An Intensive Course on Grounded Theory

Ville Isomöttönen

Department of Mathematical Information Technology
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

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Outline

1. The basic nature of grounded theory
2. Discovery of Grounded Theory
3. Glaser vs. Strauss and Corbin
4. More specific viewpoints
5. Discussion
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A thought experiment 1/4

- Consider two music researchers who have got an old recording of a famous, now an old composer.
- The tape is old and there is lots of hum and crackle in it, but one of the songs can be listened to. They decide to analyze the song and are able to provide a transcription of the melody. There were few difficult sections but they found an agreement.
- Other of the researchers thinks that they have done enough: with this data we detected how the melody goes. We did the cross check, we both heard the same notes. This is a valid and good result.
A thought experiment 2/4

- They wish to publish their results, but now other of the researcher thinks that they do not yet understand the song. Why it sounds like it does? It’s a catchy one.

- The other insists on more analysis. They decide to consider the harmonic progression of the song. They notice that their interpretation of the harmonic progression follows a very typical pop format found in many of the then time songs (let’s say this is sixties).

- They may stop here, and report the melody and the harmony and strongly conclude that the style of the composer was that of sixties.
A thought experiment 3/4 WHAT IF:

... they would have gone to this old composer and interviewed her. Let’s assume that the composer would have told that she was never interested in any odd or exceptional harmonic progressions, but wanted to stand out with small nuances hidden in the use of timbre, making the vocal lines catchy.

...the researchers would have let go the view of the research as a pre-designed study on a particular data set
A thought experiment 4/4

- Being grounded theorists, they would have been interested in interviewing the composer, and perhaps been able to formulate a less obvious hypothesis:

  The attraction in the work of Composer X is based on her interest to manipulate parameters such as timbre, while her harmonic progressions do not distinguish her work from the contemporaries.
The conclusion
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General idea 1/2

Adequacy of a theory cannot be separated from the process by which it is generated (DGT, p. 5) This was the contrasting idea to what Glaser and Strauss described as logico-deductive theories:

*Currently, students are trained to master great-man theories and to test them in small ways, but hardly to question the theory as a whole in terms of its position or manner of generation.* (DGT, p. 10)
General idea 2/2

- DGT suggested that a theory is generated from data, and then, it is expected to suit its supposed uses (DGT, pp. 1,3).

- “Theory as process” and “ever-developing” instead of fixed conceptualizations.

- Concepts and integration should emerge. A strategy stated in DGT was that theory generation should be started by ignoring literature until analytic categories are found. (DGT, p. 37)
Constant comparative method (DGT, pp. 101–116)

- Comparing incidents applicable to each category
- Integrating categories and their properties
- Delimiting the theory
- Writing the theory

All of these can take place in parallel with each other, but are likely started in the given order.
Comparing

- The first basic rule: as coding an incident, the analyst compares the incident with the previous incidents coded in the same category.

- The second basic rule: the analyst should stop coding and write a memo on his/her ideas. Thus, DGT acknowledged grounded theory as a thought process!

- Intuitive?
Integration

- Discovery of how concepts and their sub-concepts interrelate.
- As coding proceeds, the analyst compares, not only incidents with some incidents, but with the properties of the category that resulted from initial comparison of incidents.
- Integration follows from the comparison.
Delimiting

- Delimiting is forced with the constant comparison.
- The analyst starts to achieve two major requirements of a theory: parsimony of variables and formulations, and scope in the applicability to wide range of situations while remaining the theory close to data (DGT, p. 111).
- It’s also about reduction — getting rid of the overlapping concepts using more general concepts.
Writing

- DGT says that the discussion in the research notes provide the content behind the categories which become the major themes in the theory.
- DGT identifies two ways of writing...
  - discussional
  - stating propositions
- ... but prefers the former as it foregrounds the on-going nature of the grounded theory process ("ever-developing").
Theoretical sampling and saturation

- Joint coding and analysis.
- Theoretical sampling: the decision of what data should be collected is controlled by the emerging theory.
- Theoretical saturation: categories seem to have obtained all the relevant properties, and the analyst starts to see similar indicators in the data over and over again. To my mind, one and the same pattern(s) keeps shining through the data.
Sensitizing and analytic concepts 1/2

- DGT (p. 38) suggested that concepts should be both analytic and sensitizing.
- The omitted viewpoint!
- Analytic: concepts are not the entities themselves but characterize the entities (a tree vs. something about the tree).
- Sensitizing: the concept helps to bring the empirical phenomenon into mind (“a catchy concept”).
Sensitizing and analytic concepts 2/2

- Thus, understanding these properties of concepts really guides your grounded theory work!
- Note: Glaser later changed the terminology and started to speak of imagery concepts.
Substantive vs. formal theory 1/3

- A substantive theory is grounded in the research on one particular substantive (empirical) area and the comparison takes place within that single area.

- Formal theory addresses more abstract, conceptual area of research. The comparison takes place between different substantive areas in order to create understanding of abstract concept without a particular connection to one specific substantive area.
Substantive vs. formal theory 2/3

- EXAMPLE. Suddaby (2006) writes that any research starts with a research question and that a study must be grounded to extant research related to the question.

- ...then he interprets that “substantive theory” means basing a theory on the extant research: ...they distinguished between substantive theory, or theory grounded in extant research in a particular subject area (e.g. leadership), and grounded theory, but they observed a direct and necessary link between the two forms of theory:...
... then he cites DGT: Substantive theory is a strategic link in the formulation and generation of grounded formal theory. We believe that although formal theory can be generated directly from data, it is more desirable, and usually necessary, to start the formal theory from a substantive one. The latter not only provides a stimulus to a “good idea” but it also gives an initial direction in developing relevant categories and properties and in choosing possible modes of interaction. Indeed it is difficult to find a grounded theory that was not in some way stimulated by substantive theory. (DGT, p.79)

⇒ Be careful reading interpretations of this method.

What about the previous example from this perspective?
Conclusion


- Discovery of Grounded Theory is a grounded theory (google Glaser’s writing on ’Remodeling grounded theory’).

- Why?

- Basically, all you need is in *Discovery of Grounded Theory*. 
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Two approaches of GT 1/2

- Glaser published his *Theoretical sensitivity* in 1978, which basically elaborates DGT.
- Strauss and Corbin published *Basic of qualitative research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* in 1990. As the title hints, this was an attempt to formulate grounded theory as a mechanical process. They call it grounded theory.
- Glaser got somewhat angry, and put out a book that reviews the differences between the two approaches chapter by chapter, titled as *Emergence vs. Forcing.*
Two approaches of GT 2/2

- Many follow Strauss and Corbin, likely because their approach is an attempt to formulate grounded theory method as a mechanical process, and as a such it becomes easier to first adopt.

- Glaser keeps defending the idea of the original grounded theory.
Thinking vs. mechanical process

- Strauss and Corbin: *Coding is a systematic and precise set of procedures that can’t be done haphazardly or at the whim of the researcher. In order for the emerging theory to be grounded, as well as valid and reliable, the procedures must be followed just as carefully as those that govern good quantitative studies* (Basics of Qualitative research, p. 46). ...Stated in the section on theoretical sensitivity.

- Glaser says that the mechanical approach leads to “creating” that involves testing and verification (see Emergence vs. Forcing, p. 76).
Introduction vs. deduction

- Strauss and Corbin put forward that the analysis is about continuous interplay between inductive and deductive thinking (Basics of Qualitative Research, p. 111). The hypotheses are deduced and then verified.

- Glaser criticizes that induction is not about proving or disproving a hypothesis with data but about figuring out from the patterns in the data what concepts and hypotheses emerge (Emergence vs. Forcing, p. 71).

- “Verification” vs. “being in the need of making sense of something”

- To be returned if there is sufficient time...
Paradigm model vs. emergence of theoretical codes

- Strauss and Corbin present a paradigm model for interrelating the discovered categories. “Unless you make use of this model, your grounded theory analysis will lack density and precision”.

- Glaser gives eighteen families of theoretical codes that helps putting a theory together and says that new codes continually emerge and arrive at sociology.

- Glaser criticizes the single model (“pet code”) view by arguing that grounded theories should not be developed in terms of a single pre-defined model as this would force data to fit the model and restrict the analysis to thinking of data only in terms of a single model.

- Example/Discussion.
Selective coding and core category 1/2

- Strauss and Corbin: selective coding is the process of selecting a core category, relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in the categories that need further refinement and development (Basics of qualitative research, p. 116).

- Glaser speaks of core variables which relate to basic social processes in the phenomenon under study. Selective coding is about arrival at and selection of such a core category. The selected core must emerge and be relevant to those involved (it is not just any selection at the end of the process).
Selective coding and core category 2/2


- They report five themes and conclude that the selective coding should allow the selection of more than one core category.
Conclusion: how to get started?

- Textbooks on qualitative methods may overlook the differences between the two approaches.
- As demonstrated with the examples, people who write about the method interpret it in different ways.
- As a result, a conceptual confusion emerges. For example, DGT and the subsequent approaches are cited in one and the same study without understanding the differences.
- My viewpoint: lean on the original papers and books, be aware of the differences, and LEARN BY DOING.
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Subjectivity/objectivity

- You have your sensitivities. You need to have. And you interpret.

- BUT, in my experience, the constant comparison gives you an objective mindset: you are trying to understand something from similarities and differences between the data incidents.

- The view of objectivity vs. subjectivity may arise from the philosophical position of the researcher instead from the method itself (Urquhart 2002).
Data usage

- Anything is data. This was already stated, but think about this in the educational context.
- “Surrounded by data” instead of a fixed data set.
Is it a research method?

- In my opinion, we must ask if it is accepted as a research method?
- Originators speak of grounded theory as a research method.
- I think Glaser and Strauss “legalized” conceptualization (read: a thought process) as a research method.
- Which is great :)
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Please, feel free to comment.
Thank you!

Thank you Anders!
Some of the recommended reading


Cathy Urquhart. Regrounding grounded theory — or reinforcing old prejudices? a brief reply to Bryant.


Some notes and reflection on the seminar

Notice that I purposefully stressed the grounded theory as an on-going thought process to communicate that it is not merely a data analysis technique that yields a list of categories. Thus, do not overlook the importance of careful comparison. If you wish further review the idea of comparison, see section on substantive coding in the Glaser’s 'Theoretical Sensitivity’, particularly the page 62.
Discussion: “Should one use the paradigm model given by Strauss and Corbin or something else when integrating categories” Answer: Integration is grounded. It is empirical. But defined theoretical codes (how concepts can be potentially integrated) can be helpful in this process. Please, see section on theoretical codes in the Glaser’s ’Theoretical Sensitivity’, particularly the coding families. I mentioned that a model view has been intuitive for me (diagramming concepts and their relations). This is included in the Glaser’s theoretical codes.
Question: “How can you publish a complete grounded theory as it likely takes more pages than is typically accepted in publishing forums”. Answer: you do not need to include a mass of description into a grounded theory but foreground the concepts and logic between the concepts. This conceptual level of writing is thus the answer. Please, see sections on the theoretical coding families and the writing process in the Glaser’s ’Theoretical Sensitivity’.

Discussion: Subjectivity vs. objectivity. I recommend you to read about the ontological view in Critical Realism and reflect this on the classical form of grounded theory.