

Doing Grounded Theory:

Issues and Discussions

Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D.

Sociology Press

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For Anselm L. Strauss
in remembrance of the journey
we started together in 1967

For all the minus-mentorees
throughout the world
who are "doing".

I wish to thank my many colleagues who continually encouraged and critiqued this book as I was writing it up. The responsibility for negatives is all mine in spite of their efforts which led to many positives. In particular, I am totally indebted to John Klinkert for his unending efforts in editing with encouragement. Also Andy Lowe and Barry Gibson were always there for comments and perspectives, as was Phyllis Stearn. I wish to thank Jim Andrews for keeping the computers going and the pagination.

I wish, particularly, to thank my wife, Carolyn, who unceasingly encouraged this book, which was five years in the making, by traveling the world with me and by constantly reminding me of my spiritual task as purveyor of the method and helper and inspirer to people doing grounded theory throughout the world.

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CHAPTER 1

DOING GROUNDED THEORY: Issues and Discussions

How are you doing? I'm doing. Just do it. Let's do it. Do it because it is meant to be. Do it because it is there to be done. Do it because it WORKS. Grounded theory works and many people are doing it. This book is to get people "doing grounded theory" and "doing it" to the best of their ability. In this book I will discuss the issues that emerged as I traveled to many parts of world giving lectures, seminars and workshops on doing grounded theory.

This book will tackle at once many properties of doing grounded theory. Grounded theory is multivariate. It happens sequentially, subsequently, simultaneously, serendipitously and scheduled. This book will have a cycling buildup as more aspects integrate. So the reader will probably find him or herself rereading sections each time with a different perspective.

A lengthy, unordered list of the issues and discussions which have emerged when doing grounded theory, which I will discuss below, begins with a chapter on the roots of grounded theory and ends with a discussion of trusting grounded theory. I trust that the reader who is "doing" will find this book confidence building, inspiring, energizing for the task, enthusiasm producing or, in short, motivating to just "do it". A chapter is devoted to this topic of the properties of motivation.

Closely linked to motivation is the overcoming of doubts in one's ability to do grounded theory. In particular, the chapters on finding the substantive problem and generating categories will empower

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the reader to cut through the data and preconceptions about it to the substantive problem quickly and develop its categories and their properties. In the chapters on theoretical coding and sampling, the reader will, yet again, see how to raise the conceptual and perceptual levels of the research. Pattern searching will be clarified while generating categories.

In the chapters on forcing and problem finding I will discuss how individual agendas and external requirements of colleagues and audiences impact emergence and how they can be corrected. I hope to help the reader obtain more openness to emergence as well as to remain open to their own creativity. I hope to instill a need for new conceptual ideas and thereby stay so liberated (or get unstuck) by being permitted this freedom by the method. In so trying, I hope to build up, confirm and legitimate the grounded researcher identity of the reader.

As I plant these productive seeds for doing grounded theory, the reader will see the experiential, natural and common sense propensity aspect of grounded theory. By experiential, I mean seeing is believing as is doing. Grounded theory's power and usefulness emerge in the realizations which come from doing. Its potential for consulting, for developing a data oriented life style and for deepifying of one's understanding of social life also comes from doing.

I hope to instill in the reader the general method aspect of grounded theory so it can be used in many fields on any type of data or combinations of data. Multi-disciplinary and multivariate thinking will emerge with the realizations from doing grounded theory. With these realizations will emerge the power of the generated theory in its use for self and others. As we look at the chapter on theoretical codes, I hope to convey the idea that there never is "the most important point". There is just the constant shifting of variables as theoretical codes change. Grounded theory can pick up and encompass this overall integrated picture.

In the chapter on learning grounded theory I will discuss some of the problems of this minus-mentor methodology and ways of coping with them. I will bring out the importance of grounded theory researcher networks, associations and communication connections for researchers who need the stimulation, support and feedback of colleagues at various stages of their research, who also need instruction from more advanced grounded theory researchers, and who need encouragement when experiencing the delayed action learning curve of grounded theory.

Lastly, I will attend the historical roots of grounded theory creation. The methodological and theoretical underpinnings of grounded theory arise from the Chicago school of qualitative research and the Columbia school of quantitative research. Grounded theory's academic roots are from the traditionally known highest quality sociological schools of thought, theory and methods. These roots, along with the amazing product of grounded theory, legitimate its use as one among the many other methods of research.

As I, one of the originators of grounded theory, write the following pages, I embody for others that grounded theory is a methodology discovered by a live human being. It required a lot of thought, a lot of history and a lot of work in order to eventually be used by other researchers. The properties of grounded theory mentioned above and to be discussed below are not my rantings of hope, prospect and trust. They are the comments and issues told to me by numerous researchers throughout the world. They emerged over and over again in my seminars, lectures and work shops, as people discussed with me and others what they were "doing." Keeping grounded theory on track is needed by researchers. It is my current goal and joy.

General Properties of Grounded Theory

As I have said in "Discovery," grounded theory is the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method. Grounded theory is not findings, but rather is an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses. It is just probability statements about the relationship between concepts. Again it is not findings! However, in practice soon after generated, grounded theory is often treated as description based on findings. These hypotheses, which become treated as findings, are often enough for its users. Even theory bits seem enough, as we shall discuss in Chapter 16 on trust.

In a substantive grounded theory the integrated set of hypotheses account for much of the behavior seen in a substantive area. They are plausible. The hypotheses should work and in so far they do not, constant coding and analyzing of the data modify them until they do. Being honest about the data is paramount, because there is a great opportunity for misrepresenting what is grounded, that is, saying an hypothesis is grounded when it is not. The researcher may be lying or forcing while under the pressure to know before hand or to say what is expected. But no matter, if the theory is used by another, the other will soon find out the misrepresentation as he

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constantly compares. He will then modify the theory to fit, work, and be relevant.

Built into grounded theory is its own constant verification through modifying by constant comparison. Grounded theory is the discovery of what is there and emerges. It is NOT invented. It will always be as good as far as it is taken, especially when developing new categories and their properties. As people have said to me, "I used a grounded theory approach to a certain point." Partial doing is a start and better than no doing at all. I hope this book will eventually get those researchers through the whole grounded theory package: to generate a full blown theory that achieves theoretical completeness which I will discuss under sorting and writing.

World Wide Use

When we wrote *Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, I told Anselm that we were fifteen to twenty years ahead of our time. I was close. Except for our students there was little or no penetration of grounded theory into qualitative research during the first 15 years. The next 15 years saw it grow in popularity all over the world. I was shocked to discover this when I did my research for "Grounded Theory: 1984 to 1994."

Why was this? Why did grounded theory never really penetrate sociology? Indeed, grounded theory has made little inroads into those academic fields where the analytic interests of the academics, not the subjects, are the only relevant interest in the field. Academic interests are typically quite benign; that is, they are of no consequence that can be considered crucial to anybody's fate. In these fields, the structure busting of properlining, in order to get to the underlying processes or core variables to show what is really going on, does not have much chance. Their methodology is an adhoc pot-pourri of strategies plucked from here and there to produce research that buttresses socially vested fictions and careers. Methodology is something that everyone tells others to follow and that everyone does not want to be told by others to follow.

Fifteen or so years ago, fields with high impact dependent variables, variables that deal with learning, pain or profit, began looking for a methodology that gave them answers that fit, worked, were relevant and easily modifiable to constantly changing situations. These fields are the health sciences, education, business, management and marketing fields which were dealing with the vital relevant problems of the substantive areas of concern. Research in these

fields is very significant to us all. A methodology was needed that could get through and beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the underlying processes of what is going on so that professionals and lawmen alike could intervene with confidence to help resolve the participants' main concerns surrounding learning, pain and profit. In this sense, grounded theory has put vested social structures in some jeopardy, because the dependent variables are vital to work with; hence, it is hard to ignore grounded theory results.

Thus those researchers doing grounded theory are taking part in a world wide growing body of grounded theory research and joining a world wide cadre of grounded theory researchers who are taking on the major problems of our day: virtualization and globalization of business, with associated cultural-organizational-identity cross pressures and conflict, the development of business oriented medicine and managed care, the growing awareness of the importance of the relationship approach in business and medicine, the organizational effects on these relationships and so forth.

These problems have driven researchers to use a methodology that produces hypotheses that work. As one grounded theory consultant wrote me, who works all over northern europe, "It is amazing where grounded theory can take you." And I too am amazed that the phone calls to me for consultative help and requests for books from Sociology Press come from all over the globe.

Minus Mentoring

One clear consequence of this growing world wide use is the minus-mentoring use of grounded theory. This term was generated by Phyllis N. Stern. It means that many researchers are doing grounded theory in a context where there is no one available to train them on how to do it. They have to learn doing it out of the grounded theory books. They run aground easily. In this book I will deal with many of these junctures or social structural blocks to help the reader get through them and on to a completed grounded theory. These blocks are normal when working alone in an academic or research atmosphere varying from mild to no support.

I have heard concerns that turning researchers loose to conduct grounded theory studies for dissertations without training and experience was selling the method short. "Grounded theory is a sophisticated, complex, research method, full of nuances, which cannot be conducted by neophytes with no training or guidance,"

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one experienced grounded theory researcher has told me. He feels that this contributes to the "erosion and distortion" of the methodology. I most assuredly do not take this perspective. Minus mentoring is going on all over the world irrespective, and much of its isolation in fact integrates with the isolation requirements of the methodology. There are several viable solutions to the non-isolation required periods.

Isolation is a property of personal pacing of grounded theory research which I discussed at length in "Theoretical Sensitivity." There are several periods when talk is unadvisable because it will dilute or give away the motivation to memo or to write or it is advisable to not subject formulations to deflating criticism until the researcher reaches the write-up stage. Also, grounded theory has a delayed action learning curve and therefore much talk can be superfluous, not necessary or a waste of time for the research. Part of the delayed action phenomena is the experiential aspect of learning grounded theory and this takes time and doing on a solo basis. Even though the minus mentor researcher's condition may extend the delayed action realizations that come as research proceeds most often other people are not needed. Indeed, many minus mentoring researchers love their privacy, and thus they welcome their virtual immunity to guidance and training.

When we get to the chapter on generating categories, I will discuss the finding that often categorizations are the end point of grounded theory research. Minus mentor researchers are particularly subject to this. They do not go on to theoretical coding, hypothesis generation and integration. They are too subject to the thrills and joys of conceptualization and trip out with conceptual description. Story talking takes over.

When support and guidance are needed, natural inclinations lead to associations with others. Self teaching groups are formed, which I will discuss in the chapter on learning grounded theory. Obviously groups provide the multiple perspective that give guidance and training. The researcher can even consciously turn himself into a single self containing multiple perspectives by writing them down, taking a respite and then reading them as if they were new.

Colleague phone calls are made to others states or nations far away. Many call me from throughout the world. Papers are sent worldwide for reading and opinions and critiques. Problems are hashed out on the internet and through e-mail. Sensitive but non-grounded theorists, who are proximate, are used for discussion. It is not hard for the minus-mentor researcher, who has a set of ini-

tial categories, to foster discussion because of the “grab” of the emergent problem and its related concepts. It is almost always interesting to laymen.

Minus-mentoring researchers, especially, travel to workshops and seminars “wherever” to find models and share doings.

Current Future of Grounded Theory

As I traveled around the world, I discovered that grounded theory’s future is in the hands of those new to social research, and most of these people are doing dissertations. These researchers are not age graded. They are simply new, whatever their chronological age, to social research and to academic life and its careers. Their dissertations are very important not only because of the iron clad dependent variables having to do with with nursing or business, but because they are hoping to become a PhD and thereby climb onto the first rung of the academic career ladder. They usually have a specific and limited time in which to get their doctorate finished. Grounded theory provides them a surefire temporal certainty, yet not too long, in which they may expect to finish their dissertation. They will always have something that is relevant in a reasonable time to obtain their doctorate. They can schedule.

Grounded theory is formative, relatively inexpensive and a source of very rich ideas. It becomes the formative, prime research experience of the dissertation researcher, to be used as a part of career design. It becomes the cornerstone of their professional identity. There is a certain “rightness” about the method in trusting to emergence, that researchers trained in other methodologies never feel. The latter non-grounded theory researchers are trained to “know” beforehand and thus they find emergence uncomfortable to trust. Forcing for the latter comes naturally and is hard to give up. It is part of the normative projection of everyday life.

Those, who are fortunate enough to be trained from the start in grounded theory, just get started earlier in grounded theory’s future. They are not trained to honor and verify preconceptions. They are trained to generate an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses that emerged from the data.

Way of Life

As grounded theory widens its use from sociology into other areas, particularly the areas within business, education and health which

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entail studying high impact dependent variables, it develops many fans. These fans are both researchers and people who support it strongly even though they are not doing the research themselves. They like it because it provides relevant conceptual and perspectual empowerment over the continual resolving of their concerns. It works. It fits. It is almost automatically modifiable to keep up with changing social situations and organizational forms.

The next degree of involvement in grounded theory beyond fans are the people, mostly researchers, who take on grounded theory canons and do grounded theory as a way of life. I developed grounded theory to be used as one type of research methodology among many methodologies. It is certainly not the only approach to data.

But I know many who adopt it as a way of living the rest of their lives. Looking closely at this phenomenon, these are people who need a way of constantly looking at data and its realities in order to figure out what they are doing, what is going on around them and what is emerging in their lives. To be sure grounded theory is non-religious, non-spiritual, non-ideological and non-requiring to join. It is free to use and see what emerges as one might wish. They do it every day. This is obviously an unintended consequence of the method. It shows grounded theory's empowering grab in organizing features and approach to life and substantive situations.

All is Data

A basic tenant of grounded theory, one that particularly grabs its devotees, is that "all is data". This a true research perspective on all incidents that come the researchers way. It expands constant comparison and theoretical sampling. The briefest of comment to the lengthiest interview, written words in magazines, books and newspapers, documents, observations, biases of self and others, spurious variables, or whatever else may come the researcher's way in his substantive area of research is data for grounded theory.

This perspective makes doing grounded theory especially fun and powerful, as the researcher does not need to buy into any particular data as sanctified, objective or valid. He need only see what incidents come his way as more "data" to constantly compare, to generate concepts and to induce the patterns involved. This is especially true of the comments and actions of adverse supporters and critics of grounded theory whose utterances usually indicate a "properline" is being tampered with. Thus, preconceiving what data will be used

for a study severely restricts the generative aspect of the study and consequently the theory.

The extent and type of data used is important and built into the analysis. There are apparently at least four types of data. First is baseline, which is the best description a participant can offer. Second is properline data, which is what the participant thinks it is proper to tell the researcher. It is what participants feel they are supposed to say, no matter what reality is. They have no stake in correct description, only in correct distortion. Third is interpreted data, which is what is told by a trained professional whose job it is to make sure that others see the data his professional way, despite the fact that it alters the normal way of seeing it. For example a surgery could be seen normally as a violent intrusion in to the body, but the surgeon will interpret it as a wondersome cure. The fourth type of data is vaguening out. There is no stake for the participant in telling the researcher anything, so he just vagues out. The actual data is none of the researcher's business, so the participant gives him vagueries. This occurs in fields and areas where concealment of most information is called for as confidential, such as in law, business, many illnesses and health care. In sum, no matter what type of data is obtained, the data is the data even if the researcher does not particularly care for it. It is his or her job to let the data emerge in its own right and induce its meaning as it is happening.

Overlaying these four types of data is how conceptual it is related. The data can vary from factual descriptions to airy ungrounded conceptualizations. It is often a mix.

Lastly, in general more data is always collected than analyzed in the larger research enterprise. Thus good analysts are always needed to analyze this abundance of unanalyzed data. Grounded theory produces such analysts. It is only a short step to realizing that secondary analysis of data already collected for other purposes is very worthwhile for the grounded theorist to theoretically sample and analyze. It saves the data collection time. It seems that in routine research the less analysis is done, the more the data is collected — what else is there to do? Thus in research institutes everywhere are typically large, even huge, amounts of unanalyzed quantitative and qualitative data just waiting to be constantly compared and analyzed from which grounded theories can be generated.. Secondary analysis should be part of the cycling of a researcher's research plans so he can do more than one study at a time provided they are at different stages of the grounded theory package.

Collaboration

As demonstrated by the several books I wrote with Anselm Strauss, grounded theory lends itself to collaboration. Many researchers like to work together on a research team doing grounded theory. Large grants necessitate research teams. So it is a natural consequence that at least two members of the team will want to collaborate on a paper or a book. There is no sure-fire model for collaboration EXCEPT, let the model in any one case emerge. Equals in research may be easier, but often one writer is officially senior. But this need not matter, when the collaborators let compatibility and comfort emerge.

Do not abdicate the doing of grounded theory just because of not being able to work with someone. Researchers recently finished with a dissertation are used to solo work and may be shy of team work or may be distasteful of collaboration. Yet, quite often they are slated for team research as a part of their career.

I can offer a few hints for achieving compatibility with humbleness when collaborating. Collaborators should not write together. They should write separately and then rewrite each others work. Next they submit it back to the other for study while giving plenty of time for considered thought and assimilation of the collaborator's "take" on the rewriting. Sitting down together in a discussion is often difficult, if conflicts and disagreements exist. Talking on the phone reduces contaminating gestures and facial expressions and encourages politeness. Taping these phone calls helps for listening references for backup. Transcribing the tapes is not necessary.

In short, do not bog each other down with an attempted moral fairness that stifles. Do a very empirical, ongoing grounded theory on the current collaboration that will neither block nor bog down the production for either collaborator. Staying honest with discretion will emerge as long as deference and humbleness persists. I have focused on the negative side of collaboration. When it works well, it did emerge and the collaborators will voice their power and enjoyment of it. The primadonna approach to grounded theory is not necessary, as it will correct itself by the constant comparative method. Thus a conflict between collaborators is a yet-to-be-analyzed comparison which will yield another property of a category of their collaborating theory and possibly of the research too. That's all.

Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Grounded theory stands on its own as a theory of a method which yields techniques and stages that can be used on any type of data and combination thereof. It is merely another methodology, not a "best" methodology that replaces or supplements other methodologies. The researcher should always (at least try) to choose the method best for him and for the problem at hand. Choosing which method to use includes many factors: appeal, goals of researcher, cost, rigor, interpretations, usefulness and so forth.

The appeal of grounded theory is great. It is suitable for handling many problems that forcing or preconceiving methods do not handle. In other words, if the researcher want hypotheses that can be used to help participants in a substantive area, grounded theory is well-suited to discovering the participants' problem and then generating a theory accounting for the processing of the problem. Other methods may be more suitable for studying the researcher's preconceived research interest whether or not it is relevant to the participants.

These "other" methods are generally suitable to researchers who need to stay constantly "in control" while forcing their models on data. In contrast, grounded theory requires a tolerance for feeling out of control while generating the beginning of a relevant main concern, a core category and subcore categories.

Non-forcing does not come easy, as the reader shall see in the chapter below on forcing. Yet there are some fields in science where induction is the only way to go, regardless of whether or not the data is quantitative, experimental or qualitative, such as biochemistry, space science, etc. The data is reviewed over and over to generate a theory for exactly what is going on. There is no time for preconceptions or deduction. After it is discovered what is going on, then research may be done to test some of the hypotheses.

The rigor of grounded theory is as stringent as it is in the more forcing or quantitative methods of survey and control oriented research. In grounded theory interpretations of hypotheses are constantly checked by the constant comparative method. They are as much a part of the theory and as grounded in it, as the main concern and its continual resolving.

In surveys and experiment however, the interpretations are usually conjectured out of impressions, personal projections and coincidentally bearing literature. Thus, they are difficult to correct. Consequently in the latter quantitative studies there is a large