

**The Grounded Theory
Perspective III:
Theoretical Coding**

Barney G. Glaser, PhD, Hon PhD

Sociology Press





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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of Anselm Strauss, who in 1965, afforded me the opportunity to use abstract models on the emergent patterns from qualitative data. This book is also dedicated to the memory of Robert K. Merton, who taught me the use of abstract models and its consequent thought.

This book is also dedicated to helping the many students who are doing GT dissertations integrate their emergent theory. It is also dedicated to Judith Holton who stored each chapter against loss by computer failure as they were accomplished and who offered editorial suggestions.

I wish also to appreciate my wife, Carolyn, for her unending support during the two and a half years of work on this book.

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Chapter 1

Staying Open

This book is about staying open to the emergent when doing grounded theory (GT). The full power of grounded theory comes with staying open to the emergent and to earned relevance throughout the whole GT methodology process, but especially so with regard to the finalizing in written form a GT with emergent theoretical codes (TC). Researchers seem to have the most trouble at this stage of generating GT — sorting memos and writing up the theory with emergent TCs. Substantive coding comes comparatively easily and is exciting, giving the exhilarating feeling of discovery. Theoretical coding does not come easily as an emergent and has a beguiling mystique. As one PhD student emailed me: “theoretical codes and interchangeability of indicators were the two aspects of GT that I found the most difficult to comprehend.” (Holton email Jan 26, 04). Another GT researcher writes, “The author of this current paper suggests that theoretical coding perhaps places the most demand upon the grounded theorist’s creativity.” (JB Cutcliffe, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 2000, page 1482)

Theoretical codes are frequently left out of otherwise quite good GT papers, monographs, and dissertations. They are hard to understand in the beginning of research by the novice GT researcher. This book will trouble shoot this problem by dealing with many facets of theoretical coding. It discusses TC emergence, new TCs, several sources of forcing TCs, the power of TCs, and grand TCs based on theoretical perspectives, all with the purpose of considering several sources of trouble with using TCs. The goal of these discussions is to help staying open to the non-forced, non-preconceived discovery of emergent TCs.

The reader may consider this a sophisticated book, hard to understand unless he/she has read and studied my several former books. There will be some repetition of the ideas I have already written, but they will be in the service of a new light regarding TCs. This book will be about very abstract ideas. If it is hard for the reader to stay on a substantively abstract level of conceptualization, this book will be even harder. Keeping researchers on an abstract or conceptual

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level is hard — especially for those in nursing, medicine, business and social work — since they are trained at the accurate description level. They tend to slip into a theoretical descriptive level as trained; style and practical considerations of field take over. Staying open to TCs will help maintain the substantively conceptual level required by GT and increase its power.

This book is grounded in my origination of GT, supervising many, many GT researches and dissertations, reading many dissertations and GT monographs and intense study of noted QDA methodology books. It is grounded in the hard study of the above caches. It is NOT a think up book. It is grounded in what is going on in GT research. The focus of this book, as is my other books, is to help researchers get GT research done — achieve GT products that receive the rewards of the PhD degree and career moves. It is not an epistemological, rhetorical wrestle that gets wordy and goes nowhere. People are doing GTs all over the world and GT methodology helps them achieve their product. Epistemological discussions are of no potential help to the actual doing of research. Rather they can easily have the negative effects of sewing doubt in emergence of categories and causing premature judgments of relevance.

As I defined in “Theoretical Sensitivity:” “Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes of a research may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory. They, like substantive codes, are emergent. They weave the fractured story back together again. Without substantive codes they are empty abstractions.” (Glaser, 1978 page 72) TCs are abstract models which allow the researcher to talk substantive categories and properties while thinking theoretically. The important point is that the reader should develop a clear notion of their conscious use and relevance in generating theory. Then he can use with theoretical sensitivity an emergent theoretical code or codes to put his theory together. This consciousness can help staying open. Reading my previous books help achieve this abstract level TC abstraction and use comes with GT experience over many researchers. It is part of the experiential growth of GT skill development. This abstraction avoids the flat descriptive — often superficial — presentations of QDA products.

Staying Open

Staying open to the emergent, earned relevance of theoretical codes is the point of this book. I hope to cover enough ideas in the following chapters to put this goal in relief and context. The

repetitions that come from sections in “Theoretical Sensitivity” and “Doing GT” are in the service of this goal. Staying open to earned relevance means that TCs are not to be forced by disciplines, supervisors, or pet TCs. Trusting to emergence and one’s own theoretical sensitivity is paramount. I will deal at length on forcing in chapters 8, 9 and 10.

Staying open to earned relevance of TCs means, for the researcher, being open to the fullest array of TCs as possible. The researcher must learn and master sensitivity to as many TCs as possible. The more TCs the researcher learns the more this requirement becomes moot. There are hundreds. The lists in “Theoretical Sensitivity” and “Doing GT” offer the most frequently used and familiar ones. But they are a small list compared to the possible number of TCs to which one can be open to by perusing the literature of many scientific fields.

A vital theme hit upon frequently throughout this book is that GT is NOT a methodology guided by one theoretical perspective and it is TCs. GT is a general method, based on a concept-indicator model, that can use any TC derived from any theoretical perspective. This theme is hard to abide by in actual research. It is not easy to stay open because of training, of the tremendous grab of some TCs — eg basic social process — and of the being wedded to a particular theoretical perspective and its attendant idols or great men — e.g. symbolic interaction. The researcher sees what he has been trained to see. Breaking out to being open takes time and is hard in a framed research context as well as personally. I realize that what I am saying is easier said than done. But it can be done. Many do. The basic idea is to become open and sensitive to the emergent, earned relevance of TCs. The GT procedure is to stop preconceived forcing based on discipline, supervisors, pet codes, a “grande” perspective and to unwarranted hunches.

Hard To Stay Open

Staying open is not easy. It is hard. Most people attempt a GT research framed — inculcated in a theoretical framework — consciously or unawaredly. Perhaps it is hard to truly become open, but it is quite possible because GT procedures from start to finish are designed to open up the researcher and keep him open to the emergent and earned relevance. When the researcher gets the point, GT procedures provide ways to perpetually suspend the frameworks of any forcing theoretical perspective in favor of what substantive and

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TCs emerge. Staying open then becomes relatively easy. Not knowing before the emergent becomes fun and discovery exciting.

Most GT researchers I have read to date, get the staying open point easily for substantive coding, but not for TCs. They miss the point for TCs for failure to study them, thus not becoming sensitive to what TC might emerge. Rather they use the TC of their theoretical perspective of training origin. By restricting TCs to their field of origin they miss possible emergent TCs being not sensitive to a fuller array of them. I trust this book will get GT researchers beyond this rather normal block.

One normal block is to describe GT by a popular TC "as if" GT research always yields the TC. For example, Olson says "I have often described grounded theory as an explanation of some underlying basic social process, and so I guess, in my mind, the development of a GT is really a qualitative causal modeling process." (email Mar 7, 2003, by Karin Olson, Institute for Qualitative Methodology.) To be sure BSPs emerge a lot and are pervasive, but not always as I clearly said in "Theoretical Sensitivity" (page 93), In fact in our now famous book "Awareness of Dying" the core category was a typology of dying expectations.

In "The GT II: the Remodeling of GT" (Glaser, 2003) I detailed at length the remodeling of GT by the QDA (qualitative data analysis) methodologists. GT has been used to jargon up QDA methodology and in the bargain TCs are caught up in the method-mix jargon. QDA methodology stultifies GT. Staying open to a full array of sensitively emergent TCs is restricted to the QDA author's forced theoretical perspective, usually symbolic interaction or system's theory. TCs become assumed by the framed researcher.

Staying open to whatever TC is relevant is the goal in my effort to extricate the forcing of TCs by the QDA methodologists and their grand theoretical perspectives. There is nothing wrong with using structural or symbolic interactional TCs if they earn relevance, but my effort is to stop the ascendant default remodeling caused by routine forcing them. And especially I wish to stop or at least to curb the use of a TC to remodel GT to another QDA. For example using Strauss's conditional matrix, "as if" always relevant is pure forcing. One reads of Strauss's conditional matrix everywhere in the QDA literature. Remember GT is a general methodology that can use any data and therefore any TC.

Milliken and Schrieber unknowingly argue against the generality of GT methodology when they write about the epistemology of GT. They say "Epistemology has been defined more loosely in sociology

to encompass the methods of scientific inquiry use to study knowledge. Thus epistemology can be seen both as a philosophy of human knowing and how one learns about it. Inherent in different epistemologies are different assumptions and beliefs about the nature of know, of what can be known, and who can be the knower. “In applying these thoughts to GT they say: “In contrast to quantitative methods, in which the researcher is the expert, in grounded theory the researcher defers to the experience of the participant, who has experience with the phenomenon of study. The researcher’s job is to investigate the socially constructed meanings that form the participant’s realities and the behaviors that flow from those meanings. That is, we want to know how they understand and act within their worlds. What can be known of the cover and over behavior of participants is negotiated between the researcher and participant, toward a shared understanding. CLEARLY, IN OUR VIEW, THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GROUNDED THEORY IS STEEP IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION.” (page 180, *Using GT in Nursing*, 2001)

Their view is patently wrong (see chapter 10). It is pure QDA rhetoric in the quest of worrisome accuracy (see Glaser 2002). It neglects conceptualization. It uses a grand theoretical perspective and its TCs to define GT, thus denying it is a general method that can use any type of data and the TCs of any theoretical perspective. GT searches for the latent patterns in any type of data to write a grounded theory about. Latent patterns are everywhere and “all is data” for GT including the use of any TC from whatever perspective. To be sure, interactionally constructed data exists BUT it is only a piece or one type of the data used in GT studies. To be sure GT, as a general method, picks up constructed data in many studies these days, but these researchers must transcend the data type to see the general use of GT methodology and enrich their research by using “all as data” (Glaser 1998). GT does not need a grande epistemology, as such, to justify its use. It is based on a latent structure analysis approach using a concept indicator model yielding emergent theoretical frameworks that the researcher must stay open to.

Two experienced grounded theorists express the stay open requirement well: Phyllis Stearn says “theoretical coding ... simply means applying a variety of analytic schemes to the data to enhance their abstraction.” (*Grounded Theory Methodology; Its Uses and Processes*. Image, Feb. 1980 page 23) Holly Skodol Wilson says “Theoretical codes are the ways in which substantive codes and data they express are interrelated. There are innumerable families of

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theoretical codes. All are ways of relating variables theoretically. I attempted to discover multiple and varied relationships between and among concepts. Such an approach is designed to yield molecular rather than linear theoretical models....” (Nursing Research: 1977, vol 26, page 103). Thus the true nature of TCs has been around for many years and cannot be allowed to be remodeled by a single theoretical perspective as others would try, especially the QDA methodologists.

Theoretical codes come from all fields and their theoretical perspectives, whether social psychology, sociology, philosophy, organizational theory, economics, political science, history, bio-chemistry etc. etc. Staying open to TCs from these fields is very enriching of GT. For example the bias random walk TC from Biochemistry is very useful in GT. Conjunctural causation from political science is an eye opener for GT. I will give more of these codes latter in the chapter on New TCs.

Staying open to what can emerge can be turned in on itself, “as if” to be open somehow cannot be based on the researcher's ability to suspend knowledge. This inability to stay open is seen as routine and unavoidable and to be expected as expert knowledge. Katherine May argues that expert knowledge in qualitative research consists of an exquisitely tuned capacity to know where to look and the ability to ferret out similarities and differences, based on experience. Although entering the field with as open a mind as possible has advantages, experience in the health care arena was an undeniable asset. She says “expert analysts are virtually always informed by extant knowledge and use this knowledge as if it were another informant.” Her view, thus, is that staying open is not possible for the learned, but experienced preconceptions in the alternative are useful. Thus she implies that experienced researchers get formed in their field and cannot transcend their experienced view. They see it everywhere, rather than staying open. I say “not so”! Experienced people are more able to suspend their knowledge of literature and research field, based on their skilled, competent research ability to stay in control of perceptions and therefore stay open. They can spot preconceptions both substantively and for TC quite easily, since they are more aware. (See pages 10-21) *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research methods*, edited by Janice Morse, Sage, 1984). It is easy for the novice researcher to be open, because of lack of knowledge (see GT Perspective II, Glaser) but the experienced researcher can find it just as easy if not more so, based on awareness of more subtle forcing.

Learning TCs

By now the reader may be throwing up his/her hands feeling that he cannot stay open feeling it is too hard to leave the stability, comfort and safety of cherished, learned, trusted TCs of their field. Not so! They are not to be given up. They are to be extended by learning more TCs to be sensitive to and then letting earned relevance dictate their use. Staying open to emergent TCs requires learning as many as possible so the researcher is sensitive to what may earn relevance.

First of all the researcher should study TCs beyond the boundaries of his current discipline and keep studying them. It never ends. There are so many. Learn as many as possible and the possibility is endless. As Hans Thelesius wrote me by email in Dec 14, 2002, "Theoretical codes are tricky and I have more to learn there for sure." He is open to the endless task and its possible difficulties.

Start with the TCs I have listed in "Theoretical Sensitivity". And in "Doing GT". They are exciting to learn because of their abstract view of data. Give oneself time to assimilate them when it seems difficult to grasp them quickly. The more the array of TCs that one learns, the less the tendency to force on a substantive theory a pet or discipline TC, and the easier it is to stay open and sensitive to the emergent.

The excitement of learning TCs is well put by Walter Fernandez in his dissertation "Metateams in Major Technology Projects, a GT on Conflict, Trust, Communication and Cost." Queensland University, 2003, page 71). He says, quite rightly, "Theoretical coding conceptualizes how the substantive codes are interrelated by generating hypotheses that are then integrated into a theory. The grounded integration of concepts is a flexible activity that provides broad picture and new perspectives. The theoretical flexibility, however, must remain grounded on data. The concept of flexibility implies theoretical sensitivity to a number of possible coding paradigms, or coding families, consciously avoiding over-focusing on one possible explanation. Glaser (1978,1998) provides a comprehensive (but not definitive) list of code families allowing for this flexibility." Fernandez then provides his reader a 2 page chart of 26 TC families, each family including several TCs. The list is taken from my books. Being sensitive to all of these possible TCs immensely increases staying open. Staying open to the emergent is what Fernandez means by "flexibility", while he insists on earned relevance.

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The more TCs a researcher learns the less the tendency to derail a GT into a routine QDA by diluting the GT with a pet or discipline TC — e.g. it's all constructed interaction or the conditional matrix — which is so, so wrong. (GT Perspective II, 2003) There is no argument for the routine discipline use of TC as the consequence is that it closes staying open. Stearn and Schriebner say "The researcher using GT needs to exercise care to avoid a departure from the intent of the authors who developed it, Glaser and Strauss. In short there are a number of variations in doing GT, all of which are acceptable. On the other hand there are a lot of wrong ways of doing it." (op cit Page xvii,) Imposing GTs is a wrong way of doing GT. Earned relevance of one or a mix of TCs is the acceptable. There is no "for or against" argument for any one discipline of TCs as they are just some of many that may emerge. This is the GT procedure: Let TCs emerge in mature memos and in sorting. Do not worry about results as remember: no GT is better than the skill development of the researcher and in the bargain no TC is better than what the researcher is sensitive to — unless it is forced. The emergence of TCs like substantive codes are a result, partly, of the researchers learning curve.

The TC learning curve requires study of many fields and their theoretical perspectives. I said in "Doing GT" the fact that many do not use or understand TCs simply means that they should start learning them. One reads theories in any field and tries to figure out the theoretical models being used. It is a fun exercise. It is a challenge to penetrate the patterns of latent logic in other's writings. It makes the researcher sensitive to many codes and how they are used. He or she should take the time it takes to understand as many theoretical codes as possible by reading research literature also. This is a very important part of developing theoretical sensitivity." Skimming and dipping in papers for TCs from other fields is fun and easy. They pop up. Let me give some examples.

In perusing a biochemical paper I came upon the "bias random walk" model. This means all variables are in unorganized flux until one crucial variable is introduced into the scene and then of a sudden all the variables fall into stable organization. This is highly applicable to social life and action. People mixing around and visiting in all directions before a meeting, of a sudden come to order when a host, teacher, or lecturer appears. It happens in fancy seminars, courts or staff meetings or in kindergarten classes. In some cases a gavel is pounded and "come to order" is announced. The formal and sentimental order of the occasion is produced almost immediately.

Another powerful TC that comes from economics is “amplifying casual looping.” This is part of the interaction of effects family. As consequences become continually causes and causes continually consequences one sees either worsening or improving progressions or escalating severity. This applies to spousal power abuse or authority power abuse as the abuse gets worse. It applies to increasing organizational failure. It applies to falling in love. I am sure the reader can now see more possible applications. Causal looping amplifies in either direction: positive or negative. This TC integrates substantive codes nicely, when it emerges. It applies to the bullying self socialization phenomenon we saw in the Columbine massacre. (See Jaclyn Gisbourne, *The Miso Model: A Synthesis and Application of Domestic Violence Concepts to Leadership and Organization Theory*) For economic models (See, Frederic S. Lee, “Theory Creation and the Methodological Foundation of Post Keynesian Economics” Dept of Economics, University of Missouri.” He focuses on repeatable causation and mechanisms thereof.

Yet another powerful TC that comes from political science is “conjectural causation”. Ragin (*The Comparative Method*, Univ of Calif Press. 1987, page 20) explains it clearly: “The other characteristic form of the problem of order-in-complexity concerns the difficulty involved in assessing causal complexity, especially multiple conjunctural causation. When an outcome results from several different combinations of conditions, it is not easy to identify the decisive causal combinations across a range of cases, especially when the patterns are confounded....” The problem is not to specify a single causal-consequence model using Strauss’s conditional matrix. The problem is to determine the character of more complex causal models that exist in the substantive data. And many causes may not be relevant; high impact causes only have earned relevance.

My three examples show the complex causal models that emerge can provide integration of substantive codes that go far beyond simple causation that is forced “as appropriate”. The reader will find it fun to skim theories from other fields to pick up their TCs and thereby open themselves up to many TCs while assimilating and becoming sensitive to their particular meaning. The more this is done, the more the researcher will have the realization that the number of TCs is endless and yet to be named and that staying open and sensitive to whatever TC emerges is the only way to do GT. In the alternative it is a pure shut down to remodel GT to saying it have only one theoretical perspective. This learning approach

to TCs solves the problem that Marjorie MacDonald neatly articulates — the almost total absence of theoretical codes in current nursing GT research by lack of integrating the macro and micro levels of social action. (See her Chapter 7, *Using Grounded Theory in Nursing*, op cit).

TCs are Slippery

As I have said above, theoretical coding is the least understood aspect of generating GT. When GT is used merely as a legitimating jargon to QDA, then of course understanding TCs is a moot issue. But when the researcher is genuinely trying to do GT, the first confusion is the general idea of theoretical coding of the data for substantive categories and for TC models with TCs. This is an unfortunate terminological confusion. Both types of codes emerge in memos. They occur in mixes, and TC mixes are often the integrative picture that fit and works. For example a causal model can easily be mixed with a zone of tolerance and two outside cutting points. Learning TCs emphasizes the earning relevance of these mixes as they model the integration of substantive codes. The possibilities are not infinite as it might seem, they are grounded empirically.

Unlike substantive codes, the underlying groundedness of a TC is less clear, since they are abstract models of integration, based on best fit. Their fit is not as underlying tight fit with the data as a substantive code. Their organization of a theory is not wrong so much as variable at an abstract level that can have alternatives, while the grounding comes out in the work, fit and relevance in the substantive codes.

This slipperiness often results in confusion, depression, and anxiety over nonemergence or what is the best way of integrating a GT. Commitment to one model is seen as “dangerous”. Of course best fit is required in TC emergence, but given the ready modification of a GT in the hands of others, the TC model can easily get adjusted, changed or corrected. The slipperiness of abstract TCs is a power. Using a theoretical code is not dangerous, it formulates the confusion about putting the GT into writing. This is why forcing a TC is often a tendency and a premature way out of the confusion on waiting and working for the TC of earned relevance. It is best to let the TC emerge. Forcing leads to familiarity within a discipline but also to irrelevancies. For example every GT is not a BSP (basic social process) and rich as this TC is, forcing stages on a theory can dilute its fit, work and relevance.

The goal of a GT researcher is to develop a repertoire of as many theoretical codes as possible. There could be hundreds. The more theoretical codes the researcher learns the more he has the variability of seeing them emerge and fitting them to the theory. They empower his ability to generate theory and keep its conceptual level.

Theoretical Coding: Substantive Codes vs Theoretical Codes

To revisit what I have been saying: “If and when the researcher gets beyond substantive coding and a full memo bank, he begins to sort and then he will use emergent theoretical codes, explicit or implicit to integrate his theory.” However, “there is a confusion between substantive codes and TCs among some researchers.” (Glaser 1998, page 163) Needless to say, Substantive codes are the categories and properties of the theory which emerges from and conceptually images the substantive area being researched. They are used to build the conceptual theory, but are not theoretical codes. This is a bit confusing to people, especially those with little or no theoretical training.

In contrast, theoretical codes implicitly conceptualize how the substantive codes will relate to each other as a modeled, interrelated, multivariate set of hypotheses in accounting for resolving the main concern. They are emergent and weave the fractured substantive story turned into substantive concepts back into an organized theory. They provide the models for theory generation and emerge during later coding, memoing and especially in sorting memo banks. Theoretical codes too must pattern out to be verified to provide grounded integration.

“Without substantive codes theoretical codes are empty abstractions. But substantive codes could be related without theoretical codes, but the result is usually confused, unclear theoretically, and/or typically connected by descriptive topics but going nowhere theoretically. It is the interaction between substantive and theoretical coding which characterizes GT as an analytic inductive research methodology rather than conceptual journalism.” (Glaser 1998 page 164). This statement is simple enough to say but leads to confusion in many ways. Everyone understands substantive coding, but TCs are still not well understood and how to code for them. TCs are confused with substantive codes on a conceptual level, by similar words, in mixing, and in research action, calling theoretical coding be used for both types of codes, and just missing the TC involved.