

## **Grounded theory: A thumbnail sketch**

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This is intended as a brief overview. I've tried to provide just enough detail to serve as an overall framework. My intention is to support people using grounded theory, particularly for thesis purposes. I've written it particularly with psychology postgraduates in mind. There is much about it that suits psychological research. But in those psychology schools where a narrow empiricism reigns (I think that's most of them) it may appear countercultural. I hope it may also be useful to others. In tackling a grounded theory thesis, if you can find a supervisor or mentor who has used grounded theory, so much the better. I also strongly recommend that you read some of the key works on grounded theory -- there's a select bibliography later. In other words, use this paper to get started. Then read the key literature. You will then almost certainly need to be familiar with the methodological literature to justify your choice of grounded theory to readers, especially examiners.

So I'm suggesting you work your way through this paper (preferably with your notes from a couple of interviews in front of you). Then I'd suggest Glaser and Strauss (1967). That was the start of it all. You might then follow this up with Glaser (1992). This was written in response to Strauss and Corbin (1990). It clearly delineates the differences between the approaches of Strauss and Glaser. It also explains clearly that grounded theory, Glaser style, is an emergent methodology. It provides some arguments to support that approach. Glaser (1998) is also relevant for beginners in grounded theory and is intended as a textbook for beginners.

I'm not sure that either Glaser or Strauss would endorse this thumbnail sketch. However, I'm persuaded that it serves a useful purpose. I had to read a lot of Glaser before I understood (or thought I understood) the process. I think I've provided a description which is brief and clear enough to be easily readable. I think there is just enough detail to get you started. This description follows Glaser more closely than it does Strauss and Corbin. As someone who has been using other emergent research methodologies for many years, I find Glaser's approach more clearly emergent and more clearly justified as emergent. It is also more congenial to my style and applications than is Strauss's approach.

First, a summary. You'll find this immediately below. This is followed by a slightly more detailed description, taking each of the elements in turn. I later suggest a variation, borrowing processes which I use in action research. Finally, I provide a bibliography.

### **Overview**

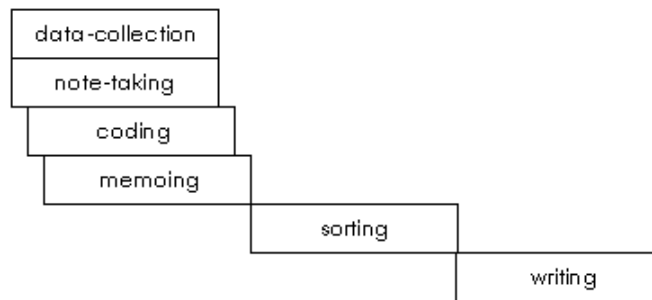
Grounded theory begins with a research situation. Within that situation, your task as researcher is to understand what is happening there, and how the players manage their roles. You will mostly do this through observation, conversation and interview. After each bout of data collection you note down the key issues: this I have labelled "notetaking". Constant comparison is the heart of the process. At first you compare interview (or other data) to interview (or other data). Theory emerges quickly. When it has begun to emerge you compare data to theory. The results of this comparison are written in the margin of the note-taking as coding. Your task is to identify categories (roughly equivalent to themes or variables) and their properties (in effect their sub-categories).

If this is all a bit abstract, some examples later will help. As you code, certain theoretical propositions will occur to you. These may be about links between categories, or about a core category: a category which appears central to the study. As the categories and properties emerge, they and their links to the core category provide the theory. You write yourself notes about it -- memoing. As the data collection and coding proceeds the codes and the memos accumulate. You add to your sample through theoretical sampling. This is purposive sampling which increases the diversity of your sample, searching for different properties. If your core category and its linked categories saturate; you no longer add to them or their properties. This is a sign that it is time to move to sorting. You group your memos, like with like, and sequence them in whatever order will make your theory clearest.

The literature is accessed as it becomes relevant. It is not given special treatment. Glaser makes the point that most research including qualitative research is hypothesis testing. The order of your sorted memos provides you with the skeleton, and many of the words, of your thesis. You begin writing.

To summarise graphically ...

Over time, a grounded theory study works through the following mostly-overlapping phases.



In short, data collection, note-taking, coding and memoing occur simultaneously from the beginning. Sorting occurs when all categories are saturated – this is explained in more detail later, as are the elements of this diagram. Writing occurs after sorting. For ease of explanation, what follows may seem a bit prescriptive. Feel free to experiment with it until you find something that works for you. The theory is *emergent*– discovered in the data, Glaser will say. The methods can be emergent too. This is an important issue, worth more attention.

### **Hypothesis testing versus emergence**

What most differentiates grounded theory from much other research is that it is explicitly emergent. It does not test a hypothesis. It sets out to find what theory accounts for the research situation as it is. In this respect it is like action research: the aim is to understand the research situation. The aim, as Glaser in particular states it, is to discover the theory implicit in the data.

This distinction between "emergence and forcing", as Glaser frames it, is fundamental to understanding the methodology. Most of you, whatever your discipline, will have been exposed more to hypothesis-testing research than to emergent research. The research processes you have learned and the thesis structures you have internalised are those of hypothesis testing, not of emergence. Doing grounded theory well is partly a matter of unlearning some of what you have been taught or have acquired through your reading. If you judge grounded theory by the criteria you have learned to use for hypothesis testing research you will likely misjudge it, perhaps badly. In particular, the place of literature is quite different. So is the way in which both methodology and theory develop gradually as data and interpretations accumulate.

In particular, judgments about the rigour of research are often based on narrow criteria: criteria which make sense only for the methodology for which they were developed. Grounded theory has its own sources of rigour. It is responsive to the situation in which the research is done. There is a continuing search for evidence which disconfirms the emerging theory. It is driven by the data in such a way that the final shape of the theory is likely to provide a good fit to the situation.

In fact, Glaser suggests two main criteria for judging the adequacy of the emerging theory: that it fits the situation; and that it works -- that it helps the people in the situation to make sense of their experience and to manage the situation better. Elsewhere, I've offered similar arguments in favour of action research. In particular, I draw your attention to my 1999 paper to the AQR conference, and the recent paper on data driven research.

### **Data collection**

You will of course keep your eyes open. There is a lot to be learned just by observing, some of it evident within minutes of entering a situation. Interviews are frequently the main source of the information you will develop your theory from. But any data collection methods can be used. Focus groups are not uncommon in other qualitative research, and are suited to grounded theory. So is informal conversation, group feedback analysis, or any other individual or group activity which yields data.

I've included some references in the bibliography. For interviewing I like Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1990) or Kvale (1996), and of course my own *Convergent interviewing*. For focus groups you might try some of the recent work: Bader and Rossi (1998) I like, and also Barbour and Kitzinger (1999). For both interviews and focus groups I've also listed some others. For group feedback analysis, try Heller and Brown (1995). I won't go into further detail here. I *will* say two further things. First, I assume that you will touch base with the literature on your chosen

method. Second, I presume you'll continue to fine tune it as you develop more experience in its use. I encourage you to experiment.

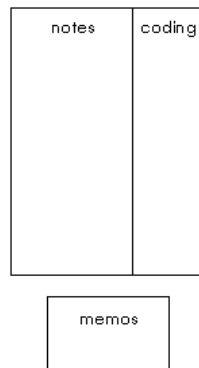
### Note-taking

Glaser recommends against recording or taking notes during an interview or other data collection session. Speaking for myself, I agree with his avoidance of tape recordings and word-by-word transcripts. I think you'll get more understanding from the extra interviews you could do in the time it would take you to listen to and transcribe a tape recording. However, I think he is vulnerable on that point, and especially for thesis purposes. My suggestion is that you take key-word notes during the interviews and convert them to themes afterwards. I also suggest that you tape-record the interviews and check your notes against the tape recording. This won't be as time consuming (or alternatively as costly) as full transcripts and in my experience it will do the job well.

If it's not for thesis purposes I think you can make your own choices. I neither take notes during interviews nor use a tape recorder. I find rapport develops more rapidly and effectively if I don't. However, I do have a memory system which allows me to memorise up to 20 distinct themes (more if it's necessary) and recall them in order. The coding (which follows) will be much easier if you do it adjacent to the interview notes. You can leave wide margins (as much as a third of the page, perhaps) for that purpose.

### Coding

So -- in reality or in imagination -- you have in front of you a set of interview notes. They are written in the left hand two-thirds of the page, let's say. You've identified any important bio-data about the person interviewed at the head of the notes (this may later help to identify properties).



Have some other pieces of paper, or preferably cards, for memoing. The benefits of that will become evident soon. You begin to code. You take a sentence at a time and examine it.

### Constant comparison

For the first interview you are merely asking yourself: What is going on here? What is the situation? How is the person managing that situation? Therefore, what categories (plural) are suggested by that sentence? Code the second interview with the first interview in mind. Code subsequent interviews (or data from other sources) with the emerging theory in mind. That's constant comparison: initially comparing data set to data set; later comparing data set to theory.

*For instance, suppose you were to ask the postgraduates in the coursework higher degrees at Griffith University about the course, as I did recently. The first two people might mention (as they did) having to organise time or organise work. You may tentatively code these sentences as "organising" (perhaps among other codes).*

As you do this, be aware of any theoretical ideas that come to mind. If any do, note them down immediately. For easier sorting later, I use 125 mm x 75 mm systems cards. They fit in my pocket and are very convenient. I carry a pocketful around with me most of the time.

### Categories and properties

In effect, a category is a theme or variable which makes sense of what your informant has said. It is interpreted in the light of the situation you're studying, and other interviews, and the emerging theory.

*In the two sentences considered above, I've already mentioned "organising" as a tentative category. What is different between the two sentences is this: one is about organising time, one about organising work. Perhaps this will be a property, a sub-category, of organising.*

### **Core category**

After a time one category (occasionally more) will be found to emerge with high frequency of mention, and to be connected to many of the other categories which are emerging. This is your core category. It is hazardous to choose a core category too early in the data collection. However, when it is clear that one category is mentioned with high frequency and is well connected to other categories, it is safe to adopt this as the core category. (If more than one core category emerges, Glaser recommends focussing at one time on one only. You can recode for the second of them later, if you wish.)

*All five of the postgraduates I talked to in my miniature example mentioned the use they were making or would make of what they were learning. It became evident before long that this one category (titled "application") fitted the two criteria of frequency of mention and high connectedness.*

When a core category has been identified, you cease coding any sentences which do not relate to it. You will find that in most instances your coding rapidly becomes more efficient as the study progresses. You now code for the core category, other connected categories, and properties of both. You record any identified connections between categories in memos. You continue doing this, adding to your sample as necessary (see sampling, below), until you achieve saturation.

### **Saturation**

In collecting and interpreting data about a particular category, in time you reach a point of diminishing returns. Eventually your interviews add nothing to what you already know about a category, its properties, and its relationship to the core category. When this occurs you cease coding for that category.

### **Sampling**

Your initial sample is likely to be defined by your choice of research situation. If there are many people associated with the situation, you might begin by putting together as diverse a sample as you are able. (I don't recall anywhere that Glaser offers a clear description of the beginning sample, though I may be mistaken there.) As categories emerge from your data, you then seek to add to your sample in such a way that you further increase diversity in useful ways. Your purpose is to strengthen the emerging theory by defining the properties of the categories, and how those mediate the relationship of category to category. Glaser and Strauss refer to this as theoretical sampling. The sample is emergent, as is the theory and the method generally.

*The small group of postgraduates I talked to were either studying part-time and working, or had worked at some stage. One might expect a category such as "application" to be influenced by work experience. I could therefore have added usefully to the sample by identifying and talking to people from the program who had never worked.*

### **Memoing**

I have mentioned already that memoing continues in parallel with data collection, notetaking and coding. In effect, a memo is a note to yourself about some hypothesis you have about a category or property, and particularly about relationships between categories. Glaser makes the point, and I agree, that memoing is given high priority. As an idea occurs to you, pause in what you are doing and write a memo to yourself. I carry a pocket full of 125 mm x 75 mm system cards in my pocket most of the time, for jotting down memos.

In time your core category and the categories related to it will have saturated. By the time this happens you will have accumulated a large number of memos. Between them they will capture the different aspects of the theory which has emerged from your data.

*In the example, early memos might record hypotheses that "organisation" and "application" were categories. Another memo might question if "present application to work" and "future application to work" might be properties of application. A further memo might hypothesise that application is a core category. Another memo might query if organisation is important at least in part because it may lead to better application.*

In short, in using grounded theory methodology you assume that the theory is concealed in your data for you to discover. Coding makes visible some of its components. Memoing adds the relationships which link the categories to each other. The next task is to decide how you will structure the report to communicate your theory to others. That is the purpose of sorting.

### **Sorting**

My reason for using cards for memoing is twofold. They are easier to carry, so I can jot down ideas whenever they occur to me. They are easier to sort. For the actual sorting I work on a large table or on the floor. First I group them on the basis of the similar categories or properties they address. I then arrange the groups to reflect on the sorting surface their relationship. The intention is that their layout in two dimensional space will capture the structure of the eventual report or thesis. I then gather the cards in the sequence which will allow the structure to be described. This provides the basis for the writing up, which follows.

### **Writing up**

Having done all this -- coding, memoing, sorting -- the writing is less a chore than it might otherwise be. The sort structure is the report structure. It is often just a matter of preparing a first draft by typing up the cards in sequence and integrating them into a coherent argument.

### **The place of literature**

There are two important points to be made about the literature. The first is that, in an emergent study, you probably won't know at the beginning which literature will later turn out to be relevant. This has implications both for the place of reading in your own research process and for your report. The second is that the literature is not given a position of privilege when compared to the data. It is treated as data, with the same status as other data.

### **Literature as emergent**

Most people embarking on a research project will first examine the relevant literature. Thesis candidates often do not begin data collection until well into their candidature. In an emergent study you can begin collecting data as soon as you have a research situation. You can then access literature as it becomes relevant. Glaser (especially 1978) makes much of the prior background reading which provides the models to help make sense of the data. He recommends reading widely while avoiding the literature most closely related to what you are researching. His fear, which I share, is that your reading may otherwise constrain your coding and memoing.

At the same time, I think this approach may leave you vulnerable to criticism from examiners or referees or colleagues. The defence is to take special pains to be responsive to the data, to seek disconfirming evidence assiduously, and to defend by careful argument your decision to do so. Reading later is less an issue for Glaser. My own view is that it makes sense to access relevant literature *as it becomes relevant*. Most examiners and colleagues will expect you to locate your study within the relevant fields of literature. You can also reach a wider sample, in effect, by refining your findings in the light of the literature in slightly different but related fields.

In short, a progressive accessing and reading of relevant literature can become a part of your data collection procedures.

### **Literature as data**

Constant comparison remains your core process. Your aim as you read is to compare literature to the emerging theory in the same way that you compare data to the emerging theory. For instance you might follow the same procedure of data-collection (in this instance reading) overlapping with note-taking, coding and memoing. Whether or not you do precisely this, the key issue is how you treat apparent disagreement between your emerging theory and the literature. You don't assume that your theory must be wrong. After all, you have been concerned throughout with its fit to the data and its ability to make sense of actual experience. You seek to extend the theory so that it makes sense of both the data from your study and the data from the literature.

This issue -- of treating disagreement appropriately -- has been a focus of some of my own work on rigour in action research. It is in fact possible to substitute some action research procedures for some of all of data-collection, note-taking, coding, memoing and sorting.

### **A variation based on action research**

I research my own practice as educator, facilitator and consultant. The methods I use were developed until recently entirely independently of grounded theory. I wasn't familiar with its literature. When I did eventually start to read that literature I was pleased at the obvious parallels between the two approaches. Let me illustrate this by describing how I approach ... let's say, organizational diagnosis, using interviewing. I'll do this in such a way that the parallels are evident. I think you will find that the parallels are such that you can substitute parts of one for parts of the other.

### **Convergent interviewing**

In diagnostic interviewing (see my 1990 monograph) I begin in a very open-ended way. For instance I may often say "Tell me about this organisation" or whatever it is. I then keep the person talking for somewhere about 45 minutes without asking specific questions. This increases the likelihood that the data come from the informant's experience, not from the questions I ask. I memorise the themes they mention (some of my colleagues instead take key-word notes, which serve the same purpose). I prefer to work with a colleague who at the same time interviews a different informant. After each pair of interviews we compare notes. We identify those themes which both informants mention.

Sometimes those themes are mentioned in the same way by both informants. Sometimes they mention the same theme, but with disagreement.

*I was evaluating an action learning program with Karyn Healy, a colleague. Many informants mentioned that they weren't provided resources which allowed them to pay someone to do their work, to free them up for their action learning. An example of agreement might be two informants saying words to the effect that their action learning was done in their own time, which they both resented. A disagreement would be when both mentioned doing it in their own time, but one of them mentioned this with satisfaction, not dissatisfaction.*

When we identify an agreement we devise probe questions to seek exceptions to the agreement.

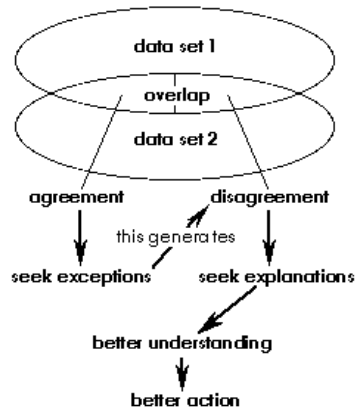
*For example, we might ask if there were people who didn't resent the intrusions on their own time. We might ask if there were advantages to being able to devote their own time to the action learning projects.*

When we identify a disagreement we devise probe questions which seek explanations for the difference.

*For instance we might say something like this ... "Many people have mentioned taking part in the action learning in their own time. To what extent was this your experience? How did you feel about that? Some have mentioned this with substantial resentment. Others seem not to mind. Can you help us understand how this difference might arise?"*

As with grounded theory the explanations emerge gradually from the data as the study proceeds. All interviews begin open-ended. In the later interviews there are more probe questions. And more of those probes are specific. The theory emerges from the data, from the informants. In the early stages it consists primarily of themes. These become more elaborated as the study develops.

This is depicted diagrammatically below. I suggest that, in deciding your own methods, you choose those which will be easiest for you to defend to examiners, readers or colleagues. What you do is probably less important than how well you justify it.



### Qualitative psychology

This is for those attempting to use grounded theory in psychology. Many of you will barely have heard of qualitative methodology, let alone learned how to use them. However, there is a growing, if small, band of people exploring the application of qualitative methods in psychology. I've included some of them in the bibliography below. It may help you with your supervisors, committee or examiners if you can demonstrate that there is an alternative tradition to which your studies are a contribution.

### Contribution to knowledge

I have no doubt, by the way, that you will have a contribution to knowledge at the end of it all. The theory will arise more quickly than you imagine. You'll enjoy doing it (Glaser calls it the "drugless trip"). There is a good chance it will be an addition to the literature because most psychological research builds on what has gone before. You, on the other hand, are going to be responsive to the research situation as it is. You are going to find out what is really happening there. By some chance you may discover a theory only to find someone else has come up with the same theory using more traditional methods. You still have a contribution to knowledge, and a valuable one. You have cross-validated, using a very different methodology, the theory previously offered.

Have fun.

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