

**The Grounded Theory  
Perspective:  
Conceptualization Contrasted with  
Description**

**Barney G. Glaser, PhD, Hon PhD**

**Sociology Press**





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# **The Grounded Theory Perspective: Conceptualization Contrasted with Description**

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As always in remembrance of Anselm Strauss  
and our incessant discussions on the  
nature of Grounded Theory

For all those students doing and have done  
Grounded Theory dissertations who have shared  
their problems and work with me

I wish to thank my colleagues, Andy Lowe, Barry Gibson, Sven Styrborn and Evert Gummesson, who in their varied ways encouraged the explanations I have tried to proffer in this book. Their constant invitations for me to seminar provided the arenas for much of the data in which this book is grounded. I wish to thank with great appreciation Hans Zetterberg, my teacher, who started me down the road to relating social theory to social practice. Lastly, my wife, Carolyn, continued to unceasingly encourage this book, as she did all the others, by constantly reminding how much it was needed.

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by: Barney G. Glaser, PhD, Hon PhD

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## Chapter 1

# The Grounded Theory Perspective

I hope and trust the reader will not consider this book banal nor “off the wall.” It is simply my effort, after extensive study of the qualitative research perspective of many methods, to put the Grounded Theory method (GT) into perspective amongst the many qualitative data methods (henceforth QDA) and the positivism claim on these methods. Choice or favoring any particular QDA method is the prerogative of the researcher. GT is merely one methodology among many QDA methods as well as quantitative methods. GT humbly stands on its own as a general method which can use any form of data. It stands among other QDA methodologies and is not to be confused as a QDA methodology.

I am afraid that this book will seem banal for a simple reason. My abilities to make methodology obvious will be misread as obvious, especially by experienced GT and QDA research theorists. This book may also be misread as me trying to write the same book I have already written using different words but the same ideas. Prolific authors often do this. I trust I will not, although I extend many ideas I have previously written about. Also as I go over the issues below, some may feel they know — at places — my analysis already, BUT so many do not know and do not see until they read the analysis in this book. GT has a delayed action learning curve and few get all the ideas very quickly. The time it takes to learn GT will be strongly aided by this book.

Inexperienced beginners need this book, not to contest or compete with other QDA methodologies and quantitative methods. They need this book to distinguish the GT method from the preconceiving nature of QDA methods. This distinguishing of differences is to be seen, not as better or worse, good or bad, but so that the product of what ever method used can be appreciated for what it is and not for all methods.

I will deal with the variable, underlying and fundamental problems of studies using QDA methods or GT, not method vs method. I hope to hit more differences in perspective than I miss, as I will miss some no doubt. The essential comparative difference is that

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GT exists on a conceptual level and is composed of integrated hypotheses and QDA methods produce description with or without conceptual description mixed in. Most problems confronted by QDA researchers are moot for GT. The reader will understand as I discuss this distinction between concept and description at length. Further, it will help all parties to a research study understand what the study has produced based on these two perspectives.

GT is not an either/or method. It is simply an alternative to positivistic, social constructionist and interpretive QDA methods. My bias is clear, but this does not mean I rubber stamp "ok" or indite any method. The difference in perspectives will just help any one researcher decide what method to use that suits his/her needs within the research context and its goals for research.

To summarize briefly, the goals of this book are three fold:

1) I wish to help researchers, especially PhD candidates doing a dissertation, handle and explain GT to others with authority and power over them. Explaining and justifying GT is a worldwide problem with editorial committees, career-hiring and promotion committees, senior colleagues, funding and grant committees and especially so with PhD candidates trying to convince a recalcitrant dissertation committee or a committee member that GT is "ok". I am constantly asked what to do to get a GT research proposal and then project accepted and through. This book will simply help the researcher handle whatever difference from QDA needs attention at any one time with committees, reviewers and boards. This book is not to compare and contrast in order to favor one method over another, nor best one method and deprecate another to make one distinctive beyond its purposeful fit in any one research project.

For example, John A, a PhD candidate, wrote me; "Part of the problem which we all seem to have as budding GT theorists is to 'trust' in our own preconscious abilities, especially if it means going before a dissertation or thesis committee that wants to see the tangible evidence that you've been 'scientific'." This is but one version of the constant request by a committee to see the positivistic dimensions in the research regarding sample, interviews, hypotheses, etc. We consider these aspects and more at length below. Students must deal with this general problem and, more specifically, many knotty issues of data collection and analysis. I am constantly asked for help.

2) I wish to distinguish, at some length, GT from QDA in order to stop, by clarification, the cooptation and corruption by QDA of GT and to stop the confusion and fusion by QDA researchers of QDA over GT. I wish QDA, no matter which type, not to be called or seen



as GT. This “bit use” of GT in QDA has to stop or be done carefully. Just because QDA is grounded in data does not mean it is grounded theory. As I have said time and again, all research is grounded in research data, but this does not mean it is GT. Giving QDA GT labels of various sort may be done unawaredly or naturally, to legitimize or to consciously take it over. It has to be stopped, or at least corrected and slowed.

3) It is my self-appointed task, as the reader well knows from my recent books, to keep genuine orthodox GT on track by elaborating further its distinctiveness from other QDA methods, keeping in mind that the confusion starts with virtually 95% of GT uses of qualitative data.

This book will not seem banal or mere rhetorical wrestling if the reader has read all my GT books. I am assuming the reader will read them all since I will talk “as if” he or she has. In fact so many QDA researchers who borrow GT terminology have read few or only, at best “Discovery”. The reader will not understand in depth this book without this reading. What will seem difficult to understand without the reading will seem simple with it. The reader needs my rendition of the GT concepts. The reader needs to be familiar with what I am referring to in these books, so I can curb repetition of what some know already.

My books are a bit hard to read as they are dense and too long to read for everyday use. So if necessary to cut back, reading “Discovery of GT”, “Theoretical Sensitivity” and “Doing GT” will be a good start.

This reading can be “fun”. Listen to Odis Simmons: “I spent much of today scanning through “Theoretical Sensitivity”, “Basics of GT Analysis” and “Doing Grounded Theory”, looking for quotes relevant to our proposal. What fun to revisit these books. Very Stimulating. All I can say is you are really a genius. All social science researchers should drop what they are doing, read your books and do it right. I feel blessed for having the opportunity to learn so much from you!”

### **Powerful Distinction: Conceptual-Descriptive**

The power of the concept-description distinction is great. It may seem or feel obvious to some readers, when stated, but few if any researchers and writers realize it. This lack of, or non-awareness, results from the chronic confusions between theory as a set of integrated concepts, conceptual description and descriptions because each has different properties. And when properties are cited they

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are for one type research not adhering to properties of another, which actually do not apply.

Clarifying these properties and sorting out their consequences is the goal of this book. It will clarify the fundamental differences between GT and QDA. The reader will see that many of the problems and weaknesses of description do not apply to conceptualization.

A GT perspective is no better than the perspective of the person or researcher doing, speaking or writing about GT. This book will enhance the perspective on GT within a context of a myriad of QDA approaches. Of course the perspective of any one person will depend on how much he or she has read on GT and been involved in GT research. This book is designed to enhance this perspective to the point that GT will be seen as a scientific method quite different from, as well as with few similarities, in clear focus and clear limitation from QDA. GT will be seen as both ideationally autonomous from QDA while being quite tolerant of a multitude of QDA formulations of methods that borrow GT notions here and there.

GT is not "all things to all men." It is simply an option without privilege. GT is powerful in its explanations of behavior and its application. As a consequence many researchers have placed big personal stakes on using GT, mainly a dissertation for a PhD; secondly for a whole career; and lastly in attending a high impact dependent variable, such as care and curing, profit, and learning.

The analysis of this distinction with its enhanced degree of awareness will show the readers how to judge when a QDA project starts to become a true GT. Conversely it will show when a researcher who does not know or fully apply the GT package will let his research deteriorate into QDA which starts positivistically appealing to those on a dissertation committee, journal review board, publisher editorial boards, colleagues or career panel. This gradual deterioration is a way of handling these boards, but a clear view of the differences will handle them just as well (hopefully) without the loss to GT. The adopt, adapt, coopt and corruption of GT into QDA will be diminished, I trust, by this book. However, this clarification is not a "take away," from either GT or QDA as methods. It gives both their true power. I also am the first to admit, that vaguing the distinction at times may have positive benefits. I shall deal at length with the adopt and adapt phenomenon in a chapter below.

### The GT Abstraction

GT comes from data, but does not describe the data from which it emerges. GT is applied to the substantive area from which it

emerges to explain the preponderance of behavior in that area, which behavior is the continual resolving of the participants' main concern. GT does NOT generate findings: it generates hypotheses about explaining the behavior from which it was generated. GT is conceptually abstract from time, place and people. It is not descriptive and unit bound. GT, to repeat, gets applied to explain theoretically the variation in substantive behavior.

This application is straight forward and based on emergent fit when substantive areas change. It is not conjectural and was developed in 1967 to get away from applying conjectural theory that proved irrelevant, while forcing without fit and without working. Conjectured theory does an injustice to the data to which it is applied. GT bows to the relevance of the data while explaining it.

The unanticipated consequence of this discovery of grounded theory is an over emphasis on grounding which leads quite easily to QDA description. Thus the researcher, to remain grounded, tries to describe the data accurately to produce evidence and to give voice to the participants. This over emphasis distracts many a researcher from the task of conceptualization in his or her zeal to describe accurately. As a result while GT gets applied, many a researcher will do QDA that merely describes but will call it GT.

Remember, GT is a generated substantive theory which gets applied to explain behavior in the data from whence it came and QDA tries to describe the data accurately. GT conceptually transcends the data from whence it was generated. QDA renders the data descriptively as accurately and best it can.

GT transcends the frantic QDA need for accurate description and its myriad of attendant "positivistic" problems in order to present findings, to prove or disprove an hypothesis, and to get inside the "voice" of the participants. GT transcends the time, place and people of any and all units sampled and conceptually generates the fundamental patterns yielding hypotheses which can explain the behavior of the participants as they go through the patterns. GT generates conceptual theory by a rigorous method which transcends the multi-methods of QDA description as the research goes through the GT method to reach theoretical completeness. More on this in the chapters below as I detail GT's true power in contrast to the confusions of QDA efforts at accuracy.

### Summary of Aim of This Book

GT may be the most widely employed methodology in the social sciences today. It gives the researcher a specific package of steps to

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follow that are closely aligned with the canons of “good science”. GT came forward as an approach to qualitative data (and quantitative data) at a time in the late 60’s, as other QDA methodologies did also, in response to the extreme violations brought to data by quantitative, preconceived, positivistic research using forcing conjectured theory. The irrelevance and lack of fit was legion. Thus GT was just one counter effect to existing social psychological research and theoretical conjecture (or theoretical capitalism). GT took hold as reputable and legitimate, because of its relevance, fit and workability and its rigorous systematic approach to generating theory that explains. But it is but one among many QDA methods. Comparative use is up to the researcher. GT does not preempt.

This book will set down a lot of ideas that the GT researcher will not have yet considered or realized. So he or she will experience the after the fact “but of course” realization, like they knew the idea before. But he or she did not realize these ideas to the point of consciousness and use, and now the researcher will be able to use them. Keep in mind that no one researcher captures all the meanings and ideas of GT in a short time. It has a delayed action learning curve stretching over, at minimum, a year and a half.

The whole GT package is hard to understand without much experience. The tedium of constant comparison is odious for many a researcher, so they may easily “jump” steps of the package, by using QDA techniques. Thus we get adopt and adapt (see chapter below). The power of GT is diluted and reunderstood. Superthink preconception sets in, emergence is lost. This adoption and adaption of GT receives the support of those formed in other QDA methodologies, as well as those involved in a controversy if the researcher still reverts to the GT package.

The new GT researcher tempting a PhD research project must continually, quite often, resolve their main concern: How to deal with the people formed in other QDA and Quantitative methodological perspectives in terms of the GT perspective. More experienced GT researchers will be better at handling other types of board’s or committee’s recalcitrance. All will be helped by using the distinction between conceptualization contrasted to description.

The topics I will consider to this end are: Conceptualization, conceptualization compared to description, descriptive capture, and conceptualization of theory, modification compared to testing theory, preconception, adopt and adapt, generalizability of GT and QDA, the GT research proposal, data collection and theoretical sampling, the GT research problem, “all is data” in the GT study, accurate

compared to bias data, and constant comparison and core confusion. Most of these topics will be chapters, the remaining will be included in chapters.

As I consider these topics I will weave in GT methodology concepts: constant comparison to get emergent categories and their properties, interchangeability of indices, conceptual saturation of the properties of categories, constant delimiting, theoretical sampling and the joint collecting, coding and analyzing of data, memo banking, theoretical completeness, core category, open and specific doing, sorting memos for emergent organization by theoretical codes, analytic rules, and writing GT. The reader will realize that most of these GT methodological concepts QDA researchers do not know how to use, miss them or are just unaware of them. The ones used are often legitimizing buzz words for a QDA research-result writing.

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Grounded theory is a research methodology that involves the development of theory through the systematic collection and analysis of data. It is a process of discovery that allows researchers to identify patterns and relationships in their data that can be used to develop a theory. Grounded theory is often used in the social sciences, but it can also be used in other fields such as medicine, education, and business. The grounded theory perspective is a way of thinking about research that emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of the data and the relationship between the data and the theory. It is a process of discovery that allows researchers to identify patterns and relationships in their data that can be used to develop a theory. Grounded theory is often used in the social sciences, but it can also be used in other fields such as medicine, education, and business. The grounded theory perspective is a way of thinking about research that emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of the data and the relationship between the data and the theory.

## Chapter 2

# Conceptualization

**C**onceptualization is the core process of GT. We all know or have an idea what conceptualization is in general. In this chapter I will detail what properties of conceptualization are essential for generating GT.

I discussed at length in “Doing Grounded Theory” the conceptual license that GT offers. The researcher can use his/her own concepts generated from the data instead of using, probably forcing the received concepts of others, especially those concepts of unduly respected theoretical capitalists. Actually generating a concept is very exciting and it is where many an effort at GT stops. This is far short of doing GT through all steps to the end product. The GT perspective in this book will hopefully move more researchers further toward doing a complete GT.

In “Doing GT” I endeavored to emphasize the complexity of the world and therefore the freedom, autonomy and license required to write generated theory that explains what is going on in this world, starting with substantive areas.

Remember, all GT is is the generation of emergent conceptualized, integrated patterns, which are denoted by categories and their properties. This is accomplished by the many rigorous steps of GT woven together by the constant comparison process, which is designed to generate concepts from all data, most frequently qualitative incidents (see chapter 13 on the Constant Comparative Process.)

Through conceptualization GT is a general method that cuts across data methods (experiment, survey, content analysis, and all qualitative methods) and uses all data resulting therefrom. Because of conceptualization, GT transcends all descriptive methods and their associated problems, especially what is an accurate fact and what is an interpretation. It transcends by its conceptual level and its 3rd and 4th level perceptions. More below on this property of conceptualization.

By transcending, I do not say implicitly that description is “bad” “wrong” of “unfavorable”. Description is just different with different

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properties than conceptualization, yet these different properties are confused in the qualitative research literature. Actually descriptions run the world, however vague or precise and mostly the former. Precious little conceptualization affects the way the world is run. We have many immensely funded description producing agencies such as newspapers, police, FBI and so forth as well as an immense multi-QDA research movement.

It is sociologists, psychologists, social psychologists and other social researchers who are mandated to conceptualize in the social sciences. GT provides a systematic way to conceptualize carefully and its audience, though small, is growing. Yet at this point in time, 33 years after "Discovery of GT" was written, many social researchers still have little or no awareness of conceptualization, conceptual levels and, therefore, the integration of conceptual hypotheses.

The two most important properties of conceptualization for GT are that concepts are abstract of time, place and people and that concepts have enduring grab, which appeal can literally go on forever as an applied way of seeing events. In this chapter I start by explicating what a concept is for GT, then explain its abstraction from time, place and people, followed by detailing discussions of conceptual ability required, conceptual levels, conceptual grab, conceptual description, conceptual conjecture, conceptual foppery and vagary and conceptual power. Much of this discussion overlaps and cumulates.

### Pattern Naming

For GT a concept is the naming of a social pattern grounded in research. For GT it is a pattern which is carefully discovered by constant comparing of theoretically sampled data until conceptual saturation of interchangeable indices. It is discovered by comparing many incidents, and incidents to generated concept, which shows the pattern named by the category and the subpatterns which are the properties of the category. A GT concept is not achieved by impressioning out over one incident, nor by preconceived forcing of a received concept on a pattern of incidents. GT is a form of latent structure analysis, which reveals the fundamental patterns in a substantive area or a formal area.

The pattern is named by constantly trying to fit words to best capture its imageric meaning. This constant fitting leads to a best fit name of a pattern, to wit a category or a property of a category.



Validity is achieved, that is after much fitting of words, the chosen one best represents the pattern. It is as valid as it is grounded.

In “Theoretical Sensitivity” I said that many concepts are “in vivo” concepts, that is from the words of the participants in the substantive area. Let me be clear, standard QDA emphasizes getting the “voice” of the participants. In vivo concepts are not such “voice,” in the sense that what phenomenon they attribute meaning to with a concept is just taken as a GT concept. The participants usually just give impressionary concepts based on one incident or even a groundless idea. They do not carefully generate their concepts from data with the GT methodology and try to fit many names to an established pattern. They are not establishing a parsimonious theory. They have many concepts that do not fit or work.

Inviting participants to review the theory for whether or not it is their voice is wrong as a check or “test” on validity. They may or may not understand, or even like the theory. Many do not understand the summary benefit of concepts which go beyond description to the transcending big picture. GT is generated from much data that many participants may be empirically unaware of. GT is applicable to the participants as an explanation of the preponderance of their behavior which is how they are resolving their main concern, which they may not be aware of conceptually, if at all. It is just what they do! GT is not their voice: it is a generated abstraction from their doings and its meaning which are taken as data for the generation.

GT in naming concepts does not try to take a “concern to understand the world of the research participants as they construct it.” GT is not “an enquiry that makes sense of and is true to the understanding of ordinary actors in the everyday world,” as one QDA writer would have it. GT uncovers many patterns the participant does not understand or is not aware of, especially the social fictions that may be involved.

## **Time, Place, People**

The most important property of conceptualization for GT is that it is abstract of time, place and people. This transcendence also, by consequence, makes GT abstract of any one substantive field, routine perceptions or perceptions of others, since there is always a perception of a perception, and an abstraction from any type of data whether qualitative or quantitative. Hence GT is a general method.

Thus GT conceptualization transcends. Conceptualization solves and resolves many QDA difficulties which are not abstract of time