

# Adapt or adopt: developing and transgressing the methodological boundaries of grounded theory

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**Adapt or adopt: developing and transgressing the methodological boundaries of grounded theory**

**Aims.** While acknowledging that there is an existing debate regarding the nature of grounded theory, the aim of this paper is to highlight a number of common and key areas/issues where adaptation/adoption of Glaserian grounded theory in nursing-related studies often occurs. These issues are: the differences between conceptual description and conceptual theory; beginning the study with a 'general wonderment' or a more defined research question; establishing the credibility of the theory; identifying a basic psycho-social process and emerging vs. forcing.

**Background.** Since the development and introduction of grounded theory in 1967, the number of studies, in a wide range of disciplines including nursing, that purport to be using a grounded theory method has grown enormously. While Glaser and Strauss acknowledged then that it was entirely appropriate for the methodology to evolve and develop, some of the studies that claim to be based on grounded theory methodology share little methodological similarity, and at times, bear only a passing resemblance to Glaserian grounded theory.

**Discussion.** Some methodological transgressions in papers that purport to be grounded theory studies are such that it would be inaccurate to term the resulting method grounded theory at all. Instead such studies are more accurately thought of as a form of qualitative data analysis. Such transgressions include a study that has no evidence of conceptualization; one that does not identify a basic psycho-social process; and one that moves from 'emerging' to 'forcing'. Other methodological adaptations of grounded theory, such as beginning the study with more than a general wonderment and broadening the approach to establishing the credibility of the theory, are more in keeping with Glaser and Strauss' position on the evolution of the method. In such cases, it is necessary to distinguish such methods from 'pure' Glaserian grounded theory, and it would be prudent and methodologically accurate to describe the resulting method as 'modified' grounded theory.

**Keywords:** grounded theory, methodological development, methodological transgressions, nursing research, qualitative data analysis

## Introduction

In 1967 *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* was published and this introduced the ground-breaking methodology of grounded theory (GT). Since then the book has become recognized as a seminal

work, and GT has become a 'global' phenomenon. Studies have been conducted using the methodology in a wide range of disciplines including sociology, nursing, anthropology, health science, business and management (Glaser 1995a,b). Furthermore, studies have been undertaken in a wide range of countries, including the United States of America, Canada,

United Kingdom, France, Australia, Ireland, Sweden and Finland. Within the 'Discovery' text it was acknowledged that the book represented only the beginning, and that it was entirely appropriate for the methodology to evolve and develop. This has resulted in a proliferation of methods over the years, each professing to be based on GT methodology.

Examination of many of these studies, however, indicates that there is a wide range of methods, each of which claims to be based on GT, and yet some of these appear to share little methodological similarity. Becker (1993), who noted that some purportedly GT studies were often actually descriptive studies, highlighted this methodological heterogeneity. Benoliel's (1996) insightful analysis of 146 GT research reports in nursing published between 1980 and 1994 discovered three categories of study. With reference to this methodological heterogeneity, she described these categories as GT approach, GT methods and GT research, and thus some studies were a divergence from the original method. Such methodological hybrids (and developments) at times bear only a passing resemblance to GT methodology and are perhaps indicative of a mixing of qualitative data analysis (QDA) methodology with GT (Glaser 1998, 2001). QDA is a phrase coined by Glaser (1992, 1998) as a generic term to indicate the many QDA methods.

Arising from extensive discussions and communications with Professor Barney Glaser on this issue, I intend in this paper to highlight a number of common and key areas/issues where adaptation/adoption of GT in nursing-related studies often occurs, and to give examples from the extant nursing literature. These issues are: the differences between conceptual description and conceptual theory; beginning the study with 'general wonderment' or a more defined research question; establishing the credibility of the theory; identifying a basic psycho-social process and emerging vs. forcing.

In the debates about the Straussian/Glaserian version of GT, the Straussian position has been well covered (see for example Strauss & Corbin 1990, Weust & Berman 2002). Much less evident, however, is the Glaserian position. This has produced a disproportionate emphasis on and familiarity with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) version of GT (Melia 1996). Moreover, recognizing that methodological boundaries do (and should) exist, it is timely to consider where GT will go next? This examination in this paper is intended to illustrate where adapting, modifying or developing GT methods moves the methodology beyond these boundaries, and particularly the boundaries of Glaserian GT. Additionally, these areas/questions will be addressed by drawing on Glaser's texts, serving to remind readers of the existence of the books that clarify these points. Accordingly, aspirant grounded theorists, particularly those who wish to follow a

Glaserian GT approach, would be wise to read beyond the 'Discovery' book and access these other texts. Lastly, it should be noted that Glaser (1998) describes GT as both a methodology and a method; as a result, both terms will be used in this paper.

### Differences between conceptual description and conceptual theory

Glaser (2001) has stated recently that conceptualization is the core of GT. Conceptualization (*vis-à-vis* conceptual theory) refers to the generation of concepts that are abstract in terms of time, place and people; generating concepts that have 'enduring grab' (Glaser 2001, p. 22). Conceptualization involves the naming of psychosocial patterns that are grounded in the research and need to be at the 'third level' of conceptual analysis (Glaser 2001, p. 22). On the contrary, conceptual description is defined as 'the generation of one concept and then saying everything one knows about that concept' (Glaser 2001, p. 22). While Glaser's view of the centrality of conceptualization is unequivocal, examination of some studies that claim to use GT methodology shows that they include little, if any, evidence of conceptualization. For example, Robertson's (1998) study contains five 'categories' and these are descriptions of experiences; however, it is difficult to see evidence of conceptualization. Similarly, Durgahee's (2002) study offers little more than a description of what the patients in the study wrote in their reflective diaries. Consequently, the question needs to be asked: 'If a study contains no evidence of conceptualization, then would it be accurate to describe it as a GT study, particularly a Glaserian GT study?' In response, studies that show no evidence of conceptualization, but contain instead conceptual description, are likely to have drifted into QDA, or perhaps even what Glaser (1992, p. 102) terms Full Conceptual Description (FCD). Glaser (2001, p. 30) tries 'to show how the confusion between description and conceptualization results in a weakening of GT by and for description and a defaulting of GT to standard Qualitative Data Analysis'.

Description falls short of (conceptual) theory generation (Charmaz 1990). The scope of descriptive findings (such as they are) is unlikely to have reached the level of theoretical development associated with conceptual theory; such findings will lack the necessary scope and abstraction (Glaser 2001). Furthermore, descriptive findings as the outcome of a GT study are unlikely to have achieved parsimony; given the sometimes-unwieldy nature of descriptive findings, they are likely to contain more than minimal conceptual elements. If a study has gravitated into FCD, then Glaser would argue that it has ceased to be a GT study as he recognizes and

understands it. A researcher who is more familiar with the Straussian approach to GT might disagree with this; therefore it would be both inappropriate and inaccurate to describe the study as Glaserian GT. This does not necessarily indicate that the study has no empirical value. Nevertheless if a researcher claims to use one method, however, and then deviates away from this and yet continues to claim to be using the method, this undermines its methodological veracity. In so doing, the researcher may have inadvertently mixed qualitative methods, without specific purpose or intent, and thus is likely to have undermined the analytical rigor of the study (Wilson & Hutchinson 1996, Barbour 1998).

In addition to the issue of methodological rigor – and the importance of this should not be underestimated – there are broader epistemological arguments for ensuring that GT studies contain conceptual theory. While GT is not solely a qualitative method (Glaser 1998, 2001), it is perhaps most often used in qualitative studies and with qualitative data. Few credible scholars would dispute the augmentation that GT brought to the qualitative research paradigm. Furthermore, even a cursory examination of the development and advancement of the knowledge base unique to nursing will show the substantial contribution that studies using GT methodology have made (Benoliel 1996). Despite its historical value, the future utility of GT resides in studies that offer more than conceptual description. Indeed, many articles warn of the epistemological danger in continuing to produce *only* descriptive studies (Morse 1994b, Sandelowski 1997, Glaser 2001, Patterson *et al.* 2001).

These arguments build on the position – now a decade old, yet still highly relevant – that qualitative research needs to pass the ‘so what?’ test; it needs to be shown to have utility in the ‘real’ world (Meleis 1987, Thorne 1991). Cutcliffe and McKenna (2004, p. 130) state that:

While there is nothing inherently wrong with descriptive level studies we, as a scientific community, need to do much more with our current research than describe. Indeed, the most illuminating qualitative findings go far further than description: they interpret, they explain; they solve problems.

Moving away from conceptual description to conceptual theory generation may not be easy for some GT researchers. The drift or transition into description can be all too appealing for some and perhaps a little daunting for others. The allure of saying all one knows about a concept or property is exciting (Glaser 2001), and can be hard to resist. Alternatively, engaging in the intellectually-demanding processes of conceptualization; of remaining faithful to the data and waiting for conceptualizations to emerge; of engaging in

additional comparison of data, labels and categories, can be disheartening and intimidating. Yet:

there is an argument for greater intellectual entrepreneurship within qualitative research...intellectual entrepreneurship implies a conscious and deliberate attempt on the part of academics to explore the world of ideas boldly. (Cutcliffe 2003, p. 144)

This echoes Morse’s (1994a) exhortation to qualitative researchers to take more risks in theory development and to move away from being timid researchers. Thus, the process of ensuring that a GT study contains conceptualization may also simultaneously address the need for intellectual entrepreneurship within qualitative inquiry.

### ‘General wonderment’ or a more defined research question?

There are many examples of GT studies that contain more than an abstract wonderment as a preface. For example, Magnusson *et al.* (2003) asked a very specific question: how do structural changes in mental health nursing influence interaction when providing home care to patients with long-term mental health problems? Arguably, this study was even more driven by another question, for Milliken and Northcott (2003, p. 101) state that their study directly addresses the Canadian Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia’s call ‘to evaluate the concrete and complex interactions of specific families in order to identify positive attributes which could, in turn, predict improved outcomes’ (Milliken & Northcott 2003, p. 101). Yet Glaser (1978, 1992, 1995a, 1995b) has repeatedly declared that the GT researcher enters the area under study without even deciding on a research question:

The grounded theory researcher, whether in qualitative or quantitative data, moves into an area of interest with no problem. He (sic) moves in with the abstract wonderment of what is going on that is an issue and how it is handled. (Glaser 1992, p. 22)

At this stage in the study the aspirant GT researcher has no preconceived idea of what the key issue or process will be for the people in the area of study. The key issue or processes will subsequently emerge during the study and thus the resulting theory should have more ‘fit and grab’. That is, rather than focusing time and energy on investigating a preconceived, researcher-driven problem or process that is of little concern to the participants, this openness enables the researcher to be more responsive to the participants’ problem.

A question that needs to be asked is: could a study that starts with more than a ‘general wonderment’ claim to be using a Glaserian GT method, or has it adapted this to the point that it transgresses the methodological boundaries?

However, there are (at least) two situations which currently inhibit this approach: the current *modus operandi* for obtaining funding for a study and/or registering for a higher degree, and research 'careers' and their relationship to knowledge generation.

In this day and age, economics and the drive towards evidence-based practice have a significant influence on the research agenda in health care. As a result, justifiable concerns and/or questions are likely to be raised with a (nurse) researcher who attempts to begin a doctoral study by stating that they have an interest in a particular area, but no clear idea of what they should be researching. Indeed, the process of writing a proposal for a doctoral study currently inhibits potential candidates from doing so. This is particularly the case when a candidate elects to undertake a PhD by thesis, rather than through a taught programme or previous publications. The doctoral proposal usually needs to identify not only the area of study, but often the particular research question as well. Admittedly, these questions can and do change during the process of the doctoral study. Nevertheless, the current registration process most often requires candidates to specify a research question.

Many calls for grant applications require the aspirant researcher to submit a detailed research proposal before the award is granted. Within such proposals there is usually a clear requirement to specify the research question and substantive focus of the study. Indeed, a common criticism of some proposed qualitative studies is that they lack specificity and precision (Stern 1991, Tripp-Reimer & Cohen 1991). Lack of precision in the research question can also cause considerable difficulty for ethics committees. It falls outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of some ethics committees' problems in determining the ethics of studies with an emergent design. The lack of a clearly-defined research question, however, may give some ethics committees reason enough not to support a study (Leininger 1992, Morse 1994b), particularly where they are more familiar and comfortable with biomedical than social science ethical discourses.

Something of a paradox now becomes clear. In attempting to remain methodologically faithful and approach the area of study with nothing more than a 'general wonderment', the aspirant grounded theorist may very well be precluded from conducting this study because of the absence of a clearly-defined question. In such circumstances, therefore, it might be prudent to include a question in his/her research proposal; however, this should be as non-specific as possible. Additionally, the researcher needs to make it clear that they are using a modified GT approach. In this way, the study is more likely to be supported rather than opposed by the various

scrutiny committees. Furthermore, by including a non-specific question, the proposed study might constitute a legitimate example of adapting (and developing) Glaserian GT methodology, and the researcher can clarify this by explaining in what way they are using a modified GT method.

The second factor to consider here is research 'careers' and their relationship to longitudinal knowledge generation. No researcher is an 'empty vessel', a person who can approach an area of study with an entirely a-theoretical stance. However, today it is considered preferable, if not essential, for researchers to identify and pursue a particular research theme. This is due in part to the influence of research assessment exercises in higher education systems and the preference of some grant-awarding bodies to see evidence of cumulative, thematic research strategies contained within proposals. Thus, it becomes entirely possible for a researcher to have undertaken a GT study in one substantive area, which then leads to related questions in a connected substantive area, particularly since a hallmark of high quality research is that the study generates additional questions and lines of inquiry. Indeed, such a sequence of studies building on the findings of previous investigations reflects the longitudinal nature of knowledge (and theory) development (Chinn & Kramer 1995, McKenna 1997). In this way, the researcher is seen to be following a research theme, building a research programme and following an identified research strategy.

For example, my doctoral study (Cutcliffe 2004) was concerned with considering whether bereavement counsellors inspired hope in clients and, if so, how? The study used a modified GT method and identified the core variable of 'the implicit projection of hope and hopefulness'. In this instance, the theory posits that counsellors project their own hope (and hopefulness) into clients. This projection subsequently leaves counsellors with a depleted level of hope, which they stated that they addressed through clinical supervision. Consequently, this study led to the question, amongst others, of: 'How is hope inspired in clinical supervision?'

As this next research question appears to involve basic psychosocial processes, a GT (or modified GT) method is indicated; however, in this instance the research area would be approached with more than a 'general wonderment'. Perhaps this example serves as an illustration of attempts to further de-limit the emerging theory, and as such, the study of clinical supervision might be considered as an extension of the original study rather than a completely new study. By theoretical sampling of this related substantive group, the scope of the theory is broadened. One should also keep in mind, however, Glaser's (1998) comment that those who attempt to discover a problem and force it on to other

populations do not realize that a GT researcher starts anew in each study.

Nevertheless, while recognizing that a GT researcher who wishes to stay faithful to the method would start afresh in each study, it also needs to be acknowledged that pursuing a research theme or following an identified research strategy throughout one's career perhaps prevents a researcher from doing just that. If a researcher carries out a study in an area about which they already have some limited knowledge, indeed perhaps knowledge gained by conducting a GT study in a related substantive area, then they need to make it clear that they have adapted the method and are subsequently using a modified GT method. Alternatively, the researcher should highlight that the proposed study is further delimiting and broadening the scope of the original theory and may even be moving from the substantive to the formal level.

### Establishing the credibility of the theory

How to establish the credibility of a GT has been well-documented in the literature. Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated that, in order for a GT to have practical application, whether substantive or formal, it needs to have four highly inter-related properties:

**Fitness:** The theory must closely fit the substantive area in which it will be used.

**Understanding:** The theory must be readily understandable by people concerned with this area. (In his 1992 work Glaser changed 'understanding' to 'workability')

**Generality:** The theory must be sufficiently general to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations within the substantive area, not to just a specific type of situation.

**Control:** The theory must allow the user partial control over the structure and process of daily situations as they change through time. (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 237)

Consequently, the researcher attempts to ensure that these criteria have been achieved with the people who are going to use the theory, but *not necessarily with those who provided the raw data* (emphasis added). Yet there are examples in the empirical literature of studies that claim to be using a GT method, but have asked the actual research participants to comment on the criteria (see, for example, Barker *et al.* 1999, Weust & Berman 2002, Cutcliffe 2004). Further, these authors argue that this enhanced the credibility of the findings. There is also a large (and growing) literature on establishing the credibility of qualitative research findings. Nolan and Behi (1995) maintain that all criteria developed

for use in qualitative studies, to a greater or lesser extent, rely on presenting the results to those who were studied (i.e. the research participants who supplied the raw data) and asking them to say whether they agree with them. There is a substantial literature that supports this statement, with many authors advocating that the researcher return to the participants in order to help establish the authenticity the research findings (Turner 1981, Lincoln & Guba 1985, Brink 1991, Ashworth 1993, Sandelowski 1993, 1998, Leininger 1994, Kvale 1995, Hall & Callery 2001, Cutcliffe & McKenna 2002).

The question here is: if a researcher who claims to be using a GT method, returns to the *actual research participants* to establish the credibility of the theory, have they moved beyond the methodological boundaries of GT? Perhaps the nature of the sample and focus of the research may shed some light on this. For example, GT research in nursing is concerned with uncovering the basic psychosocial processes in nursing/health care situations, and often nurses will provide the data. Consequently, in seeking to explain these basic psychosocial processes, the resulting theory needs to have 'fit and grab' for *nurses*. In this instance, returning to the participants to establish the credibility of the theory would be appropriate, and could be considered an example of modifying/adapting and subsequently developing GT methodology.

### Identifying a 'basic psychosocial process'

Glaser (1978) was clear that a GT should identify a basic social process (BSP). This term was later amended in his 1998 'Doing Grounded Theory' work to include psychosocial processes. Yet, even a cursory examination of the related empirical literature indicates that many studies that claim to be using a GT method do not identify a BSP. For example, in my GT study of hope inspiration in terminally ill HIV clients (Cutcliffe 1995), I failed to identify a BSP. Glaser's insistence once more begs the question: if a study claiming to use a GT method does not identify a BSP, is it accurate to describe it as a GT study? The outcome of a GT study should be a core variable, the parsimonious conceptual element that explains how participants resolve their key social/psychosocial problem. Further, a BSP needs to be linked to the core variable and should have temporal dimensions or stages. There should be two or more clear emergent stages and these should differentiate and account for variations in the pattern of behaviour (Glaser 1978). Glaser's view is that a process is something that occurs and involves change over time, and the variations over time in the BSP can be explained by the stages. Without such stages, the researcher is unable to integrate

fully the conceptual elements (e.g. categories, properties) within the BSP.

Remembering the purpose of a GT study should help the researcher to identify a BSP. Glaser (1992 p. 5) declared that 'GT allows the relevant social organization and social or psychological organization of the people studied to be discovered, to emerge – in their perspective'. When undertaking a GT study, researchers should examine and consider 'Do the findings in my study explain the social or psychosocial organization of the people; do they identify and conceptualize the basic processes that these people use to resolve their key problem?' Without this, the theory remains underdeveloped. The fit and grab are diminished, and its workability is limited if not thwarted. As Glaser (2001, p. 59) remarks:

The emergent theory I develop is, in any case, transitory. New dimensions revealed through further comparisons will alter it.

Without the identification of a BSP, the theory is so underdeveloped as to lack a vital component and thus cannot be considered to be theoretically robust. Consequently, to adapt the methodology so that the researcher fails to identify a BSP is to move the methodology beyond the limits or boundaries and thus produce some method that should not be regarded as GT.

### Emerging vs. forcing

In response to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) 'Basics of Qualitative Research', Glaser (1992) wrote his 1992 book 'The Basics of Grounded Theory: Emerging versus Forcing'. The fundamental methodological difference between emerging and forcing was one of the principal drivers that led to significant differences of opinion between Glaser and Strauss, and led Glaser to describe the 'version' of GT described in 'Basics of Qualitative Research' (Strauss & Corbin 1990) as 'Full Conceptual Description'. In order to understand fully the differences between Glaserian GT and FCD a researcher is encouraged to access Glaser's (1992) work before starting their study. I offer a brief synopsis below, however, of the key issues involved, and reiterate Glaser's central premise that, if a researcher moves into 'forcing' then they have adapted Glaserian GT into a methodological hybrid of 'Full Conceptual Description'.

Glaser (2001) wrote at length of the difficulties that arise when a researcher attempts to bring preconceived ideas to a new study and subsequently forces these on the data. The alternative, to approach without a formed idea, can feel scary and insecure. Yet, if one has confidence in oneself and the method, approaching a study from a position of unknowing gives openness and life to a concept or idea (Glaser 2001).

However, not knowing in the initial stages can lead to anxiety, regression and even confusion. As Glaser (2001, p. 72) stated, 'It is hard to tolerate when the normative is so close. But also remember that emergence happens fast'.

To help deal with the attraction of a formed idea, Glaser (2001) suggested that the answer resides in the GT method – staying open and allowing the theory to emerge. By trusting the data, engaging in further comparison, allowing one's creativity to be engaged, and facilitating the accessing and application of tacit knowledge (Altheide & Johnson 1994, Cutcliffe 2003), the real value and reward of GT is actualized. Hall and Callery (2001) agree, and suggest that an intuitive approach to data analysis has been lost by equating rigor with imposing the conditional matrices synonymous with FCD.

Grounded theorists need to ask 'neutral' questions when beginning to code the data. This will help them avoid forcing, and will allow concepts to emerge and findings to have relevance (Glaser 1992). In his 1978 work, 'Theoretical Sensitivity', Glaser identified a number of neutral questions: 'What is this data a study of?', 'What category or what property of what category does this incident indicate?', 'What is actually happening in the data?' and 'What is the basic social psychological process or social structural process that processes the main problem that makes life viable in the action scene?' At the preliminary stage of data coding, more structured or closed questions are likely indicate forcing. There are clear implications for the credibility of the emerging theory if one begins with this openness; with this 'not knowing'. When allowing the concepts and categories to emerge from the data, the researcher actively avoids allegations of imposing their own agenda or 'pet theory' on the data (Wilson & Hutchinson 1996). In keeping with the tenets of GT, additional questions to be asked of the data during coding will emerge from previous 'open' coding and the need to stay free from forcing is paramount. Forcing in the early stages of Glaserian GT analysis will undermine methodological rigor and move the method beyond the boundaries of Glaserian GT, thus producing something that should not be regarded as Glaserian GT.

### Conclusion

It is entirely in keeping with the founding principles of GT that development and modification should occur. Nevertheless, the key question remains: when does modification or adaptation change the method into a hybrid, with QDA or into some other methodological variant that can no longer be accurately identified as Glaserian GT? Following discussions and correspondence with Professor Glaser, I have identified five key methodological issues that commonly give rise to

### What is already known about this topic

- Grounded theory is a well-established research method that is often used in nursing and related studies.
- Since the emergence of the debate around Straussian/Glaserian versions of grounded theory, the Straussian position has been well covered in the methodological literature.
- This has resulted in a disproportionate emphasis on and familiarity with Strauss and Corbin's version of grounded theory.

### What this paper adds

- Illustration of where adapting, modifying or developing grounded theory methods may move beyond the original methodological boundaries.
- Methodological precision and clarity for researchers who wish to understand and/or use 'Glaserian' grounded theory.
- Facilitation of a more balanced debate by redressing the over-emphasis on the Straussian version of grounded theory.

adaptation and/or modification of Glaserian GT. Some methodological transgressions within GT are so consequential that it would be inaccurate to term the resulting method Glaserian GT at all. Instead, such studies are more accurately thought of as a form of QDA. Such transgressions include lack of evidence of conceptualization; absence of a basic psychosocial process; and a move from 'emerging' to 'forcing'. Other methodological adaptations of GT, such as beginning the study with more than a general wonderment and broadening the approaches to establishing the credibility of the theory, are more in keeping with Glaser and Strauss (1967) position on the evolution of the method. Even then, it is necessary to delineate such methods from 'pure' Glaserian GT, and it would be prudent and methodologically accurate to describe the result as 'modified' GT.

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