Grounded Theory and Credibility

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Abstract

Grounded theory is a method of theory construction in which researchers systematically develop a theory from the collected data. This method is the most widely claimed qualitative method yet questions have arisen about these claims as well as about its epistemological assumptions and methods of knowledge production. These questions have undermined the credibility of the method and veiled its innovative potential. We show why several major epistemological criticisms of the early versions of the method had merit but dismissal of the method did not. Credibility issues about grounded theory extend to research practice and encompass current debates in qualitative inquiry. Thus, we look at data collection and offer ideas for shaping it to enhance theory construction. We next show how grounded theory already contained underused strategies that increase both its methodological power and the credibility of the subsequent analysis. In particular, we illustrate how to code for actions and conduct line-by-line initial coding. We also explicate the benefits of theoretical sampling. Grounded theorists who take up the directions we outline here will increase the credibility of their studies and simultaneously become more impervious to being judged by the criteria of another form of inquiry.

Keywords:

grounded theory, constructivism, credibility, epistemology, data collection.

Grounded Theory and Credibility

Grounded theory is a method of qualitative inquiry in which researchers develop inductive theoretical analyses from their collected data and subsequently gather further data to check these analyses. The purpose of grounded theory is theory construction, rather than description or application of existing theories. Hence, grounded theorists pursue developing their analytic categories and use data in service of constructing these categories (Charmaz, 2010). The originators of this method, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967), first argued that qualitative research could be used for theory construction at a time when qualitative research was imperilled. Yet they also articulated a powerful rationale for legitimizing conducting inductive qualitative research that inspired numerous scholars who neither understood the logic of grounded theory nor how to use it.

Several variants of grounded theory exist but all share a set of methodological strategies. Grounded theorists engage in data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process that uses comparative methods. They compare data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with tentative categories, and categories with categories. This method fosters analyzing actions and processes rather than themes and topics. Grounded theorists code their data for actions and study how these actions might contribute to fundamental processes occurring in the research site or in the research participants' lives. Through comparing data with codes and codes with codes, grounded theorists can decide which codes to treat and test as tentative theoretical categories. A defining strategy of grounded theory is theoretical sampling, which means sampling for developing the properties of a tentative category, not for ensuring representation of a sample of people with a particular demographic characteristic. Theoretical sampling involves gathering new data to check hunches and to confirm that the properties of the grounded theorist's theoretical category are filled out. Researchers may also use it to define variation in a studied process or phenomenon or to establish the boundaries of a theoretical category. When these properties are saturated with data, the grounded theorist ends data collection and integrates the analysis.

A contemporary version of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory, adopts the methodological strategies above but also takes into account methodological developments in qualitative inquiry over the past 50 years. As a result, constructivist grounded theory takes a different stance toward the research process and product than earlier grounded theorists had adopted. We outline the constructivist stance here and take it up in more detail in the following sections. Earlier grounded theorists tended to treat inquiry as separate from its social conditions. In contrast, constructivist grounded theorists view research as occurring within specific social conditions and thus attempt to learn how these conditions influence their studies. This approach leads constructivist grounded theorists to locate themselves within

inquiry whereas earlier grounded theorists' stance assumed they remained neutral observers outside of inquiry. Constructivists also locate themselves inside inquiry to get as close to the studied phenomenon as possible. While gaining a close view, constructivists aim to discern how participants' meanings and actions may be connected to larger social structures and discourses of which they may be unaware. Earlier grounded theorists seldom made such links.

Constructivist grounded theorists view data as constructed, not simply out there in the world waiting to be discovered and gathered. Similarly constructivists assume that conducting and writing research flows from views and values. These endeavors are not neutral activities. In this view, research products are not objective reports. Instead, researchers interpret findings. Earlier grounded theorists aimed to find patterns in social life and to create abstract generalizations that explain them. This quest for abstract generalization minimizes understanding difference and variation in the research site or among the research participants that constructivists aspire to learn.

In this chapter, we begin by examining major epistemological debates and methodological issues in critiques of grounded theory that raise questions about its credibility, but are not limited to the grounded theory method. As Karen Henwood (Charmaz and Henwood, 2007; Henwood and Pigeon, 2003) observes, grounded theory provides a useful nodal point around which researchers can debate contemporary issues in qualitative research. Specifically, we show how naive methodological claims, contested definitions of the grounded theory method, and unexamined epistemological assumptions have led to methodological misunderstandings that hide the power and innovative potential of grounded theory and undermine its credibility. Similar issues have arisen in other forms of inductive qualitative inquiry, albeit seldom as overtly (but see Wacquant, 2002). Our exploration of credibility emphasizes data collection, an area that many grounded theorists have treated as unproblematic, and shows how the logic of grounded theory can advance both data collection and analysis. We briefly discuss credibility in data analysis and theory construction, and conclude with reflections about establishing credibility.

We propose that constructivist grounded theory offers researchers a sound epistemology and makes using grounded theory strategies accessible. Unlike earlier versions of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory acknowledges the influence of the researcher on the research process, accepts the notion of multiple realities, emphasizes reflexivity, and rejects assumptions that researchers should and could set aside their prior knowledge to develop new theories. Ironically, major criticisms questioning the credibility of grounded theory *as a method* have been based on its early statements of over 40 years ago, and on generalizations about what constitutes the method derived from readings of how early proponents have used it (Burowoy et al., 1991; Wacquant, 2002). These criticisms miss seeing that researchers can use grounded theory methodological strategies without accepting the epistemological assumptions of earlier versions of the method.

Methodological Claims, Knowledge Production, and Credibility

Grounded theory, or more correctly the grounded theory method (GTM), is far and away the most widely *claimed* qualitative method in recent and current sociological and social research literature (see, for example, Titscher et al., 2000). However, some grounds for scepticism have arisen that qualify what this level of popularity and these widespread claims actually mean. Credibility issues concerning methodological claims and knowledge production arise in three forms:

1. The highly misleading or questionable claims that many authors have made that they used GTM when they conducted a qualitative study. Many journal editors and research assessors view such claims with suspicion, since all too often these assertions are at best based on only a passing familiarity and adoption of the method; and at worst, amount to nothing more than an artifice, masking an ill-conceived and ill-prepared project.
2. The way GTM has developed in the hands of its two progenitors – Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. GTM itself originated in their three key texts published 1965–1968, particularly *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). These founding texts resulted from a genuine collaborative effort, but subsequent developments led to a major rift between them by the early 1990s. As a result, some GTM researchers have been more concerned with upholding one specific form of the method over the other than with stressing the outcome and value of the research itself and thus add to the misgivings of editors and research assessors already mentioned.
3. The 'fairy-tale' (Wacquant 2002, p. 1481) quality of early grounded theory epistemology, in which theories and concepts almost magically emerged from data. Many GTM users offer nothing more than mantra-like incantations along the lines of 'the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 12), and thus leave the method and its adherents open to the sort of ridicule that Wacquant intimates.

Taken together, these three issues have left GTM open to the accusation that the method lacks credibility, precision, and coherence. In our contributions to GTM, however, we have intended to demonstrate that the method is credible, rigorous, and highly practical because it is usable and produces valuable outcomes.

We will first take up the three areas of concern – in reverse order – to explain how these misconceptions and ambiguities derive from a partial or mistaken appreciation of the truly innovative characteristics of GTM. We will then demonstrate several ways in which the method can be employed, and, in so doing, will offer what we consider to be a clear and firm basis for the method that will prove useful both for researchers and those charged with assessing research proposals or publications which claim to employ GTM.

Whether or not Glaser and Strauss intended it, scholars took the initial formulations of GTM, and their subsequent individual versions of it, to imply that researchers discover truth rather than create it (Rorty, 1989). This reading of GTM placed it firmly in the positivist camp, but with the added twist that conceptual development and theoretical discovery appear to be the result of a process of emergence from the data, with the researcher acting in a passive or, at most, facilitative manner. Many of the actual statements in Glaser and Strauss's original monograph are, in fact, far more nuanced. For instance '[T]he sociologist should also be sufficiently *theoretically sensitive* so that he can conceptualize and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 46; stress in the original), but the key words picked up by many researchers, and also continually quoted by Glaser himself, amount to the claim that 'theory emerges from the data'. When reading *Discovery*, it is understandable why this interpretation held sway: the previous page offers a somewhat ambiguous sentence that ends with the claim that 'data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory' (emphasis in the original, p. 45). Strauss reinforces this idea in his later work, with Juliet Corbin:

> A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind (unless his or her purpose is to elaborate and extend existing theory). Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12)

This view of the researcher as passive is exacerbated and extended with the image of GTM as research that takes place in a vacuum; Glaser (1998; 2003) enjoins researchers not to engage with the literature and not to formulate research questions or be guided by existing models or theories. Again several specific statements in this regard are somewhat more complex, but they have often been taken as a rationale for avoiding some of the time-consuming and detailed aspects of planning a research project. Hence, this rationale leads to judgments that claiming to use GTM is often simply an excuse for shirking necessary but somewhat mundane tasks of articulating a research question or hypothesis, and completing an initial literature review.

Not only some of GTM's harshest critics, but also others who claim to use it, see beyond this combination of epistemological make-believe and cognitive miasma. De Vreede et al.'s (1998) paper exemplifies this problem. The authors offer their version of the GTM mantra: 'This approach [GTM] aims to develop inductively derived grounded theories about a phenomenon. A grounded theory is not built *a priori*; rather, it emerges during study as data collection, analysis, and theory development occur in parallel' (1998, p. 205). De Vreede et al. state that the feat of cognitive plumbing – turning off the tap of prior knowledge – is simply an unproblematic procedure, as is the emergence of theory from collected data. In another instance, a surprising misuse of grounded theory became evident during a conference discussion.

An author happened to mention that the earlier versions of his paper had not specified any method, and that the journal editor suggested that since the approach was non-quantitative to retro-fit GTM to the paper, particularly since 'many qualitative researchers in IS [Information Systems] have to conduct and publish their research within the context of a positivist orthodoxy in North America ... and thus, the scientific (or perhaps scientistic) language of GTM is VERY valuable to them' (see Bryant, 2002).

So these two features of GTM were not specifically problematic, and indeed articulating them in this fashion actually helped them in getting published. The outcome may have occurred in part because the editors themselves did not have any great familiarity with GTM, something that would be less likely now, 10 years later.

This continuing incoherence in researchers' understanding of the method persisted in part as a result of the split between Strauss and Glaser in the 1990s. Researchers spent more energy in discussing the nature of the disagreement, and clarifying allegiance to either the Straussian or Glaserian version of the method, than in responding to critics from outside the two main camps. Researchers intent on using GTM do not need to engage with all the aspects of this disagreement, but they should at least be aware of it when discussing their use of the method and referring to the GTM literature.[1]

Glaser's (1992) invective directed at Strauss marked the split between them. Despite Glaser's rancor, the central points of his critique are well founded. Perhaps ironically, the popularity of the method dates precisely from the publication of Strauss's (1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; 1998) books separately and with Corbin (Titscher et al., 2000; Reichertz, 2007). Yet, with Strauss's death in 1996, Glaser has positioned himself as the voice of Classic GT, and his writings in the past 20 years offer his view of what the method ought to be.

To turn to the third of the above issues, the degree of misapprehension by some editors and research assessors also owes something to the large number of people who make questionable claims to use GTM. Given the split between the Straussian and Glaserian versions of GTM, in some cases questioning such assertions may actually be an argument centered on distinctions arising between these versions. Glaser certainly has contended that Strauss and Corbin's version no longer falls under the heading of GTM. But authors' claims to be using GTM when they simply use a limited and often conceptually pedestrian form of coding are far more widespread. Such authors fail to offer any conceptual development or theoretical insight. Thus, some commentators and critics challenge: where's the *theory* in grounded theory?

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[1]The article by Smit and Bryant (2000) makes this point, and various chapters in Bryant and Charmaz (2007) point to the relevant literature.

This credibility gap concerning GTM became increasingly evident in the 1990s and, in some respects, still persists in some fields. In the light of all these issues, the truly innovative features of GTM can all too easily be forgotten. Fortunately in recent years sufficiently robust responses to the above issues ensure not only that the popularity of the method will continue, but that it can do so from a far stronger foundation. What is now often seen as the *constructivist* form of GTM, developed in the 1990s, was much more a case of a reinterpretation or restating of the principles of the method than a new formulation. The constructivist project has been further developed with the articulation of the pragmatist thread that runs through the method (Bryant, 2009; Charmaz, 2008).

Methodological Developments and Constructivist GTM

It is a truism that researchers must articulate their methodology and methodological practices in order to confirm an acceptable degree of methodological robustness and clarification of their research approach. This requirement applies particularly to PhD proposals, research proposals and publications. For those adopting qualitative approaches, meeting it can be problematic: indeed one of the key motivations in developing GTM was to provide a firm basis for qualitative research.

Unfortunately neither Strauss nor Glaser – either separately or in concert – ever offered a sustained engagement with the epistemological and methodological developments that can conveniently be dated from the appearance of Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962; 2nd edition 1970). The result has been that throughout the 1980s and 1990s grounded theorists were open to attack from two sides. The orthodox, quantitatively oriented position regarded GTM as merely a veneer for largely descriptive, impressionistic work that at best simply laid the groundwork for 'real' research, preferably expressed in statistical terms. Simultaneously, interpretivists or constructivists challenged positivist orthodox, as Rorty's statement neatly encapsulated: truth is 'made' rather than 'discovered'. In response, grounded theorists, with their data-oriented mantra, simply remained mute.

We now respond to these problems by addressing, in turn, three issues:

1. Credible data
2. Analytic credibility
3. Theoretical credibility.

Credible Data

Epistemological and methodological developments inform the concrete practices of constructivist grounded theorists. We turn now to look at how data collecting,

coding, and theoretical sampling shape grounded theory practice and to offer ideas about how grounded theorists and other qualitative researchers might use them to improve their studies.

The credibility of grounded theory starts from the ground up. The quality and sufficiency of the data for accomplishing the research goals matter. What stands as solid and sufficient data is currently contested throughout qualitative inquiry and also may be questioned in quantitative research. In the past, questions have arisen about the amount, depth, and quality (i.e., accuracy) of data in GTM as well as of the methods invoked for obtaining them. These questions eclipsed the untapped strengths of grounded theory for data collection.

GTM may be used with varied types of data including ethnographic materials, documents, and interviews, although interview data is the most common data collection method. Constructivist GTM answers earlier questions about credible data collection and offers directions for sharpening data collection that researchers have not yet fully explored, much less explicated. Constructivist GTM emphasizes choosing data collection methods that fit the research question and gathering sufficient data to construct a credible analysis to fulfill the research goals.

The hypothetical plausibility of specific data for theory construction interests grounded theorists more than ascertaining the complete accuracy of, say, a field note or interview statement. Glaser (2002) positions his version of grounded theory against the quest for 'worrisome accuracy' of other qualitative approaches. He emphasizes the 'transcending abstraction' (p. 3) of grounded theory categories and argues that the comparative process across many cases corrects such inaccuracies as caused by the influence of the researcher (p. 47). We agree that having many cases increases accuracy and enhances credibility. Yet Glaser (1978; 2001) and Stern (1985; 1991) defend small samples when they believe their data has saturated the properties of a theoretical category. But what makes a category theoretical? When is a category saturated? These questions have not been entirely resolved. Meanwhile, other researchers have adopted Glaser's and Stern's position to shortcut and shortchange data collection, and thus undermine the credibility of grounded theory.

Similarly, several GTM proponents' stance toward data collection has undermined the credibility of the method. GTM favors attending to data analysis more than examining data collection techniques. Glaser's (see, for example, 2002) slogan, 'All is data,' reinforces earlier views that grounded theorists were sloppy about data collection (Lofland and Lofland, 1984), as does his continued insistence on note-taking rather than transcribing interview data. The constructivist revision of grounded theory, however, attends to gathering detailed data and treats both data and data collection as located in temporal, spatial, social and situational conditions. Constructivists also take into account both researchers' and research participants' starting points and standpoints, and remain alert to how and when these shift during inquiry. Thus for constructivists, data do not simply reside in an external world but instead reflect the particular conditions of its production. This constructivist

view of data encourages locating the data and analysis in these conditions. In contrast, Glaser treats data collection as unproblematic and aims for generalizations that transcend specific conditions.

We focus on interviewing here because of its predominance and our experience in using it. Interviews are, of course, retrospective accounts that often explain and justify behavior. Yet they may also be special social spaces in which research participants can reflect on the past and link it to the present and future in new ways. An interview is a performance, whether stories tumble out or are strategically calculated and enacted, but that does not disqualify interviews from providing rich data and sparking analytic insights (see Miller and Glassner, Gubrium and Holstein, and Riessman, this volume). An interviewer's questions may frame the research participant's performance and seem to make the co-construction of data explicit. However, much interaction and interpretation may proceed without words.

Becoming fascinated by people, their situations, and stories – and unflinching should their stories include tales of hardship, loss, or seeming moral transgression – encourages detailed responses and reflections. Kathy Charmaz's first interview with Karen, a 46-year-old woman, illustrates what may occur during an interview (see Figure 16.1). Karen viewed her devastating neck injury as leading to multiple health problems that included chronic fatigue syndrome and possible fibromyalgia. Note how a simple question, 'Were you married at the time then when your first accident occurred in '93', produced an elaborate response in Figure 16.1.

Karen's uninterrupted statement actually went on for three single-spaced pages when she paused and Kathy again asked an informational question for clarification. Clearly, Karen was open about her life, articulate about describing it, and found that the interview gave her space and time to tell her story – and to establish a view of the events that comprise it. Yet, for her, those events were unsettling and unsettled. Karen was dealing with identity questions, confirming her ex-husband's hidden identity, and was grappling with nagging questions about whom she might be.

The amount of non-stop detail belies the substantial non-verbal interaction that occurred and thus the co-construction of the interview. The content of this non-verbal interaction also challenges common assumptions about the researcher and participant's relative power to control the interview. Participants may have stories they want to tell and tales that they wish to sidestep or on which to tread softly.[2] Thus, they may exert control over the content of the interview – and the situation by avoiding areas that might elicit probing questions.

Simultaneously, a 'silent dialogue' (Olesen and Whittaker, 1968) ensues about the *interview* itself. This dialogue particularly arises when: (1) sensitive topics arise during the interview, (2) the interviewee believes that the interviewer might define him

[2]Social scientists (Charmaz, 2009b; Polkinghorne, 1997) have attended to silences in the interviewee's story, but examining Karen's interview brings the interviewer's seeming silence into focus, for the conversation includes more than words alone.

Examples of Codes	Initial Narrative Data to be Coded
	K: Were you married at the time then when your first accident occurred in '93?
Describing life	Yes, I was living in Springview and I was married to my third husband and we lived on a ranchette with a pasture, with farm animals, and a garden, and country life, pool, gym, it was very nice, and I was out there for six and a half years. My ex-husband had kind of a double life going on as it turns out; he would disappear for two or three days at a time which became increasingly worse. He had colitis…part of it was his colitis but part of it, [as] it turned out was a hidden cocaine addiction so I couldn't continue to–in my chronic pain condition and his behavior, just kept me so stressed out where I couldn't function emotionally and physically to a point. That's why I say my survival was at stake…it hurt me. And there was no support there for my pain issue. …I always had to be the one who had to be strong because he'd be gone on these disappearing things and then somebody had to hold down the fort and keep everything going when this would happen. And then sometimes it would take him a week to recover because whatever he was doing would cause his colitis to flare up, so I was always forced to be in the position of the emotional anchor in the family and it was so exhausting to me and again I had to keep escalating that pain medication then to continue on and normally, then, at the time the disk was fully herniated so I was being treated for chronic pain but there was still some questions to the validity of my pain factor whether it was emotionally induced or physically and some question as to whether it was a lot psychological, that I was perhaps, you know, had a painful addiction and was just self-medicating.
Evaluating living situation	
Telling the time length	
Living with ex-husband's double life	
Disappearing husband	
Escalating disappearances	
Accounting for husband's disappearances	
Defining hidden addiction	
Alluding to limits for self-explaining distress	
Being unable to function	
Disintegrating self	
Questioning survival of self/of way of life	
Feeling hurt/betrayed	
Wanting husband's support for *her* pain	
Carrying doubled responsibilities	
Expressing resentments (in tone of voice)	
Keeping life (family and business) together	
Detailing ex-husband's lapses	
Timing then husband's recovery/ explaining his complicating illness	
Feeling forced to be family emotional anchor	
Being exhausted	
Feeling forced to escalate pain meds	
Seeing pain meds as allowing a normal life	
Explaining extent of injury	
Externalizing questions about pain	
Revealing ambiguous cause of pain–physical and/or psychological	
Questioning the possibility of addiction	
Raising the specter of self over-medicating	
Disclosing a plausible identity	
Overlapping emotional and psychological pain	Most of this data excerpt appeared in Charmaz, 2008, p. 165.

FIGURE 16.1 *Initial grounded theory coding*

or her negatively,[3] or (3) the interviewer reveals signs of being disturbed about or disinterested in the content of the interview. At these points, the researcher and research participant may tacitly construct and negotiate meanings that influence what can and will be said. Kathy accounts for what happened in the following way:

> I was observing Karen and she was observing me – closely. I encouraged her to talk and she monitored my responses to her disclosures all along the way. As she began to reveal concerns about her use of prescription drugs, her expression and tone changed. Despite her non-stop story, Karen's face became impassive with her steady gaze focused on me and her voice took on a measured, matter-of-fact tone. I had the distinct feeling that she was gauging how I would view her and how much she could safely reveal.

From a grounded theory standpoint, asking few rather than many interview questions allows the interviewee to tell her story without the researcher preconceiving the content, or, for that matter, the direction the interview will take. Such a strategy is particularly useful during early interviews but may change as the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and analysis.

Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes going into emergent phenomena and defining their properties. By taking a phenomenon apart, researchers can build explicit 'What' and 'How' questions into the data collection, as other qualitative researchers do (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). Grounded theorists, however, can use these questions to begin to shape a subsequent theoretical analysis. These questions elicit content that becomes the grist of the analysis and lead toward explicating processes. The question below gets at the properties of surrendering as well as this interviewee's meanings of it. When the researcher thinks analytically while interviewing, the lines blur between what constitutes data collection and what constitutes analysis. And thus here credibility is not simply a property of the data as separate from the *analysis*.

In addition to preparing an interviewee for questions that call for detailing meanings, the pacing and tone of a direct 'What' or 'How' question does much to defuse the interviewee's possible interpretation of the following question as confrontational.

Sara: ...But, fortunately, I had the experience of at some point surrendering, you know.

Interviewer: **What does that mean to you, surrendering?**

Sara: It means that I don't have, I can't control it and to look at what it has to teach me. Just, you know, let it tell me what it needs to tell me. You know, that willingness and that acceptance.

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[3]This problem increases when, unlike Karen, interviewees have some memory loss, as did a number of Charmaz's.

In an interview on health narratives in schools, Lisa M. Perhamus's (2009) 'How' question (below) not only elicits the sequence of events following students' classroom disruptions, but also contributes to illuminating the process of trying to re-establish classroom control.

> Linda, a Hispanic kindergarten teacher at Wedgewood, talked about some of the personal tolls teaching can have.
>
> **Interviewer:** **And how does that [behavior problems] affect you as a teacher?**
>
> **Linda:** It drains me. It does. Because the amount of time that I have to take, when you've got a class of twenty-one kids and you have one or even two ... boys or girls, who are off and you know in part that they can't control it and this is what you've been told that they can't control it, and then they're off, and then I have to watch ... for the well-being of my other kids or in the situation where the child just doesn't want to do his work and he'll get up and make a spectacle moving around the room. I have to stop, redirect him, which takes attention away from everybody else, and it's just, it's draining and it's not fair to the other kids. (p. 110)

GTM made the iterative practice of moving back and forth between data and analysis a common strategy in inductive qualitative inquiry. Starting with 'What' and 'How' questions brings an analytic edge to the data collection, even in the very early stages of research, and maintaining the grounded theory emphasis on process helps the researcher to link events that otherwise might seem disparate. Inquiring about the person's circumstances, views, and priorities illuminates data about social locations, standpoints, and situations. Adding 'When' questions moves the data collection toward specifying conditions under which the studied phenomenon or process occurs or changes. Similarly, asking questions about sequence of actions gets at process and implications as well as uncovering specific meanings and actions. Whatever questions are asked, it is also important to study the sequences given in talk as the research participant tells his or her story (Silverman, 2007).

Generally, grounded theorists stick closely to patterns that they define in their data and treat as categories. From a constructivist perspective, such patterns develop as grounded theorists grapple with interpreting their data.

Analytic Credibility

The strength of grounded theory resides in its strategies for analyzing data but researchers have not taken full advantage of these strategies. Using explicit codes

derives from grounded theory and has become part of qualitative inquiry. Many researchers code their data and believe that they are using grounded theory strategies to do it. However, grounded theory coding differs from other types of coding because it codes for actions, invokes comparative methods, and discerns meanings through studying actions and events. We compare bits of data within the same data such as an interview, between different pieces of data, and begin inductive analysis.

Grounded theory coding consists of at least two sequential types: an initial coding, in which researchers attempt to be open to defining whatever they see happening in fragments of data, and a focused coding that uses the most frequent and significant initial codes. The kind of data matters here. Researchers may prefer coding incidents or paragraphs with ethnographic data but use line-by-line coding with early intensive interviews and narratives. Line-by-line coding is a heuristic device to prompt the researcher to study each line of data and begin to gain a conceptual handle on them. Completing initial coding as quickly as possible fosters spontaneity and fresh ideas.

Using gerunds is pivotal in grounded theory coding. Gerunds move the analysis forward. A gerund is the noun form of the verb such as 'defining,' 'experiencing,' or 'questioning.' Conducting line-by-line coding with gerunds helps to capture, crystallize, and connect fragments of data – and thus to see processes. Gerunds help the researcher to define what is happening in the data, identify the theoretical direction implicit or explicit in the code, and discern lines of an emerging story in the data. Using gerunds is difficult at first for English-speakers who think in structural terms of topics and themes, not in processual terms, but practice builds speed.

Observe that the codes in the figure reflect different levels of abstraction. The idea of a 'disintegrating self' is more abstract than the concrete interview statement. Is this legitimate? Yes, because the researcher tests the code against other data and writes memos explicating the comparisons involved in these tests. If the code does not hold up as a tentative conceptual category then the researcher drops it and pursues codes that do. Early coding allows time to ask analytic questions about the code and data that emerge from the material at hand, not from a preconceived coding framework. In this case, we could compare the data and code against other interview statements and ask questions such as:

- What are the properties of this self?
- How, when, and to what extent are these properties discernible?
- To whom?
- With which consequences?
- What happens when they are taken as real and discernible to certain key actors but not to others?
- How, if at all, is this code related to other codes?
- What kind of additional data do I need to explore this code?

Are the codes in Figure 16.1 the most fruitful for developing a grounded theory? Not necessarily. Another researcher from different perspectives, social locations, and situations might come up with more compelling codes. If we took experiencing a disintegrating self as a tentative category, we might ask how it is related to other codes such as 'questioning survival of self' and 'feeling forced to be family emotional anchor.' The latter might contribute to the former and both may contribute to experiencing a disintegrating self. Are these the only way to use these codes? Not at all. Other analytic directions could include reconstructing the past, questioning identity, accounting for and to self, or the properties and process of constructing disclosure and myriad additional possibilities depending on the relationship of the viewer to the viewed. Similarly, different researchers may develop dissimilar lines of coding of the same data, given their theoretical sensitivities and substantive interests.

Constructivist grounded theorists view coding as emergent and interactive. Therefore, coding has novel properties that draw on but are not wholly determined by the researcher's interests, standpoints, and relative and changing positions during data collection and analysis. A quest for inter-coder reliability does not make sense but a test of the robustness and usefulness of codes through comparative analysis does. Grounded theorists establish credibility by the strength of both the analytic concepts and claims and the evidence to support them.

Theoretical Credibility

Analytic credibility in the research process leads to theoretical credibility of the developed concepts. A major strength – and largely untapped potential – of grounded theory resides in theoretical sampling. Researchers use this form of later sampling to check and fill out the properties of their tentative categories, not to increase representativeness of their initial sample. In the excerpt below, Kathy Charmaz had already developed categories situating the self in time: the past, present, and future. Here, both the elusiveness of the category and her lengthy acquaintance with the interviewee influence taking an active role in shaping the conversation to pursue questions that pertained to her category. How and when a grounded theorist probes for meaning may change as both the relationship with a respondent and the iterative process of inquiry develop.

> I followed up on an earlier conversation about locating oneself in time. I asked her where she now located herself in time. Note how I follow her statements and return to key points that she raised.
>
> **Patricia**: I'm in the present.
>
> **Kathy**: You're in the present.
>
> **Patricia**: Oh yeah.

Kathy: And that's a change, isn't it?

Patricia: Where was I before?

Kathy: In the future.

Patricia: Future. Yeah. Yeah. [said thoughtfully] I'm right here – today.

Kathy: And has all this [what we had talked about in the preceding hour and a half] brought you to today?

Patricia: The whole process? Yeah.

Kathy: And what does tomorrow look like?

Patricia: Tomorrow's hopeful.

Kathy: How much of tomorrow do you see today with you [being] right here today?

Patricia: I see some. I can see quite a bit of tomorrow, I think. But what I see is that part...I feel like because I – I have much more control over my – my life today that tomorrow will be better as a direct result of how I live today. But I also know that there's a great deal of unknown in there. But I think there are a lot of unknowns for a lot of people, for everybody. And that I have the advantage over everybody else because I'll be able to deal with it.

Kathy: Hmm, that's interesting. And your today is, when your self is in today, what does that mean to you?

Patricia: When myself is in today, what I'm probably saying about today is, *today* – actually today. (Charmaz, 2009a, p. 54)

If researchers go back and forth to the same people or setting, they can use theoretical sampling to increase the depth and precision of their categories and their knowledge of the studied people and their situations. Because theoretical sampling often requires finesse, tacit negotiations may ensue about what researchers may ask and when they can ask it. It helps to listen to the stories participants want to tell before redirecting the conversation to ask questions pertaining to one's tentative theoretical categories. Such negotiations alleviate accusations of advocating the 'smash and grab' data collection approach that Dey (1999) wielded against Glaser and Strauss (1967) and that subsequently undermined the credibility of grounded theory data.

The analytic strength of grounded theory resides in how researchers use its iterative process. They can check hunches, follow leads in earlier data, select telling codes as tentative categories, develop categories, and demonstrate relationships between them. The point is to make these categories at once more abstract and useful by increasing their scope and interpretive power. Relatively few grounded theorists use theoretical sampling in a systematic way. Yet this strategy can help researchers to make their work distinctive and theoretically sophisticated and thus increase its credibility.

Summary and Future Prospects

- Grounded theory contains flexible methodological strategies that can be used effectively in contemporary qualitative inquiry.
- Methodological misunderstandings, questionable claims, and conflicting grounded theory approaches have undermined an extremely popular and innovative method.
- The constructivist revision of grounded theory resolves its earlier problematic epistemological assumptions and knowledge claims.
- Revisiting and revising areas of inquiry, such as collecting data that past GTM proponents had treated as unproblematic, fosters increasing the credibility of grounded theory practice and products.
- Adopting the strategies discussed above will not only increase the credibility of GTM studies but also decrease their likelihood of being judged by criteria imported from another form of inquiry.
- Explication of its methodological strategies makes the method more accessible and effective, thereby increasing its popularity and credibility.

In short, extending GTM strategies to explicitly address areas that early proponents of the method did not consider will contribute to the development of the method and to its credibility.

Questions

1 What is constructivist grounded theory?
2 How did misunderstandings about grounded theory contribute to questions about its credibility?
3 Which strengths of grounded theory increase its credibility?
4 What are the main features of grounded theory coding?
5 How does theoretical sampling differ from other forms of sampling?

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www.groundedtheory.com

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