REDISCOVERING GROUNDED THEORY
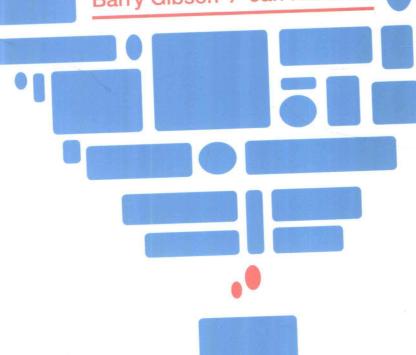
Barry Gibson / Jan Hartman
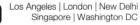
REDISCOVERING GROUNDED THEORY

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Preface

It is hard to remember, let alone describe, the many conversations that have taken place over the last eight years that have led to the writing and subsequent publication of this book. What we can say is that it all began as a chat in a pub, The Sun and Doves, in Denmark Hill in London. We had been introduced to each other by Hans Thulesius; otherwise the meeting would have been pretty improbable. What became apparent after that initial conversation was that not only did we see different things in grounded theory, but we also had a lot that we needed to learn about how each other saw grounded theory. In some respects the more we began to understand each other's background perspectives the more we began to understand grounded theory. Sometimes we agreed easily, other discussions took longer.

As you can tell, given the length of time over which these conversations have taken place, we have both enjoyed the discussions immensely. This is not least because a large proportion of the conversations took place at key locations around where we both lived and worked. They happened in Lund and Malmö in Sweden in Allegro with Giannis, The Bishops Arms, Malmö Brygghus, Nya Tröls, among others. They also took place in Sheffield in the UK after Barry was appointed as a Lecturer in Medical Sociology at the School of Clinical Dentistry. There we spent time debating and discussing grounded theory in The Bath Hotel, The University Arms, The Hallamshire, The Nottingham House, The Gardiners Rest and The Rising Sun. We could name a few others but we think you can get the idea.

Apart from discovering that we both have a passion for Real Ale, several things happened in these conversations. First, we began to understand that an essential component of the legacy of grounded theory as a method *was its sociological origins*. In some respects, we felt, this legacy has been lost or at the very least underplayed. Our dilemma was that on the one hand the originators promoted grounded theory as a general method, one that could transcend disciplines, but on the other hand grounded theory is also *inherently sociological*. We felt there was a real need to revisit this context. Although in this book we seek to highlight the sociological origins of grounded theory, there is of course a risk that we might compromise its openness. As a consequence, we attempt to make sure we always point to the openness of grounded theory in the book. We would also like to stress that when you learn to see grounded theory as a method that has its roots in sociology, when you fully understand the implications of this, we feel you can do grounded theory better. We hope you can see this as you read the text.

Second, we could see that it can also be situated within the context of philosophy of science in order to clarify its similarities to and differences from other theoretical perspectives. It became very apparent that not only was this view valuable, but it could make grounded theory more accessible and this might definitely enable us to do better grounded theory. Indeed, we believe that if the philosophical assumptions had been clarified from the start, the mess grounded theory now seems to be in could have been avoided. We hope that the philosophical parts of this book will redeem the situation somewhat.

Third, during this time we have both been supervising PhD students attempting to do grounded theory. We have both witnessed just how challenging it can be for some to get to grips with building a theory that goes beyond description. We have both been helping them understand how to conceptualise, how to do constant comparative analysis and also how to engage with theoretical sampling, coding, memoing and, of course, integrating their theory. As our students encountered different problems we would discuss these problems and how to overcome them. We have talked about the parts of our advice that worked and the parts that didn't. From these conversations we began to see what worked in terms of giving advice to students and what didn't. In this respect, a third goal for our book was to enable a way for students to do grounded theory better.

Finally, a few caveats. In writing this book we in no way claim special insight or that somehow our understanding of grounded theory is more authentic or better than anything else that has been written. It simply is what it is. Neither do we wish to participate in a kind of 'tyranny of grounded theory' that argues that only one way is the right way, whether this might be

the classical or constructivist form. All we wish to do is to take you through our intellectual journey as a sociologist and a philosopher both encountering the same phenomena. We hope you can see that we have a lot of admiration for the method, for its originators and for those who have been working on it since it was developed. Our intention, then, is to engage constructively and vigorously with these contributors wherever we can with the aim of providing a meaningful and helpful contribution to the grounded theory literature. We hope that you gain something from undertaking this journey with us.

Barry and Jan

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1

Introduction

Aim: To explore the context and reasons for rediscovering grounded theory

Learning outcomes

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- identify and appreciate the need to rediscover grounded theory
- outline and appreciate the sociological context of grounded theory
- have a critical awareness of the need to understand the philosophical context of grounded theory
- develop a clear understanding of the outline and overview of the book

Grounded theory has become one of the most widely applied research methodologies.[1] You will find reference to it in fields as disparate as medicine, education, architecture, marketing, business management, psychology and sociology. This variety of uses is testimony to the success of grounded theory. So what is this widely applied methodology and why should we pay attention to it? Put simply, grounded theory is a method for the generation of theory from data. It is a method that seeks to produce theory that is practical and useful and closely related to the field in which the theory has been developed. It seeks to achieve this by building theory that is 'grounded' in the perspectives of the people who are trying to work in the area being studied as they resolve the problems with which they are confronted.

Grounded theory was developed to try to address what had become an embarrassing 'gap' in sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. This 'gap' was effectively a 'gap' between theory and empirical research. On the one hand, there were sociologists developing 'grand theories' that sought to explain everything in society, but who conducted very little in the way of empirical research. On the other hand, there was a large literature of empirical studies that did not say very much that was theoretical.