

**Doing Formal Grounded Theory:  
A Proposal**

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

**Sociology Press**





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## DEDICATION

This book is written in honor of Anselm Strauss, who with myself, started in 1967 our forty year journey into doing grounded theory. It is also dedicated to my daughter, Bonnie Eve Glaser, PhD, who advised me that this is the next step in the grounded theory journey.

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

Lastly, I also dedicate this book to Judith Holton, PhD, who stored each chapter against computer failure and who offered substantive suggestions all along the way.

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# Doing Formal Grounded Theory: A Proposal

by: Barney G. Glaser, PhD, Hon PhD

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## Chapter 1

# Doing Formal Theory

Is there such a thing as formal grounded theory (FGT)? Yes there is in spite of the fact that it has received scant attention since it was first mentioned and anticipated in 1965 in our book *Awareness of Dying* (p. 276). We said “And in its turn, substantive theory may help in formulating formal theory. It may also contribute to the formulation of new formal theory grounded on careful comparative research. Consequently, if one wishes to develop a systematic formal theory of awareness contexts, he must analyze data from many substantive areas.”

We then defined formal theory in 1967 in *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, chapter IV, and again I defined it in 1978 in *Theoretical Sensitivity*, chapter 9. Furthermore Anselm and I wrote one FGT: “Status Passage” in 1971, and I produced a formal theory on organizational careers in my reader “Organizational Careers” 1968.

Our words in *Awareness* forty years ago and our subsequent efforts still hold true today. This book will discuss and illuminate procedures at length for generating FGT in the hopes and trust of inspiring more GT researchers to generate FGT. This book brings together in one place and organizes much already written by Glaser and Strauss on FGT and then advances the thought, method and ideal of generating FGT to inspire its “doing”. These efforts are awaiting since to date there are so many good and excellent substantive grounded theories (SGT) ready to be broadened and generalized into a FGT. Several of these researchers of worthy SGTs are asking for this instruction and inspiration. I will attend the issue of scant, forestalled attention to FGT in Chapter 2.

These efforts are awaiting also in reading over 25 qualitative methods’ books and a few quantitative methods’ books. I found not one indexing to formal theory. There are just a few indexings to generalizations and generalizing, with no relations to their use in FGT. I found only a few mentions of FGT in text, usually in conjunction with SGT as the next step, but the mention goes nowhere. The mentions are not a clear appeal to future research. They are mentioned only in passing, they are unclear, and even slightly wrong. The

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promise offered by doing FGT is not noted nor emphasized. In short the scant attention to FGT means it is virtually ignored. The scant attention of FGT is because it does not fit the typical qualitative data analysis (QDA) methodological model and so much GT is remodeled by QDA (See *GT Perspective II*) that the next step is not in view or just not there to take. This book will give FGT the attention it needs and the procedures for doing FGT that guide these few asides as what to do after a SGT.

Here are a few typical examples from the Gilgun et al reader: *Qualitative Methods in Family Research* (Sage, 1992). After a linear list of substantive researches, Snyder says "Further because these theories have systematically induced from the actual experiences of individuals they also constitute what Glaser and Strauss referred to as grounded theory (p. 31). Examining similar constructs across substantive areas yields formal theory (p.129). My second recommendation is the construction of formal theory, that developed for a formal or conceptual area of sociological inquiry. Comparative study of the conceptual frameworks induced from the social construction of anger, fear, grief etc, provide additional rungs on the ladder toward development of formal grounded theory." (p. 63). Fine, but after this brief and promise mention of FGT, there is absolutely no push to do it and no procedural direction to go in. This illustration is just one of many examples that make the same observation, from which I derive the need for this book. It has been no better since this 1992 example to the present. Let's focus in this book on FGT as a reality, not just a promise.

Do some FGTs exist under a different name? Barely none; none that are systematically generated according to the rigorous procedures of generating grounded theory. There exist "immaculate conceptions" that draw on some data even though conjectured. There exist particularistic formal theories based on lots of experience, but not systematically researched. Exemplars of these theories are cited by Lincoln and Guba, (Sage 1985) "Like many other theorists, Simmel based his ideas about society on his own direct non systematic observations." And Goffman characterized his methodological approach: "The method that is often resorted to here — unsystematic, naturalistic observation — has very serious limitations." (p. 91–92) We can all think of further examples of conjectured formal theory from our disciplines.

Walking surveys generate particularistic formal theories all the time as while talking as "they know", but it is not research. Lawyers and MDs, who are walking surveys among many other

professionals, do this to the maximum, passing off their formal theories as coming from “professionals who know,” after years of practice. Walking surveys are grounded in the experience, vicarious experience and knowledge of the person. Stake, (1983, p. 282) calls them “naturalistic generalizations, which develop within a person as a product of experience. They derive from the tacit knowledge of how things are ... they seldom take the form of predictions, but lead regularly to expectation. They guide action.”

Literature reviews abound, which often could have been, but are not FGTs. The literature citations are usually mildly added or accumulated for simple descriptive comparison and not used for systematic generation of conceptual theory on a category.

So what is a FGT?

## FGT Defined

Let's be clear. There are many very good SGTs out there. Many people feel their “grab” conceptually and see the general implications of the core category everywhere they look. As Strauss and I wrote in *Discovery*, 1967: “A (SGT) theory at such a conceptual level, however, may have important general implication and relevance, and become almost automatically a springboard or stepping stone to the development of a grounded formal theory. SGT not only provides a stimulus to a “good idea” but it also gives an initial direction in developing relevant categories and properties and possible modes of integration (theoretical codes)” (p. 79)

For example, Odis Simmons' renowned paper on cultivating: the milkman and his client, easily leads to almost forgetting his substantive area to seeing cultivating every where in the human scene. His paper on cultivating for profit, leads to cultivating for fun, recreation, social gain, love etc. Other authors get what I call core category fever; they see their core operating everywhere. For example, Hans Thulesius' renowned paper on balancing in palliative care leads Hans to see balancing everywhere. Or a substantive theory on the comparative failure of scientists (Glaser) leads directly to the need for a theory of comparative failure in work or even more generally in all facets of social life. Or a substantive theory of deviance disavowal of people with visible handicaps leads to one concerned with deviance disavowal by a much wider range of impaired persons or other forms of visible, usually legitimate, deviance.

Thus seeing the core category working beyond the immediate substantive area studied engenders a need to study it generally.



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Thus Barry Gibson's discovery of cautionary control among dentists to avoid contracting HIV, easily leads one to want a formal theory of cautionary control which goes on in all facets of life, for all size units: traffic control, terrorist control, sanitary disease control, especially operating rooms and so forth. The general implications of a core category leads to the need for generating a formal theory of it by looking at data and other studies within the substantive area and in other substantive areas using the conceptualizing constant comparison method. In short, extending the theory of a core variable's general implications is the next obvious research step after doing a SGT.

*Thus FGT defined is: FGT is a theory of a SGT core category's general implications generated from, as wide as possible, other data and studies in the same substantive area and in other substantive areas.* Thus a well known theory of becoming a nurse is easily formalized by comparing it constantly to other data and theory about becoming a doctor, becoming a lawyer, becoming a pilot, becoming an accountant etc, to arrive at a theory of becoming a professional. This FGT of becoming can be even more general by looking at nonprofessional becoming, and even more general by looking at becoming a person in a culture: which we call socialization. Thus we see that FGT generalizations are conceptual — NOT DESCRIPTIVE — and therefore abstract of time, place and people and endures virtually forever with modification. (see Chapter 3, below). As I have said in my book *GT Perspective I*, description is very soon stale dated, conceptualization endures.

Further an FGT's generalizations about a core category are abstract to time, place and people until their application. When they are applied to a situation, a context and or conditions, the FGT concepts are adjusted to suit. For example for a FGT of cautionary control, tossing caution to the wind as some dentists do to avoid the expense does not apply to operating rooms, where expense is not a concern, or does not apply to a traffic intersection where costs of an accident can run very high .

Thus FGT is simply a conceptual extension, however research possible, of a SGT core category using GT generating procedures, particularly theoretical sampling and conceptualizing constant comparison. FGT is NOT so-called "grand" theory, general theory, elaborated theory, middle range theory etc. It has no predetermined level of abstraction. It will end up at the of level abstraction that the data and studies bearing on the core category (including the energy and resources of the theorist) will allow it. It is not as Dey

(1999) would have it, at a necessarily higher level of abstraction, although it may end up so. It depends. It is not automatically “august” or “high fallutin”.

FGT is not speculatively remote from data, especially the data it purports to explain. It is based on data and studies based on data. FGT methodology insists that no matter how general — how broad in scope or abstract — the theory, that it should be generated by that back and forth interplay with data that is so central to GT methodology. Models or theoretical codes used in previous SGTs to bring out a core category should be used by genuine grounding in the current FGT. The models may change for the core category. For example Richard Ekins in “Male Femaling” (Routledge, 1997) tried to use awareness context theory with cross dressing and came up with a variation of going from a closed to an open awareness context. He added progressive displays from closed to open awareness. The reader will discover that FGT becomes a very powerful tool of explanation. For example a theory of credentializing nurses (a PhD Dissertation) easily leads to a FGT on how to credentialize for quality control in all occupations.

The reader may question: Can one generalize from a single case SGT? Isn’t one case too particularistic? Of course, but people do it anyway, researchers and laymen alike. General implications abound at all levels. What FGT does is to broaden the base of generalizing “to and from”. FGT allows generalizing on a core category from several substantive areas with more multivariate conceptual complexity. In sum, FGT is nothing more than extending the general implications of a core variable by sampling wider in the original substantive area and in other substantive areas and then constantly comparing with the purpose to conceptualize the general implications. It increases the SGT in breadth and depth of explanation. But more on this in Chapter 3.

## Clarifying the FGT Definition

In *Awareness of Dying* and *Discovery of Grounded Theory* our definition of FGT was somewhat too confusing for its lack of specificity, although the idea and quest was clearly there. We were responding to the general implications of the core variable however unspecified at that time. Awareness context had tremendous grab. Anselm and I said, in *Awareness of Dying*, that we anticipated the formulation of FGT, but did not quite define it nor understand it. We said “In the preceding chapter we remarked that substantive theory faithful to

the empirical situation cannot be formulated by merely applying formal theory to the substantive area. A substantive theory must be first formulated in order to see which parts of diverse formal theories can then further the substantive formulation. And in its turn, substantive theory may help in formulating formal theory. It may also contribute to the formulation of new formal theory grounded on careful comparative research.... Consequently, if one wishes to develop a systematic formal (or general) theory of awareness contexts, he must analyze data from many substantive areas. When advancing a substantive theory to a formal one, the comparative analysis of groups is still the most powerful method for formulating credible theory." (p. 276)

In the *Discovery of GT* we began to define FGT. We said on page 177: "By substantive theory we mean theory developed for a substantive or empirical area of sociological inquiry, such as patient care, geriatric life styles etc.... By formal theory we mean theory developed for a formal or conceptual area of sociological area such as status passage, stigma, deviant behavior, etc. Substantive and formal theories exist on conceptually ordered distinguishable levels of generality which differ only in terms of degree. In any one study each type of theory can shade at points into the other. The analyst, however, should focus clearly on one level or the other."

This latter definition, which has been subsequently repeated several times in the method's literature, leads to some confusion. Its focus on levels of generality adds to the confusion. Most writers picking up on generality level have defined FGT wrong, by focusing on a conceptual area, which is vague. This vaguery leads to easily focus on a theoretical code (see *GT Perspective III*) such as process, or range instead of a core category. This vaguery also leads to QDA comparative description focusing on descriptive differences and similarities about the conceptual area, not on constant comparisons for conceptualization (see Chapter 4 below). For example, a lot of descriptions about status transitions is not FGT.

Ian Dey in his book *Grounding Grounded Theory*, after trying to handle the level of abstraction confusion comes up with this definition: "Thus the difference between substantive and formal theories lies in their degree of conceptual abstraction. We can move from one to the other by focusing on a high level of generality and incorporating material from other substantive areas with the same formal theoretical import. In short, the distinction between formal and substantive theory might better be recast in terms of degrees of abstraction in which theory at any level has some combination of

both substantive and formal elements. This still allows for a distinction in terms of theoretical emphasis, for theory may focus on either capturing the complexities of specific cases or on the generating (or condensing) generalities across a range of cases. However, it also implies a less clear-cut division between theoretical tools to capture individual complexity and those we might use to make generalization.” (p. 41)

This statement leads to no product oriented direction. It is iffy and leads the researcher into confusion, not a clear direction for which a clear methodology can be attached. Our lack of clarity at the start spawned this mixed thinking about FGT. Dey faults us on making such a “rigid distinction” between substantive and formal which was somewhat accurate due to our lack of early clarity. Now, the reader can see the clear distinction between SGT and FGT given in the clarifying definition above. As a research it is clear which way to go in generating by constant comparisons. Unfortunately Dey’s confusion also comes from seeing substantive theory as really descriptive, not conceptual, when he refers to capturing individual complexity of the substantive case and seeing SGT shading into FGT with no clear separation.

Karen Locke, in her book *GT in Management Research* (Sage 2001) does better with our former lack of specificity. She says “*In The Discovery of GT*, Glaser and Strauss make much of the difference between substantive and formal theory. They view formal theory as the sociologist’s goal. However, to be valid, they insist that it be developed from a substantive grounding in concrete social situations. Thus substantive theory is prior to formal theory, and it is closely linked to the practice domain. It represents the close connection to the empirical reality. When we speak of formal theory, however, we usually refer to those areas of inquiry that operate at a high level of generality, such as systems theory. In Glaser and Strauss’s view, substantive and formal theory are clearly related. Substantive theory can provide a link to more formal theory, but this is achieved by working empirically to develop conceptual categories at higher levels of abstraction and generality.” (p. 35)

Locke, in following our early lack of specificity in defining formal theory, is clearly lead into thinking any general category is generated at a higher level of abstraction when doing formal theory. My clear definition will set this vagueness to rest. Let the level abstraction fall where it may, as the generation of formal theory pursues the general implications of a core variable. Now the FGT researcher has

a clear path. Generality of “what” is brought into clear focus also. (See next section and Chapter 3.)

Jane Gilgun, in her reader: “Qualitative Methods in Family Research” follows our same lack of conceptual focus and specificity. She says: “Grounded theory can be of two general types: substantive and formal (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In SGT, the concepts and hypotheses that researchers develop are based on data focusing on one area of study. Discovering similar concepts and hypotheses across areas of study, time and setting and informants leads to formal theory.” Clearly in these definitions that lack conceptual specificity the general implications of a core variable and its resultant applications is missing.

In *Reflexive Methodology* (Sage 2000), Alvesson and Skoldberg respond to the lack of specificity on our early definition of FGT. They say (p. 31) “The difference between substantive and formal theory is not, however, altogether clear”. They refer to differences in “entities” and “properties” in each type of theory and “distinguishable levels of generality which differ on in terms of degree”, but they are not totally clear in trying to clear up our early definition. They say “The whole thing boils down to a matter of a lower or higher level of generality, and in reality there are not just two levels, but an arbitrary number of them.” Of course level of generality is involved, but it is not the crucial dimension in my specific definition above focusing on the core category.

Finally in their conclusion section they offer what they hope will clear up our lack of specificity by adding what they call a “golden rule” to our early definition. “Try to effect an epistemological break with the actor level in the formal grounded theory. The formal theory would then account for the deep structure and the substantive theory for the surface structure, upon which this is based. Such a golden rule would counteract much of what we see as the fundamental weakness in Glaser and Strauss’s position while trying to preserve its strengths.”

I am not sure what they mean, but they are still using the generality difference in an effort to handle the confusion brought on by our early statement lacking specificity on what FGT is. One reason for their miss of seeing the generalizing of a core category is that they consider it a constant resolving of a main “worry”. This is not correct and too strong. The core category constantly resolves a main concern in an area of action which concern is the general goal that motivates participants to participate, or structures to keep working. Whether or not worry is involved, and it usually is not, is another

issue and emergent. Their effort is commendable but that lack remains.

Lastly, and briefly, Margaret H. Kearny, in her chapter "New Directions in Formal Theory", alludes to what formal theory is with the typical over generality based on a kind of assuming that everyone knows what FGT is. She says (p. 228) "Grounded formal theory is middle-range theory grounded in substantive qualitative research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) conceived of grounded formal theory as describing a discrete kind of human experience that could be demonstrated across situation and contexts." This is a QDA remodeling dropping the level of generality to description, but more on this pattern in Chapter 3.

It is no wonder, given our early over general definition of FGT and these examples of methodologists trying to clear it up, that there has been scant attention given to generating FGT and a method by which to do it. There was no clear methodological generation path as there is for SGT.

In fact, FGT now defined and specified is just about the general implications of a core category which is generated from a substantive theory and which is a core variable with "grab" and just pressuring to be generalized. FGT is not about a theoretical code (TC) such as structural process, an authoritarian structure, a range, a set of dimensions, a reward system or status congruency etc. (see *GT Perspective III*) which are models for generating either SGT or FGT. The theoretical code used will emerge for a FGT as it does for a SGT. Do not confuse FGT with elaborating a theoretical code, however complex such as an escalating basic social process model.

The core category may be somewhat or very abstract like cultivating or credentializing compared to professional becoming or cautionary control respectively but it is still substantive in relevant meaning and fit. It just extends the core category in breadth and depth to more substantives areas within and without or beyond the original area. The FGT abstractness varies and is emergent and is not to be preconceived. Its degree of "middle range" will vary.

Also an FGT is not a "grand theory" about a TC such as systems maintenance or deviant theory, situational analysis, (Clarke, Sage 2005), role theory, or status transitions (Glaser, *MGTm*, p. 380). The GT researcher is modest and grounded. He is not a generator of immaculate conjecture. To repeat, FGT is just about a core category such as moral reckoning or supernormalizing, no matter what TC emerges or what level of generality emerges. It is not to be confused with elaborating TCs or necessarily generating a high level of

generality. It just generates the general implications of a core variable such as pluralistic dialoguing. It has a clear product oriented focus. It does not wander throughout a conceptual realm.

## General Implications

In Chapter 3, I will discuss at length the problems involved in generalizing in FGTs and show FGT's place in generalizability. Here I wish to pick those aspects of generalizing pertinent to the definition of FGT and the pursuit of general implications. In *Discovery* (1967) we wrote: "Since substantive theory is grounded in research on one particular substantive area, it might be taken to apply only to that specific area. A theory at such a conceptual level, however, may have important general implications and relevance and become almost automatically a springboard or stepping stone to the development of a grounded formal theory."(p. 79)

There are three main dimensions of general implications. 1. FGT in generating the general implications of a core category focuses only on conceptual general categories and hypotheses. It does not focus on descriptive differences and similarities. The conceptual generalities are arrived at through the constant comparative method of analysis. 2. Conceptual generalities are highly applicable when conditioned and or contextualized for a suitable and particular application, for example how to apply cautionary control to the operating room or to traffic at street intersections or to flight travel security. The FGT conceptual hypotheses are applicable because they have fit, relevance and workability, in short because they were grounded. 3. The doing of FGT generalizations are motivated by the pressure to generalize a core category that has grab, e.g. cautionary control etc. The researcher of the SGT sees it everywhere, such as balancing. Let me consider each in turn.

Conceptual Generating: In April of 2005, my daughter Bonnie Glaser, PhD wrote me. "I have an idea for one of your next books. It should be about how a grounded theorist takes a GT he has already done and builds on it ... through more research using theoretical sampling, emergent fit, building formal theory. In general, how to do more research and write about the general implications of theories that are already done. This is soooo important and people aren't really sure (without asking you) how to go about it. Alvita Nathaniel wants to do a FGT on moral reckoning and Antoinette McCollum on pluralistic dialoging. Both asked me to ask you 'how'?"

This book answers their question “how”. But here I would point out that it is by generating the conceptual generality of their core category that taps general implications. In short, the general implications of a core category are expanded by generating grounded conceptual categories about it from many different areas (see Chapter 4 below on generating) using the constant comparative method. FGT does NOT expand general implications by doing descriptive generalization, with its QDA need for accuracy, context, unit condition, harping on indicators or describing a general law. The core category is expanded by abstract conceptual generalizations based on grounded research. The researcher uses constant comparison to generate concepts related to the core category. It is not to discover descriptive differences and similarities.

Furthermore the researcher cannot generate FGT from speculation and/or particularistic experiences. Nor can the researcher properly generate FGT theory bits — one sentence theory — from just one piece of data or just one indicator. Theory bits come easy, as I said in *GT Perspective I*, as a researcher or reader of the research sees general implications of a core category everywhere and by human nature fits the concept to what situation he sees. One can see supernormalizing in sports everywhere and spout indicators of it and hence theorizing about it even though the category came from dealing with a heart attack. Theory bits undermine doing FGT. Some, none the wiser, may even take a theory bit about a substantive category as FGT. A SGT discussion seems formal to them. Not so. The generating research must be done to yield a FGT.

Conceptual generality is abstract of time, place and people, yet can be applied. Thus FGT revolves around this abstract power of conceptual generality. We will discuss in Chapter 3 the many kinds of generality, without this abstract power, and their sources and their dangers, but as I have said above they are typically descriptive generalizations, which have no place in FGT and are stale dated very quickly.

**Application:** General implications of a core category and its sub-core categories generated in a FGT are applicable because people see them other places (virtually everywhere) and automatically contextualize and condition them. For example, getting others to visualize deterioration easily leads to seeing worsening progressions, that is hard to get others to recognize, all around us.

Lars Dahlgren et al (a student of Sven Styborn, a major supporter of GT) in their book *Qualitative Methodology of International Public Health* emphasize the application function of abstract GT



categories in world wide public health problems. They say, (p. 137) “Finally some words about generalization. GT strives at creating abstract knowledge from concrete observations. This means that the ultimate ambition is to discover theories on a level which will make it possible to apply them to a wide range of situations or contexts. Once discovered, concepts leave the level of people and they become the focus of the research.... The aim is to construct formal theory from substantive cases.”

This conceptualization leads to generalization that then can be brought back to many empirical areas with fit and relevance. To be sure SGT concepts can be applied, but FGT conceptualizations have a wider, more grounded range. In 1978 I wrote: “I am always amazed, given the pressure to generalize, the ease of doing it with GT and the fact that all SGTs have general implications.” (p. 94)

FGTs, since they are grounded have content references that fit and are relevant, thus can be applied as the researcher contextualizes almost automatically. As the FGT builds, the applicability of its categories grows, and its categories gain credibility and their ready modification becomes easy according to the context and conditions where it's applied. Thus the abstract power of FGT is very empirically rooted. It is not based on speculative, conjectured, reified concepts. A well grounded FGT will in fact yield complex multivariate applications of a core category. Thus abstract theory, when grounded by generating using GT procedures, is very practical. FGT is much more than just a higher level abstract theory floating nowhere to be used. FGT's abstraction allows it application over a wide range of empirical areas virtually forever, as opposed to descriptive generalizations which are rooted in one empirical area and soon stale dated.

Janice Morse recognized this up to a point: She said in her article “Theory Derived From Qualitative Research,” “Generalizability is obtained when the theory is recontextualized to another setting. The use of abstract concepts in practice is difficult, and theory must provide an adequate linkage to make such concepts relevant for use in the clinical setting.” (p. 193) She is right, except that generating SGT and FGT is not that difficult in providing the “link between concepts and recommendations for practice”, since they are linked to data.

Malcom Williams has not heard of or understood GT and especially FGT when he states (*Making Sense of Social Research*, Sage 2003, p. 33) “The problem with grand theory is that its sweep is often just too grand.... We conclude that it is hard, though not impossible