


# **The Discovery of Grounded Theory**

**Strategies for Qualitative Research**

**Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D.  
Anselm L. Strauss, Ph.D.**

**Sociology Press**

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## Preface

Mentioning the Department of Sociology at Columbia University brings to mind Merton's middle-range theory and Lazarsfeld's quantitative methodology. On the other hand, the "Chicago tradition" (from the 1920's to the 1950's) is associated with down-to-earth qualitative research, a less than rigorous methodology, and an unintegrated presentation of theory. By an ironic conjunction of careers, the authors of this book were trained, respectively, at Columbia and Chicago. The point is noted only to emphasize our conviction that neither of these traditions—nor any other in postwar sociology—has been successful at closing the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research. The gap is as wide today as it was in 1941, when Blumer commented on it, and in 1949, when Merton optimistically suggested a solution.

Attempts to close the gap between theory and research have concentrated principally on the improvement of methods for testing theory, and sociologists, as well as other social and behavioral scientists, have been quite successful in that endeavor. Attempts to close the gap from the "theory side" have not been nearly so successful. In fact, "grand theory" is still so influential and prevalent that for many researchers it is synonymous with "theory"—and so they think of "theory" as having little relevance to their research. They have resolutely continued to focus on their empirical studies and on their efforts to improve the methodology of verification.

Our book is directed toward improving social scientists' capacities for generating theory that *will* be relevant to their re-

search. Not everyone can be equally skilled at discovering theory, but neither do they need to be a genius to generate useful theory. What is required, we believe, is a different perspective on the canons derived from vigorous quantitative verification on such issues as sampling, coding, reliability, validity, indicators, frequency distributions, conceptual formulation, construction of hypotheses, and presentation of evidence. We need to develop canons more suited to the discovery of theory. These guides, along with associated rules of procedure, can help release energies for theorizing that are now frozen by the undue emphasis on verification.

We argue in our book for grounding theory in social research itself—for generating it from the data. We have linked this position with a general method of comparative analysis—different from the more specific comparative methods now current—and with various procedures designed to generate grounded theory. Although our emphasis is on generating theory rather than verifying it, we take special pains not to divorce those two activities, both necessary to the scientific enterprise. Although our book is directed primarily at sociologists, we believe it can be useful to anyone who is interested in studying social phenomena—political, educational, economic, industrial, or whatever—especially if their studies are based on qualitative data.

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We wish to express our indebtedness to many colleagues for their general support of our total enterprise, their encouragement for its publication, and their specific commentaries and critiques, which we found invaluable for final revisions of the manuscript. Their comments indicated clearly that, while in general agreement, these colleagues felt in some controversy with us on several specific issues—issues that will doubtless be controversial in sociology for years to come. In short, we have taken their advice and support, but at the same time are fully responsible for our own position.

We wish to thank Howard S. Becker of Northwestern University, editor of the "Observations" series; Fred Davis and Leonard Schatzman of the University of California at San Francisco; Julius Roth of the University of California at Davis; Amitai Etzioni and Walter Klink of Columbia University; Herbert Blumer, Neil J. Smelser, Sheldon Messinger, and Aaron Cicourel of the University of California at Berkeley; George C.

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B. G. G. and A. L. S.

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# I

## ***The Discovery of Grounded Theory***

Most writing on sociological method has been concerned with how accurate facts can be obtained and how theory can thereby be more rigorously tested. In this book we address ourselves to the equally important enterprise of *how the discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analyzed in social research—can be furthered*. We believe that the discovery of theory from data—which we call *grounded theory*—is a major task confronting sociology today, for, as we shall try to show, such a theory fits empirical situations, and is understandable to sociologists and layman alike. Most important, it works—provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications.

As sociologists engaged in research soon discover, there are as yet few theories of this nature. And so we offer this book, which we conceive as a beginning venture in the development of improved methods for discovering grounded theory. Because this is only a beginning, we shall often state positions, counterpositions and examples, rather than offering clear-cut procedures and definitions, because at many points we believe our slight knowledge makes any formulation premature. A major strategy that we shall emphasize for furthering the discovery of grounded theory is a *general method of comparative analysis*.

Previous books on methods of social research have focused mainly on how to verify theories. This suggests an overemphasis in current sociology on the verification of theory, and a

resultant de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area that one wishes to research. Testing theory is, of course, also a basic task confronting sociology. We would all agree that in social research generating theory goes hand in hand with verifying it; but many sociologists have been diverted from this truism in their zeal to test either existing theories or a theory that they have barely started to generate.

Surely no conflict between verifying and generating theory is logically necessary during the course of any given research. For many sociologists, however, undoubtedly there exists a conflict concerning primacy of purpose, reflecting the opposition between a desire to generate theory and a trained need to verify it. Since verification has primacy on the current sociological scene, the desire to generate theory often becomes secondary, if not totally lost, in specific researches.

Our book—especially when we discuss the current emphasis on verification—will indicate many facets and forms that the resolution of this conflict takes among sociologists, but this discussion should not be taken as indicating that we endorse the existence of such a conflict. Rather, our position is that a conflict is created when sociologists do not clearly and consciously choose which will receive relative emphasis in given researches because of too great an adherence to verification as the chief mandate for excellent research.

## Grounded Theory

The basic theme in our book is the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research.<sup>1</sup> Every chapter deals with our beginning formulation of some of the processes

1. Merton never reached the notion of the discovery of grounded theory in discussing the "theoretic functions of research." The closest he came was with "serendipity"; that is, an unanticipated, anomalous, and strategic finding gives rise to a new hypothesis. This concept does not catch the idea of purposefully discovering theory through social research. It puts the discovery of a single hypothesis on a surprise basis. Merton was preoccupied with how verifications through research feed back into and modify theory. Thus, he was concerned with grounded modifying of theory, not grounded generating of theory. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949), Chapter III.

of research for generating theory. Our basic position is that generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses. We shall contrast this position with theory generated by logical deduction from *a priori* assumptions. In Chapter II we shall discuss what we mean by theory and compare it with other conceptions of theory.

The interrelated jobs of theory in sociology are: (1) to enable prediction and explanation of behavior; (2) to be useful in theoretical advance in sociology; (3) to be usable in practical applications—prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations; (4) to provide a perspective on behavior—a stance to be taken toward data; and (5) to guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of behavior. Thus theory in sociology is a strategy for handling data in research, providing modes of conceptualization for describing and explaining. The theory should provide clear enough categories and hypotheses so that crucial ones can be verified in present and future research; they must be clear enough to be readily operationalized in quantitative studies when these are appropriate.<sup>2</sup> The theory must also be readily understandable to sociologists of any viewpoint, to students and to significant laymen. Theory that can meet these requirements must fit the situation being researched, and work when put into use. By “fit” we mean that the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by “work” we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior under study.

To generate theory that fills this large order, we suggest as the best approach an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research. Then one can be relatively sure that the theory will fit and work.<sup>3</sup> And since the categories are discovered by examination of the data, laymen involved in the area to which the theory applies will usually be able to under-

2. In principle any concept can be operationalized in quantitative ways, but the sociologist should develop his concepts to facilitate this operationalization.

3. Of course, the researcher does not approach reality as a *tabula rasa*. He must have a perspective that will help him see relevant data and abstract significant categories from his scrutiny of the data. We shall discuss this issue more fully in Chapters II and XI.

stand it, while sociologists who work in other areas will recognize an understandable theory linked with the data of a given area.

Theory based on data can usually not be completely refuted by more data or replaced by another theory. Since it is too intimately linked to data, it is destined to last despite its inevitable modification and reformulation. The most striking examples are Weber's theory of bureaucracy and Durkheim's theory of suicide. These theories have endured for decades, stimulating a variety of research and study, constantly exciting students and professors alike to try to modify them by clever ways of testing and reformulation. In contrast, logically deduced theories based on ungrounded assumptions, such as some well-known ones on the "social system" and on "social action" can lead their followers far astray in trying to advance sociology.<sup>4</sup> However, grounded theories—which take hard study of much data—are worth the precious time and focus of all of us in our research, study and teaching.

Grounded theory can help to forestall the opportunistic use of theories that have dubious fit and working capacity. So often in journals we read a highly empirical study which at its conclusion has a tacked-on explanation taken from a logically deduced theory. The author tries to give his data a more general sociological meaning, as well as to account for or interpret what he found. He uses this strategy because he has not been trained to generate a theory from the data he is reporting so that it will help interpret or explain the data in a general manner. He does this also because he has been trained only to research and verify his facts, not also to research and generate his explanation of them. The explanation is added afterward. For instance, many papers dealing with deviance conclude with an interpretation based on Merton's anomie theory, a classic example of this use of logically deduced theory. An author could, of course, borrow the grounded theory of another sociologist for its general relevance, but—since this kind of theory fits and works—it would readily be seen whether it is clearly applicable and relevant in this new situation. It cannot be tenu-

4. And also in trying to advance their personal careers, for one cannot empirically dissociate the need to generate theory from the need to advance careers in sociology.

ously connected, omitting of many other possible explanations, as a tacked-on explanation so often is.

Another opportunistic use of theory that cannot occur with grounded theory is what may be termed "examplimg." A researcher can easily find examples for dreamed-up, speculative, or logically deduced theory after the idea has occurred. But since the idea has not been derived from the example, seldom can the example correct or change it (even if the author is willing), since the example was selectively chosen for its confirming power. Therefore, one receives the image of a proof when there is none, and the theory obtains a richness of detail that it did not earn.

There is also a middle zone between grounded and logico-deductive theorizing, in which the sociologist chooses examples systematically and then allows them to feed back to give theoretical control over his formulations; but often it is hard to figure out when this is happening, even when we are clearly told. Much of C. Wright Mills' work, we believe, is exemplified with only little theoretical control, though he claimed that data disciplined his theory. In contrast, grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data.<sup>5</sup>

In contrasting grounded theory with logico-deductive theory and discussing and assessing their relative merits in ability to fit and work (predict, explain, and be relevant), we have taken the position that the adequacy of a theory for sociology today cannot be divorced from the process by which it is generated. Thus one canon for judging the usefulness of a theory is how it was generated—and we suggest that it is likely to be a better theory to the degree that it has been inductively developed from social research. We also believe that other canons for assessing a theory, such as logical consistency, clarity, parsimony, density, scope, integration, as well as its fit and its ability to work, are also significantly dependent on how the theory was generated. They are not, as some theorists of a logico-deductive persuasion would claim, completely independent of the processes of generation. This notion of independence too often ends up being taken as a license to generate theory from any source—

5. See, for example, Howard S. Becker *et al.*, *Boys in White* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

happenstance, fantasy, dream life, common sense, or conjecture—and then dress it up as a bit of logical deduction.

Probably we need to emphasize here what we shall discuss later more explicitly. Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research. *Generating a theory involves a process of research.* By contrast, the *source* of certain ideas, or even “models,” can come from sources other than the data. The biographies of scientists are replete with stories of occasional flashes of insight, of seminal ideas, garnered from sources outside the data. But the generation of theory from such insights must then be brought into relation to the data, or there is great danger that theory and empirical world will mismatch. We shall discuss this issue again more fully, particularly in Chapter XI on “Insight, Theory Development, and Reality.”

For many colleagues, our position will be at best a hypothesis, to be tested in the years to come; while for many others it is proven fact, and for still others an article of faith. However colleagues may respond, our position is not logical; it is phenomenological. We could not suggest a process of generating theory if we did not believe that people who might use it would arrive at results that potentially may be judged as successful. Furthermore, we believe that grounded theory will be more successful than theories logically deduced from *a priori* assumptions. Our position, we hasten to add, does not at all imply that the generation of new theory should proceed in isolation from existing grounded theory. (We shall discuss this in Chapter II.)

## Purposes of This Book

This book is intended to underscore the basic sociological activity that *only* sociologists can do: generating sociological theory. Description, ethnography, fact-finding, verification (call them what you will) are all done well by professionals in other fields and by layman in various investigatory agencies. But these people cannot generate sociological theory from their

work. Only sociologists are trained to want it, to look for it, and to generate it.

Besides reminding colleagues of a somewhat slighted task, we also are trying, through this book, to strengthen the mandate for generating theory, to help provide a defense against doctrinaire approaches to verification, and to reawaken and broaden the picture of what sociologists can do with their time and efforts. It should also help students to defend themselves against verifiers who would teach them to deny the validity of their own scientific intelligence. By making generation a legitimate enterprise, and suggesting methods for it, we hope to provide the ingredients of a defense against internalized professional mandates dictating that sociologists research and write in the verification rhetoric, and against the protests of colleagues who object to their freedom in research from the rigorous rules of verification (so stifling to the creative energies required for discovering theory).

In trying to stimulate all sociologists to discover grounded theory—from those who are only at the dissertation stage of their careers to those who are already “retired” professors—we hope to contribute toward the equalizing of efforts in generating theory, which are now often limited to the earlier stages of a sociological career. For example, Hammon, in presenting us with chronicles of some of the best sociological research (those with the highest theoretical yield), has chosen mainly chronicles of dissertations or studies done as soon as the dissertation was finished.<sup>6</sup> Similar studies could be done by mature sociologists, and with more speed (less fumbling, clearer purpose) and more sophisticated theoretical yields. Indeed, that the growth of a theorist is linked to the increasing sophistication of his output is clearly seen in the work of men like Goffman, Lipset and Wilbert Moore. Yet many sociologists as they mature disregard whatever fledgling potential for generating theory they showed in their dissertations and early monographs. They cease or slow up their research and writing of monographs and turn to scholarship and the mastery of others’ works, particularly earlier “great man” theories. One respected scholar, by

6. Philip E. Hammond (Ed.), *Sociologists at Work* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).



virtue of his position and prominence, has encouraged this trend, by saying, in effect, at a recent sociological meeting, that he would like to see older sociologists cease writing their monographs and start worrying about teaching the next generation of students. We urge them to continue writing monographs and to try to generate theory!

Throughout this book we call for more theory, but not just any theory. The general comparative method for generating grounded theory that will be discussed in Part I provides criteria for judging the worth of all theory, as well as grounded theory. This theme pervades the whole book. It is our intent to give colleagues an effective means for evaluating the worth of any theory that they will teach, apply or use in research, for describing, explaining, predicting, interpreting and testing.

What about this book's usefulness for those sociologists who already are deeply involved in generating theory? Many may be able to use it effectively to help systematize their theorizing; for until they proceed with a bit more method their theories will tend to end up thin, unclear in purpose, and not well integrated (see Chapter VI). Our suggestions for systematizing should not curb anyone's creativity for generating theory; in contrast to the ways of verification, they should encourage it. Our strategies do not insist that the analyst engage in a degree of explicitness and overdrawn explanation in an effort to coerce the theory's acceptance by "drugging the reader's imagination and beating him into intellectual submission."<sup>7</sup> Our suggestions for systematizing the rendition of theory allow, even demand, room for including both propositions and the richness of information leading to them.<sup>8</sup>

Our principal aim is to stimulate other theorists to codify and publish their *own* methods for generating theory. We trust that they will join us in telling those who have not yet attempted to generate theory that it is not a residual chore in this age of verification. Though difficult, it is an exciting adventure.

In our own attempt to discuss methods and processes for discovering grounded theory, we shall, for the most part, keep

7. Melville Dalton, "Preconceptions in Methods in Men Who Manage," in Hammond, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

8. Compare to Merton's strictures on codification of theory, which require leaving out the "irrelevant" richness of connotation! *Op. cit.*, p. 14.