors open and be in and out of each others houses. Everyone knew everyone else*

### On perceptions of the past as the 'good old days'

*Well.....yes, well they were. People knew each other, you helped each other out if you were in trouble. Today people are frightened to open their doors. Back when I was young you might not have the things that are around today, but you made your own fun. You worked hard, you gave your wages to your mother and she'd give you your spending money. Life was a lot simpler then.....it was slower. I wouldn't like to be growing up today.*

### On perceptions of the present

*it's rush here there and everywhere. You turn the television on and all the news is about murders and robberies. People see things they can't have and just go out and get them. There's no respect left for anyone, teachers don't or can't control the kids and the old are just easy targets. It isn't a society that values the older generations, but I remember when it did. You respected your elders and betters, you got a clout 'round the head if you didn't', but you learned lessons that saw you through life.*

### On positive aspects of contemporary life, role changes, support networks and health

*Oh I'm painting a really black picture. Of course there are some things that are better now .....it's only when you come to a place like this it makes you realise the sort of thing you miss. I mean, it takes you back. I've lost most of my family, my husband's dead and so are a lot of my*

old friends, the ones I've known for years. So when you see things you can remember it brings back happy memories.

#### On perceptions of Blists Hill

It's not like a normal museum is it.....there's so much going on here.....I spent over an hour in the squatters cottage down the hill talking to the lady in there. I had a go at the peg rug, and she told me all about the history of the place. I've just been in the chemist, I could spend hours in there looking at all the old potions and bottles.....it's like going back in time.

#### On the past

Well you worked hard, but there were other things that compensated for that, family, community, you felt safe.

#### On the disappearance of these social aspects and feelings of isolation

To some extent they have. People are always moving from one place to another, you lose touch. At one time if you lived in a street every one would know each other. Half the time you don't know who your neighbour is these days.

Immediately after the conversation had taken place a memo was written to capture initial ideas and to provide a sense of reorientation for the future. A memo may consist of a few lines or may be several pages long. The following memo relates to the extract presented previously and offers an example of some of the initial ideas about what was occurring in the data.

### **Memo relating to the transcript**

"It is an interesting fact that although the woman is in her early eighties, she seemed to be relating personally to the era depicted at Blists Hill even though the setting is supposed to be mid-nineteenth century. However, there is very little to pin-point its exact date. There is nothing at the entrance to 'periodise' it. Architecture is mixed, ranging from seventeenth century to Victorian. It is almost as if a lack of relevant dating allows the visitor to decide what period it is. Personal identification then comes from being able to relate to it through association with *familiar* objects.

These objects then constitute the criteria against which authenticity is evaluated and measured. Also noted is the constant use of such words as 'remember', 'old days', 'community', 'safe', 'real'. It is almost as if she is transposing her own past and memories onto the 'themed' setting. The experience is personal and heritage/Blists Hill, provides a back drop for these memories.

Contributing to this near idealisation of the past are perceptions of contemporary society and changes in role, security, community and belonging. The past is contrasted with the present and seems to represent a near polar opposite. Memories are selective (nostalgic - wistful longing for a past with the pain removed). Even negative aspects ('clout' around the head) are rationalised or compensated for.

Factors that appear to influence this nostalgic reaction include:

- Disempowerment (devaluation of self in eyes of others)
- Isolation (from community & security)
- Dependency
- Alienation & loss of social contact
- Loss of significant others
- Geographical displacement
- Levels of anxiety and mistrust of the present

The experience is largely one of fantasy and escape, evoked through stories, exchange of information and imagination."

## The process of abstraction

According to Glaser (1978), after the interview has been transcribed and a memo recorded, the next stage is to analyse the data line by line looking for codes in each sentence. At this stage the coding is unfocused and 'open'. Coding is the process of analysing data and at this point the researcher may identify hundreds of codes which could have potential meaning and relevance. However, as a result of constant comparison of subsequent data these are reduced and grouped into meaningful categories. Codes are the building blocks of theory. By coding in every way possible, it allows for direction before becoming selective. It begins by fracturing the data into analytical pieces which can then be raised to a conceptual level. According to O'Callaghan (1996) questions that need to be constantly addressed include:

- What is happening in this data?
- What is the basic socio-psychological problem?
- What accounts for it?
- What patterns are occurring here?

Analysis on this level forces the generation of core categories and guides theoretical sampling, the identification of further individuals, places and conditions relevant to the study. Open codes need to be grouped and constantly compared in order to generate a conceptual code. This conceptual code should have properties which can be dimensionalised, but it is also important to note that the focus should *not be on quantitative values but on meaning*. So, for example, taking the transcript relating to the concept of nostalgia, it is possible to identify properties relating to the nostalgic reaction and in turn their dimensional range.

The concept of nostalgia has a number of properties. These were derived from the coding procedure, from words, sentences and phrases that indicated an array of influences and behavioural implications, yet in isolation answered only a fraction of the problem. So, for example, negative perceptions of the present would not have constituted nostalgia if the past was not perceived as better than the present.

## Concept: nostalgia

Concept properties and their dimensional range

Empty role repertoire	.....	Full role repertoire
Low social contact	.....	High social contact
Disaffection with the present	.....	Satisfaction with the present
Out of control	.....	In control
'Rose' tinted memory	.....	Realistic memory
Fantasy and escape	.....	Leisure & recreation
Personal association	.....	Lack of association

These codes and dimensions can be used to compare the presence or absence of nostalgia from the data provided by subsequent informants. Essentially, they may provide an initial basis for further analysis. Concepts explain aspects of behaviour, but not the whole. They unite certain influences under an explanatory conceptual heading. For example, the interview revealed a reduced role repertoire, a lack of social affiliation, disaffection with the present and the loss of control. In contrast with the present, the past was perceived as a much simpler, better time. It was remembered affectionately, although in a somewhat coloured manner. The painful aspects were selectively filtered out or justified, thus enhancing the nostalgic feeling. Other concepts identified included perceptions of authenticity, cultural identification, social experiences and so on. Each of these had properties and dimensions which were noted accordingly. The development of a core category however, involved demonstrating the relationship of each of these concepts to each other in order to provide a

theoretically integrated explanation of behaviour in this particular context. The more one finds concepts that work, the more the core category becomes 'saturated' (Glaser, 1978). Grounded theory is based on multi-indicator concepts, not single indicator concepts. A core category is a main theme. It sums up a pattern of behaviour pulling together identified concepts which have a relationship to each other. It is the substance of what is happening in the data. Glaser (1978, p.95) summarises the criteria a core category must meet:

- It must be central and account for a large proportion of behaviour
- It must be based on recurring themes drawn from the data
- It must relate meaningfully to other categories
- Analysis should be based on the core category
- It should be modifiable

In summary, therefore, it is possible to think of the coding process as a form of hierarchy at the bottom of which is open coding. Through systematic analysis and constant comparison of data the next stage is to reduce the number of codes and to group them together in a way that indicates a relationship between them. This stage relates to axial coding and the formation of concepts. At the pinnacle of the hierarchy are categories which unite the concepts and reveal a gestaltian theoretical explanation of the phenomenon under study.

## Manual or computer aided analysis?

At this point it is worth deviating slightly from the subject of grounded theory to discuss the role of computers in the research process. At present there is some debate regarding the use of computers in the analysis of qualitative material, particularly with the growing number of software packages designed to handle such unstructured sources of data. One such package, reputed to be the most sophisticated, is NUD.IST. This package claims to ease the sometimes laborious and time consuming process of transcribing, identifying and cross checking concept development. For a fuller discussion of the range and capabilities of qualitative data analysis packages, Richards and Richards (1994), provide a detailed examination of a number of the key soft wares available. They outline the merits and limitations of each, and conclude with an explanation and explication of the NUD.IST package.

In a well balanced argument, they suggest that increasingly, qualitative researchers are experiencing pressure to incorporate the use of computers in the analysis of their data, largely because computers are less concerned with emotional experiences and more concerned with structure, which still equates to credibility in the eyes of many. Nonetheless, it is suggested that an over-reliance on computer-aided analysis minimises the personal experiences of the researcher, the process, and the situational factors which serve to add depth, rather than detract from the emerging developments.

Traditionally, most packages have been limited to code and retrieve facilities, which while useful for working with structures, are limited in their analysis of content. Richards and Richards (1991) propose that NUD.IST has extended the scope of computer analysis in order to address the many challenges and criticisms associated with the limitations of earlier software. This has been achieved largely by aiming at theory construction and development through a range of flexible and varied tools and applications. These tools transcend code and retrieval to incorporate the handling of manuscripts, notebooks, text and unit indexing whilst allowing for searches to create new indexing categories.

They further argue that context can be preserved through the retention of headers and sub-headers, with retrievals and index systems which can be structurally re-organised to support the emergence of theory. In addition to this, the programme also provides freedom to change the content of categories and the creation of new categories in as wide a variety of ways as possible. The package also has the ability to attach memos to indexing categories in order to record ongoing thoughts. Finally, the system ensures minimisation of clerical effort and error, thus, it may be argued, legitimising the findings over and above those derived from manual interpretation.

These are the benefits that are on offer to the user of NU.DIST, and it is easy to see the appeal of such a package. Nevertheless, the developers of the programme are also aware of the pitfalls associated with too heavy a reliance on computers in the process. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) discuss the limitations of software packages in general terms suggesting that many remain still limited to pure code and retrieval procedures which consequently ignore, or do not have the ability to incorporate, situational and contextual factors. A further danger is the tendency of researchers to reduce field materials to only codable data, which may result in the loss of rich and valuable sources of concepts and theory. In line with this is the temptation to focus only on those aspects of the research that can be helped by computer methods, ignoring those that are less amenable to computerised analysis.

Whilst Richards and Richards (1994) maintain that NUD.IST deals with many of these issues, they acknowledge that they still face a number of challenges in the quest for total analysis of unstructured data. For example, they point out that the programme does not allow for the visual display of conceptual level diagrams and models that show emerging theory. This means that the researcher may still have to revert back to pencil and paper to do this, in order to trace developments and demonstrate emergence. In their earlier article Richards and Richards (1991) called for greater debate with regard to the challenges and meaning associated with the transformation from manual analysis to computer assisted forms. They suggested that computational knowledge means transforming qualitative methods, not merely smartening up old ones. They raised a series of issues that still need to be recognised before any consensus is reached. These include:

1. An acknowledgement that researchers can contextualise an interpretation and return to it later. Any technique that relies on segmenting and de-contextualising, puts this ability at risk, as context is not simply achieved by attaching a file name to it. Dembrowski and Hammer-Lloyd (1995) further point to the concern that the machines may take over to the detriment of the thinking process which is so vital to qualitative analysis (although they do point out that the machine can only do what it is directed to do and the main burden still remains with the researcher).
2. The fact that context is more than sequence is also an issue. It involves an understanding of the process and the ability to draw knowledge from outside of the text, from literature, reflections, and so forth, which is beyond the scope of any programme. The fear over myopic interpretation is reflected in the arguments of Dembrowski and Hammer-Lloyd (1995), who express concern that data analysis may become so mechanistic that it becomes detrimental to intuition and creativity.
3. Additionally, there remains for many, the misconception that code and retrieve techniques are the path to grounded theory, a view which would be strongly disputed by the original authors of the method, who warn against over emphasising coding at the expense of theory emergence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In effect, Richards and Richards (1991) themselves, summarise the dangers eloquently and succinctly:

*Users should be aware that many computer techniques are only marginal to, may even be inimical to, the tasks of 'grounded theory'. The process of theory emergence requires a different ability: to see the data as a whole, then to leave data behind, exploring the lines of this segment of that text. To code and retrieve text is to cut it up. The 'grounded theory' method leaves text almost untouched. The researchers contact with the data is light, hovering above the text and rethinking its meanings, then rising from it to comparative, imaginative reflections. It is the difference between the touch of scissors and that of a butterfly.*

(Richards & Richards, 1991 p.260)

## Some misconceptions associated with grounded theory

According to Charmaz (1983), both the assumptions and analytical methods of grounded theory have been criticised by some qualitative researchers on a number of accounts. For example, there are some

suggestions that grounded theorists fail to give proper attention to both data collection techniques and to the quality of the gathered material. Such criticisms, she maintains, misinterpret the aims and methods of grounded theory. Katz (1983, p.133) argues that the case for analytical induction can be made stronger with a number of revisions:

*If we view social life as a continuous symbolic process, we expect our concepts to have vague boundaries. If analytical induction follows the contours of experience, it will have ambiguous conceptual fringes.....For the statistical researcher, practical uncertainty is represented by statements of probabilistic relations; for the analyst of social processes, by ambiguities when trying to code border line cases into one or the other of the “explaining” or “explained” cases.*

This requires an understanding that codes and concepts do not have to be mutually inclusive or exclusive, but are transcending in the sense that the same code and meaning can legitimately belong to, and cut across, numerous cases. This is also a point that reinforces the difference between the Glaserian and Straussian schools of thought, and the conflict between ‘forcing’ data into categories (Strauss), and dealing only with categories that emerge from the observed situations to explain those observed behaviours (Glaser).

In addition to these very fundamental concerns, Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996) provide a summary of some of the main misconceptions which have resulted in the 'methodological slurring' of grounded theory (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992; Morse, 1994; Stern, 1994; and Wells, 1995). These centre largely around generation erosion, premature closure, and methodological transgressions.

### **Generation erosion**

The first of these refers to the divergence in methodological development between the two original authors. Nevertheless, there have been further discrepancies in the development of the method from those other than the two key figures. Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996) refer to the number of academics with no first-hand contact with either Glaser or Strauss who have independently invented rigid rules for judging the credibility of grounded theory products. Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson refer to these adaptations as 'cooked up' translations which are guilty of breaching the essence of the method and the inherent creativity of the original.

Such later additions include the requirement of a visual diagram with all grounded theories, and a statement that a sample size of twelve be the minimum for any grounded theory study, although it is unclear how this arbitrary figure was reached. Riley (1996) states that most studies achieve saturation between 8-24 interviews depending on the topic focus, although this in itself appears to go against the whole philosophy of theoretical sampling as it dictates and directs the research design right from the start. Accordingly:

*The importation of rigid rules is counterproductive to the spirit of creativity and the generation of grounded theory. Although certain flexible methodological guidelines, such as simultaneous data collection and analysis and purposive and theoretical sampling principles are undisputed, credible grounded theory ultimately stands on its own as diverse, parsimonious, conceptual and relevant to the data.*

Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996, p.123)

### **Premature closure**

The second point they refer to, premature closure, is a well debated area although it is often simply taken to mean leaving the field too early. They extend this to include the under-analysis of textual or

narrative data. The method requires the researcher to move through a succession of stages starting with *in vivo* codes, or open codes (which are codes derived directly from the data), through to more abstract or second level categorical codes, and finally to the last stage of conceptual and theoretical codes which are the building blocks of theory. At each of these levels the theory becomes more refined, integrating abstract concepts that cover behavioural variation. Therefore, while premature closure is usually associated with leaving the field too early, it can also occur in situations where the researcher has collected a wealth of data if the analyst does not move beyond describing what is in the data. As such, the grounded theory is based solely on participant's descriptions, and not on developed concepts. It is important therefore that the researcher 'lifts' ideas from the data and explains them theoretically in order to give meaning to descriptions of the behaviour.

### Methodological transgression

The last point is that of methodological transgression. Such transgressions refer to "the frank violation of the grounded theory philosophy and methodology" (Skodol-Wilson & Ambler-Hutchinson, 1996, p.224). This may pertain to methodological muddling, such as phenomenological research being presented as grounded theory (Baker, Wuest & Stern 1992; Wells 1995, Goulding forthcoming) but also applies to cases where the canons of quantitative method are modified and applied to interview or textual data, and where the outcome is a study described in positivist terms, random sampling, reliability, validity statistics, independent and dependent variables and so on (Baker, Wuest & Stern 1992).

While there is nothing that prohibits the combination of quantitative and qualitative forms of data collection when using grounded theory, the purpose of each should be made clear. Grounded theorists do not follow the traditional quantitative canons of verification. They do, however, check the development of ideas with further specific observations, make systematic comparisons and often take the research beyond the initial confines of one topic or setting. It is proposed that it is because they make systematic efforts to check and refine categories that their efforts are sometimes confused with quantitative techniques (Charmaz 1983). Nonetheless, grounded theorists strive to develop fresh theoretical interpretations of the data rather than explicitly aim for any final or complete interpretation of it (Charmaz 1983). This in itself is possibly the most important part of the process. It is also one which must ultimately be referred back to the method of analysis and interpretation. At the early stages of theory development, the interpretation should be presented to the original informants, to ensure that it is an honest representation of participant accounts. According to Riley (1996, p.36-7):

*When establishing the credibility of analysis, the tradition of investigator-as-expert is reversed. This process is called 'member checking' and is an invited assessment of the investigator's meaning. Informants can be invited to assess whether the early analyses are an accurate reflection of their conversations.*

This is done before the interpretation is abstracted onto a conceptual level and therefore becomes less meaningful to the individual. Ultimately, when using the grounded theory method, the researcher has an obligation to 'abstract' the data and to think 'theoretically' rather than descriptively. Furthermore, theoretical explanations of behaviour must allow for process, and recognise context and change. Consequently, consideration needs to be given to the labelling of categories. Glaser (1978, 1992), suggests that categories should indicate 'behavioural' type, not people 'type'. This allows the actors to walk in and out of many behavioural patterns. The emphasis is therefore on behavioural, not personal patterns. It is important to recognise that most individuals engage in a type of behaviour without being 'typed' by it; they engage in other behaviours as well.

Finally, the researcher needs to be clear about claims of generalisation. While some grounded theorists take the research into a variety of settings, this is most common in longitudinal and large scale projects. It is not necessarily a condition for all grounded theory research, the aim of which is parsimony and fidelity to the data. Accordingly:

*Transferability is not considered the responsibility of the investigator because the knowledge elicited is most influenced by each individual's life context and situation. Indeed the varied social constructions of knowledge are what the investigator is searching for. In its stead the investigator is to accurately describe the contexts and techniques of the study so that subsequent follow-up studies can match them as closely as possible.*

Riley (1996, p.37)

## A brief summary of the process

O'Callaghan (1996) describes theories developed using this method as interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted by a researcher who needs to remain open to the essential provisional character of every theory. He stresses that the qualitative nature of the paradigm focuses on the search for *meaning* and *understanding* to build innovative theory and *not universal laws*. It is a method where close inspection of the data extends theory through theoretical sampling which is sampling directed by the findings of the analysed data, rather than specifying the sample composition prior to the collection of data.

The process involves coding strategies; the process of breaking down the data, most commonly interviews and, or, observations, into distinct units of meaning which are labelled to generate concepts. These concepts are initially clustered into descriptive categories. They are then re-evaluated for their interrelationships and through a series of analytical steps are gradually subsumed into higher order categories, or one underlying core category which indicates an emergent theory. Nevertheless, in keeping with the interpretivist philosophy, it is important to recognise that enquiry is always context-bound and facts should be viewed as both *theory laden* and *value laden*. Knowledge is seen as actively and socially constructed with meanings of existence only relevant to an experiential world (O'Callaghan, 1996). Therefore, the focus becomes one of how people behave within an individual and social context. In order to proceed, O'Callaghan (1996) argues that the researcher should have:

- A perspective to build analysis from
- An awareness of substantive issues guiding the research questions
- A school of thought to help sensitise the emergent concepts
- A degree of personal experience, values and priorities

## The presentation of theory

With regard to the process of developing 'grounded' theory, it may be argued that there are three basic stages that need to be addressed. The first deals with the collection and interpretation of the data and is primarily concerned with demonstrating how, why and from where early concepts and categories were derived. In accordance with the principles common to the method, any theory should be traceable back to the data. Consequently, evidence needs to be provided as does the relationship between concepts, categories and this evidence.

The second stage is to 'abstract' the concepts and look for theoretical meaning. At this stage the concepts should be sufficiently developed as to warrant an extensive re-evaluation of compatible literature in order to demonstrate the 'fit', relationship and, where applicable, the extension of that literature through the research findings.

The final stage should present the theory, uniting the concepts and integrating them into categories which have explanatory power within the specific context of the research. This in itself can be an incredibly time-consuming and frustrating exercise.

Throughout the course of the research it is common to collect an extensive amount of data in the form of interview transcripts, field notes on observations, memos, diagrams and conceptual maps. These may ultimately amount to hundreds of pages and as such involve making decisions regarding what to

present and what to leave out. Unlike quantitative methods where, for example, a copy of the questionnaire and statistical analysis can be inserted in the appendix for justification and evidence of findings, with qualitative research it is impossible to provide the full evidence in a manner that is as immediately accessible to the reader. Consequently, what is included in the work has to be selective, but still presented in such a way as to create a meaningful picture. It is important, therefore, to chart the process as it evolves, to use diagrams to illustrate the emergence of the theory, and to point to critical junctures and breakthroughs in terms of theoretical insights.

It is very hard to convey a real sense of process which accurately reflects the cyclical and episodic nature of data collection and analysis. For example, it may not be possible to include the early development of multiple codes, concepts and their relationships, which appeared at first to be like an enormous and complicated jigsaw, without creating disorder, repetition and fragmentation within the text. Therefore, the paper or thesis should be written in a way that allows the reader to identify key stages in the research and highlight conceptual development. It is usually suggested that when writing up, the researcher obtains exemplars of work that have adopted or developed similar methods. To gain an indication of style and presentation of process two contemporary American PhD theses which are often cited in the literature on grounded theory, Lempert (1992) and Hall (1992) are recommended, particularly for researchers engaged in doctoral work. Both were awarded by the University of California (the birthplace of grounded theory) and both were in the field of sociology. While there are differences in terms of length and the presentation of evidence (Lempert, 1992, using case as the basis for analysis, and Hall, 1992, weaving sections of interviews into the analysis), they demonstrate the process of telling the story of building theory using this method.

## Problems with using grounded theory

There are pitfalls to beware of when using this methodology. There is general acknowledgement of the danger of placing too much emphasis on identifying codes as the exclusive feature of the process, without theoretically coding, or in other words explaining how codes relate to each other (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1991; Glaser, 1992; Stern, 1994).

The researcher must also ensure that constant comparison is an ongoing feature of the process. This is where emerging themes are sorted on the basis of similarities and difference. Theoretical sampling should direct the researcher to further individuals, situations, contexts and locations and the theory should only be presented as developed when all core categories are saturated. A further area of risk is to confuse inductive research with grounded theory. This may not be the case if the inductive research lacks 'creativity' and theoretical sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1994) acknowledge the over emphasis on induction in the original "*Discovery*" (1967) which played down the role of theoretical sensitivity. Indeed the very nature of induction as a pure process has in itself been challenged:

*What field researchers actually do when they use analytical induction would be described more properly by philosophers of science as 'retroduction' than as induction. A double fitting or alternative shaping of both observation and explanation, rather than an ex post facto discovery of explanatory ideas...*

Katz (1983, pp.133-4)

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that there remain a number of misconceptions regarding grounded theory, particularly in relation to positivist practices, a considered analysis of the method and its intellectual assumptions reveals that it owes more to the interpretivist movement with "its emphasis on multiple realities, the researcher and phenomenon as mutually interactive, the belief that causes and effects cannot be separated, that research is value laden and that the outcome of the research is socially constructed" (Brown, 1995a, p.294). Grounded theory as a methodology was developed for, and is particularly suited to, the study of behaviour. Given this background it has considerable potential for the broad

range of subjects which have a human dimension. However, in order to fully utilise the method, there must be recognition that it is time-consuming, often frustrating, and because of its nature, frequently takes the research in a number of different directions before a plausible theory starts to emerge. This requires patience, an open mind, and flexibility. Furthermore, preferences regarding the version adopted should be stated to avoid confusion over terminology and procedures. Finally, once engaged in the process, rigour and credibility should stem from full and reflexive interrogation of the data in order to allow theory to emerge, rather than succumb to the temptation to prematurely test underdeveloped or descriptive accounts of the phenomena under study. Grounded theory will not appeal to the researcher in search of absolute certainties, neatly defined categories and objectively measured explanations. Its appeal is more to those whose view of behaviour allows for process, change and ambiguities, and to those who hold a desire to explore meaning and experience and are willing to engage in a sometimes eclectic manner with complementary theories which often fall outside of the immediate field of study.

## Further recommended reading

Possibly the essential book for all researchers wishing to gain an in-depth grasp of the fundamental principles and procedures of grounded theory is the original Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research* Chicago: Aldine.

In order to decide which version of the method is most appropriate, two further books are recommended:

- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* London: Sage
- Glaser, B. (1978) *Theoretical Sensitivity* Mill Valley: Sociological Press

For a critique of Strauss and Corbin's method read:

- Glaser, B. (1992) *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: emergence versus forcing* Mill Valley: Sociological Press



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