Unpacking Grounded Theory:
A Venue for Education Research

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Abstract

This study unpacks converging and diverging ideas and definitions surrounding Grounded Theory, Classical Grounded Theory, and Glaserian/Straussian Grounded Theory. This qualitative research cleverly accomplishes the task in a manner that becomes useful for qualitative researchers to use Grounded Theory as a practical venue for a framework for education research. Many researchers’ definitions portray Grounded Theory as an ethnographic approach of a systematic qualitative research methodology involving the creation of theory from observation data. Even though Grounded Theory is often used synonymously with qualitative research, some researchers argue these are distinctly different (Grounded Theory Institute, 2011). Resulting theory attempts to explain categories, properties, and the relationships of a body of knowledge that is grounded in the data (Calloway & Knapp, 1995).

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Today, there appears to be a variety of converging and diverging ideas and definitions surrounding Grounded Theory (GT), Classical Grounded Theory, and Glaserian or Straussian Grounded Theory. Most definitions agree and portray the ethnographic approach of GT as more of a systematic qualitative research methodology involving the creation of theory from observational data. Grounded Theory is often used synonymously with qualitative research; but some argue that these are distinctly different (Grounded Theory Institute, 2011). Glaser and Strauss (1964) stressed that GT can be generated or deduced from observation and provides structure sometimes lacking in other qualitative methodologies. “The resulting theory is an explanation of categories, their properties, and the relationships among them. Results can lead to an evolutionary body of knowledge that is grounded in the data” (Calloway & Knapp, 1995, p. 1) hence the term, *grounded theory*. The Grounded Theory Institute (2011) claims GT can be applicable for both qualitative and quantitative arenas:

All research is *grounded* in data, but few studies produce a *grounded theory*. Grounded Theory is an inductive methodology. Although many call GT a qualitative method, it is not. It is a general method. It is the systematic generation of theory from systematic research. It is a set of rigorous research procedures leading to the emergence of conceptual categories. These concepts/categories are related to each other as a theoretical explanation of the action(s) that continually resolve the main concern of the participants in a substantive area. Grounded Theory can be used with either qualitative or quantitative data. (p. 1)

It is evident that GT functions differently from traditional education research that first lists a theoretical framework to study a phenomenon. Not so in GT; the first step is data collection using varied methods. The data’s key points are coded into concepts or groups and subsequently, into categories. Eventually, through constant comparative methods, the evolving theory is formed from the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1964).

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss, both sociologists. Glaser formed the Grounded Theory Institute in 1999 to provide a venue for online GT forums and publications. Glaser and Strauss disagreed on their GT paradigm causing a split after Strauss published *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987). Although Strauss continued his work on GT, the controversy ended with his death in 1994.

Today, differences continue to exist between the two versions of GT. While the Straussian approach appears to emphasize systematic methods and validation, the Glaserian approach stresses emergence and claims that all data, whether it is qualitative or quantitative, interview or observational, email and field notes, survey or statistical, and even a review of literature can be used in the comparative process of GT. Regardless of the approach used, GT always results in probability relationships between concepts or conceptual hypotheses from empirical data, not statistical significance (Glaser, 1998). Also, GT research does not evolve from an advanced hypothesis, but rather seeks an explanation via empirical data. The validity of results in GT is determined by the relevance (Glaser & Strauss 1964; Glaser 1978; Glaser, 1990, Glaser 1998).
Methods of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is unique because of its multivariate properties (Glaser, 1998) and it incorporates conceptual level data by first preparing to collect and then collecting and coding it. There are several methods of coding in GT such as axial, theoretical, selective, open, and substantive. Memoing occurs simultaneously and adds to the richness and aids in connections later. Constant comparative analysis is stressed to achieve core categories until saturation (Kolb, 2012). Finally, conceptual sorting of memos into outlines of emergent theory occurs before writing and rewriting with literature and final draft (Glaser, 1998). In Glaserian GT, before collecting data, conducting an in-depth literature review or discussing the research is not allowed because it could influence final results (Dick, 2005).

In a GT study, explanations slowly emerge from data and increasing probing until the theory emerges initially as themes. Dick’s (2005) Grounded Theory: A Thumbnail Sketch provides three helpful diagrammatical depictions of the GT phases discussed (pp. 4, 7, 14).

![Diagram of GT phases](image)

Figure 1. Diagrammatical depictions of GT phases (Adapted from Dick, 2005, p. 4).

Grounded Theory always begins with a research situation and the task is to understand what is happening through observation, conversation, and/or interview (Dick, 2005). After the initial data collection phase, key issues are jotted down and constantly compared until eventually a theory emerges. These results of comparisons of the key issues should be written in the margin of the note-taking as coding (Dick, 2005). In identifying categories of themes and subcategories, core categories will emerge and as they emerge, it provides more theory that is to be memoed and considered (Dick, 2005). According to Dick (2005), one of the most important steps is the axial, open, and selective coding in GT implementation.

Borgatti (1996) draws his conclusions from Glaser and Strauss (1964) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), axial coding is a process of relating codes via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking. To simplify, grounded theorists emphasize causal relationships. Borgatti (1996) says the problem with some grounded theory work is that it requires the respondent's
understanding of what causes what, as truth. Open coding is used to identify, name, categorize and describe phenomena (Borgatti, 1996).

In open coding, labels refer to things that are the nouns and verbs of a conceptual world; adjectives and adverbs are properties of these categories (Borgatti, 1996). Having abstract and concrete categories helps to generate GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Lastly, selective coding requires choosing one core category and relating all other categories to it and the idea is to develop a single storyline around which everything else is developed (Borgatti, 1996) and selective coding can propel the story.

During coding, the researcher should look for saturation. This happens when core categories are linked to categories over again. Dick (2005) claims that while collecting, interpreting, and coding data about a particular category, one might reach a point of diminishing returns and the interview or observation of data fails to add to what is known about a category. When this occurs, it is time to cease coding that category. This is referred to in GT literature as saturation (Charmaz, 2005) and indicates time to move to sorting by grouping like memos and sequencing (Dick, 2005). Lastly, the literature review data is only accessed when it becomes relevant and is then not given special treatment (Dick, 2005).

In Glaser’s (2007) GT article, All in Data, he discusses how to deal with transcending worrisome data:

GT gives freedom from distortion tyranny to data that is sourced from interpretations, constructions, voice of the participant, personal experiences of various kinds, culturally differential, language differential, objective-subjective, value-laden, behavior vs. spoken, truth vs. properline, credibility of informants, selective data collection, selective non-random sampling, multiple versions of the truth, historical, biographical, gender bias, varying interview and observation techniques. The reader may think of more sources. To repeat in this context, all that GT does is to rigorously generate conceptual hypothesizes that get applied with fit, relevance and workability (explanatory). (p. 5)

Glaser's (2011) most recent book is entitled Getting Out of the Data: Grounded Theory Conceptualization. In the book, he explains how to deal with problems that occur when researchers use GT methodology that depredate efficient use and offers assistance in generating substantive theory (Glaser, 2011). A relevant section of the first chapter of his book provides an idea that one of the founders of GT is still engaged today in supporting his theory and offers a literary view of phases illustrated above (Glaser, 2011):

It is simple enough to get out of the data to the emergence of conceptualization if the researcher uses the GT procedures set out in detail in many of my books. That is, trust in emergence by starting to constantly comparatively analyze data the first night after field notes are collected, look for interchangeable indicators in the data as it is collected, as it is gathered, while using the constant comparative method. Once the pattern, latent in the data, is found, and indicators are saturated, name the pattern and conceptualization begins. Soon more patterns emerge and memos start relating them and a multivariate GT starts emerging around a core category. The research has gotten out and off the
descriptive level of gathered data to conceptualization. GT is about concepts, not
description. This short synopsis may be extended by reading my many other books and
the published papers of several of my mature students. It works very well, if the
procedures are followed, however flexibly. The researcher uses the constant comparative
method (cc method) to discover codes resulting in a product, that is, a substantive theory.
(p. 1)

Discussion

Although Grounded Theory is being used worldwide and most prominently in the United
States, some critics of its use remain ardent in their criticism. Two outspoken GT critics Thomas
and James (2006) agree with concept of constant comparative techniques, but are adamant that it
is too difficult to free the researcher of preconceptions during the important phase of collecting
and analyzing the research data (Thomas & James, 2006); their article abstract summarizes their
distrust:

Grounded theory's popularity persists after three decades of broad-ranging critique. In
this article three problematic notions are discussed—‘theory,’ ‘ground’ and ‘discovery’—which
linger in the continuing use and development of grounded theory procedures. It is argued that far
from providing the epistemic security promised by grounded theory, these notions—embodied in
continuing reinventions of grounded theory—constrain and distort qualitative inquiry, and that
what is contrived is not in fact theory in any meaningful sense, that ‘ground’ is a misnomer when
talking about interpretation and that what ultimately materializes following grounded theory
procedures is less like discovery and more akin to invention. The procedures admittedly provide
signposts for qualitative inquirers, but educational researchers should be wary, for the
significance of interpretation, narrative and reflection can be undermined in the procedures of
grounded theory. (p. 1)

There are also critics of GT in regards to treatment of literature reviews. Recall, Glaser
(1978) vehemently discourages priori literature reviewing, which typically provides a way to
make sense of data, and fears that immersing one’s self in the literature before data collection
may constrain coding and memoing. He says the literature is emergent. He does not have a
problem with reading later, and if needed, the researcher can expand the literary field. Dick
(2005) believes this creates rigor vulnerability by examiners or referees or colleagues. However,
if there is special attention to be responsive to data and seeking disconfirming evidence and
argument, literature review reading can occur later (Glaser, 1978). Because constant comparison
is the core process, researchers must read to compare literature to the emerging theory in the
same way that researchers compare the data to the emerging theory. He even recommends note-
taking, coding and memoing of the literature (Glaser, 1978).

Application and Conclusion

Using a scholarly production, such as a book, journal, or paper and blog prompts, along
with a motivated faculty with a qualitative paradigm in mind, GT methodology can provide an
invaluable framework for producing valid research. With the current environment in education
today, there are many choices for critical educational topics such as the changes in the field of
educational leadership, changes in principal preparation, social justice, socio-political issues in
education, technology integration, globalization, or public service. The research topic and design method can be created by senior faculty that could provide timely coaching and mentoring opportunities for the junior faculty. The same Grounded Theory methodology framework described above can be utilized by authors, based on their prior experience with GT and from studying Charmaz’s (2005), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd Ed* (pp. 507-535).

Grounded Theory can provide authors a tool for constant comparative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1964). Junior faculty could respond to writing prompts or blogs of senior faculty. A vision for a project can transform and be scaffolded by collaborating and coding data following GT methodology: no prior literature reading, constant comparative analysis and axial and open coding of the writing prompt, and collaboration and simultaneous mentoring. Results can lead to richness in connections and consensus of core categories and emergent themes, sorting ideas and bias, and a final collaborative theory of the response and writings, and rewritings, product. This should occur in several phases.

Initially, junior faculty could communicate reactions to senior faculty prompts or blogs using Google docs, a website that allows users to collaboratively comment on documents. Next, junior faculty could dialogue about the writing prompt reactions with any collaboration tool. The sessions should be subsequently transcribed.

Guiding questions extracted from Charmaz’s (2005) Grounded Theory approach could aid junior faculty and provide a desirable venue for accurately unifying, guiding, and deepening their thought processes during the prompt or blog coding processes and data analysis.

1. How can we examine and problematize our language? (p. 525)
2. How can we detail our contexts to inform our analysis? (p. 524)
3. To what extent and in what ways are we analyzing what is said, unsaid (silences), and how these are said?
4. What assumptions underlie our positions? (p. 519)
5. To what extent and in what ways do these posts reflect, trouble, and implicitly reinforce dominant discourses?
6. What in the posts is implicit, tacit, luminal? (p. 513)
7. How does the fact that we are analyzing our own work impact our analysis?
8. To what extent and in what ways does our analysis address issues of agency, power, status, and hierarchy? (p. 513-514).

The template for coding the writing prompt or blog data could be arranged with two columns and organized by prompts. A comparison of the culminating yield list of topics and themes, could be made between and among data levels and should be individually coded and again shared to validate the data (Creswell, 2003). First, individual codings may appear as conglomerations of pseudonyms, themes, colors, lenses, convergent and divergent thoughts, and written and unwritten silenced ideas. Authors should come to consensus about their organization of the writing prompts.

Authors should understand the rarity of complete non-bias in their reactions to the prompts, coding the data, and in their guiding question responses. Therefore, it will be
necessary, not unlike GT, to make implicit belief systems explicit (Borgatti, 1996) and to reveal co-author context and assumptions. This is easily accomplished by incorporating biographical summaries and individual paragraphs about each author’s context or personal experience, what brought each to a leadership position, and their own perceptions of leadership and how those perceptions have evolved. In the end, using GT methodology in this manner provides a foundational framework that remains an invaluable education research venue for an emerging collaborative research.

References