

ASSIGNMENT # 1

Grounded Theory

Submitted to:

Dr. Fatima Khurram

Submitted by:

Areeha Khan Durrani

Roll no 4

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Department of Applied Psychology
The Islamia University of Bahawalpur

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is probably the most commonly used qualitative method, surpassing ethnography, and it is used internationally. This method is used extensively in North America and internationally. Significantly, this vast expansion has extended from only two researchers, Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss, who were at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), their students, and their students' students. In four decades, their methods and research publications have created a traceable lineage. The influence of grounded theory is now so widespread that it can be argued that it has profoundly changed the face of social science clearly developing it in several innovative areas.

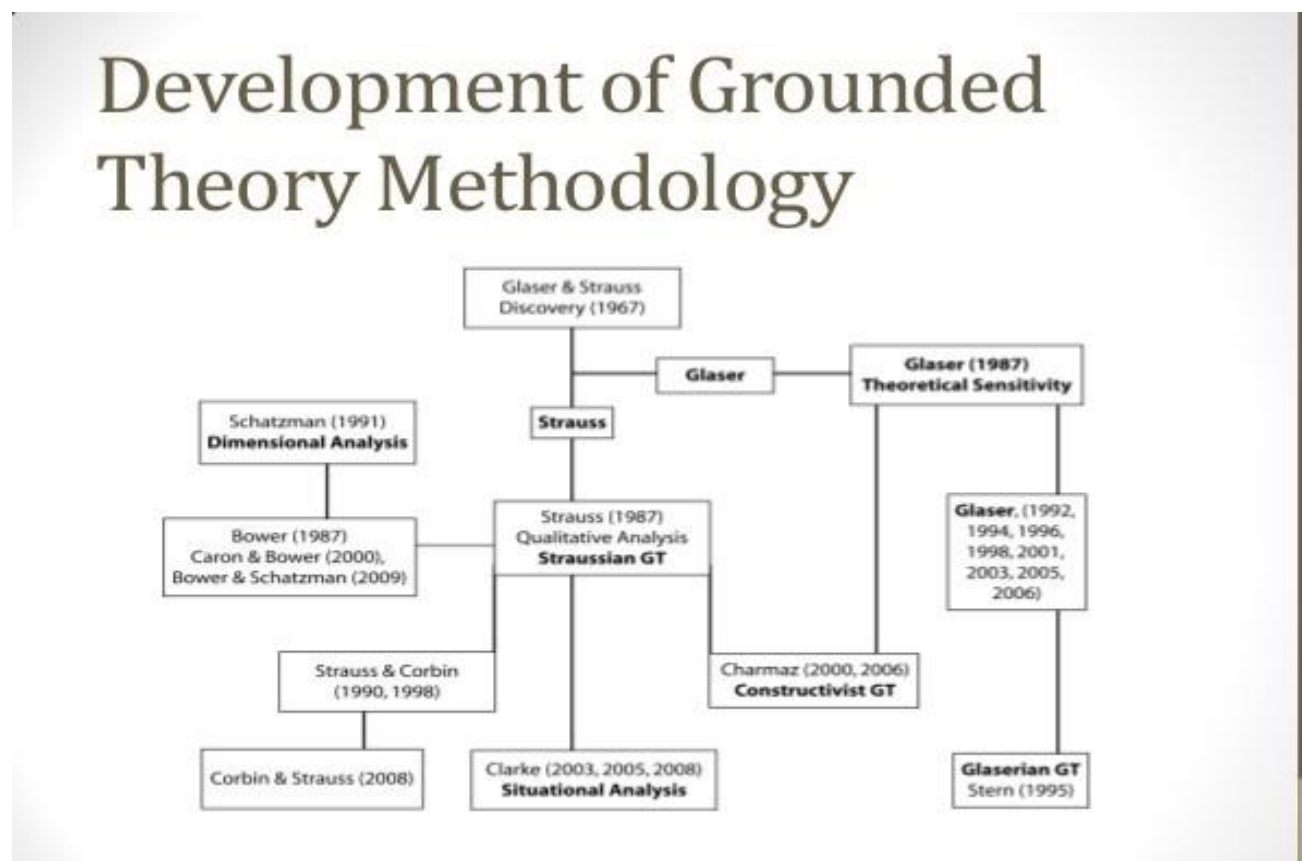


Figure 1: Genealogy of Grounded Theory: Major Milestones

Grounded theory, a now widely used approach to qualitative research, as traditionally constructed aligns most closely with positivistic and post-positivistic assumptions (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). It was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in response to what they considered to be an overemphasis on hypothesis testing and the verification of theory in sociological research. They argued that the work of theory generation could not be complete and that all human experience was unlikely to be captured and accounted for by the existing grand theories of the time. They put forth grounded theory as a systematic approach to qualitative data collection and analysis to be carried out with the explicit purpose of discovering new theory from data or building new theory from the ground up, rather than by logical deductions from a priori assumptions. Although grounded theory turned the process of scientific inquiry in the post-positivist tradition on its head by beginning with the collection of data to use to ultimately build theory rather than collecting data to prove or disprove existing theory, the foundational assumptions on which traditional grounded theory rests are largely rooted in post-positivism. That said, constructive approaches to grounded theory have also been articulated and widely implemented (e.g., Charmaz, 2006), and others have argued that grounded theory techniques can be implemented using a variety of philosophical approaches (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Traditional grounded theory “accepts that there is an external world that can be described, analyzed, explained and predicted: truth, but with a small *t*” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). Part of the intent of grounded theory was to codify qualitative research methods and put forth a systematic set of explicit strategies for carrying out the research process, with the assumption being that following a systematic set of methods would lead to the discovery of real phenomena and the development of verifiable “theories” of them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such work, however, requires getting out into the field to collect rich data on which to build these theories.

Some of the defining features of a grounded theory approach are

- (a) simultaneous data collection and analysis,
- (b) the development of codes from the data rather than from theory
- (c) constant comparison of data at all levels of the data collection and analytic process
- (d) theoretical sampling to serve the purpose of theory generation rather than representativeness of the sample
- (e) memo writing to define and elaborate on emerging categories and the relationships among them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Glaser and Strauss, from the very beginning of their work together, stressed that the outcomes of a grounded theory study—that is, the grounded theory itself—had to adhere to some specific criteria, but ones that were distinct from those often held up as necessary for hypothesis-based, deductive research. They termed these *grabs*, *fit*, *work*, and *modifiability*. Which helps in enhancing the ways in which they can be understood as guidelines for evaluating the outcomes of research as follows:

1. *Grab*

This is a characteristic of a substantive grounded theory. It relates to Dewey's idea of a theory being judged in terms of its usefulness, rather than on any abstract principle of veracity. If a grounded theory has *grab*, this might be demonstrated in the way in which the actors from the research setting respond when it is explained to them—they will understand and engage with it, using it in their activities and practices. Jeanne Quint's development of innovative nursing practices and the ways in which these were taken up by colleagues and fellow professionals are prime examples of this feature.

2. *Fit*

This term refers to the need for theoretical insights to adhere to the substantive context, rather than to the predilections or biases (conscious or unwitting) of the researcher(s). Glaser offers further thoughts on this issue in *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978), stressing that the categories resulting from a GTM study should fit the data. How this is accomplished, and the cogency with which it is demonstrated and argued, will depend on the researcher(s) and the relevant published outputs. It should be thought of as an overarching aim to be striven toward in any GTM-oriented research.

3. *Work*

This again builds on the idea of a theory as a tool. Tools are useful within specific contexts or for specific tasks. There are no general-purpose tools suited to all and every situation and job. The anticipated outcome of a GTM-oriented research project ought to be a *substantive* grounded theory—that is, one that is of use in the context from which it has been drawn and within which it has been grounded. Thus, any such theory ought to be able to offer explanations and insights that perhaps previously were unrecognized or implicit and also provide a basis for consideration of future actions and directions. If such a substantive theory is then enhanced and developed to a wider class of contexts, it can claim *formal* status. One of the earliest examples of this was Strauss's work on *negotiated orders* (Strauss, 1978), which extended some of the aspects of the research that led to Glaser and Strauss's early writings.

4. *Modifiability*

One of Glaser and Strauss's criticisms of hypothesis-based research was that, far too often, by the time a research project had been completed—passing from derivation and proposal, through investigation, to eventual proof or disproof—things had moved on and, as a

consequence, the finding and conclusions proved to be of little or no relevance. Furthermore, the process of conceptual discovery is not to be thought of as a once-and-for-all activity, but rather as a continuing and continuous dialogue. Thus, grounded theories have to be understood as modifiable, rather than as fixed, definitive statements for all time.

Grounded Theory Method in Practice

The Grounded Theory Method (GTM) comprises a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Henwood, 2007). The method is designed to encourage researchers' persistent interaction with their data, while remaining constantly involved with their emerging analyses. Data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously and each informs and streamlines the other. The GTM builds empirical checks into the analytic process and leads researchers to examine all possible theoretical explanations for their empirical findings. The iterative process of moving back and forth between empirical data and emerging analysis makes the collected data progressively more focused and the analysis successively more theoretical.

GTM is a method for qualitative research. It offers an alternative to hypothesis-based research, stipulating that, at the outset, the researcher(s) should not seek to articulate concepts or hypotheses to be tested, but rather that the initial aim should be to gather data as the basis for developing the research project in its initial stages. This can appear perplexing both to researchers and assessors, since there seems to be little in the way of guidance with regard to the research topic itself. In practice, however, researchers always do have some idea of their topics of interest and should be able to offer some initial characterization of the contexts that they are keen to study. This may be a specific location, a set of practices, or specific issues that have engaged the researcher's interest.

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