**What is Grounded Theory?**

Grounded theory is a ‘method of discovery’, as the research process enables the researcher to find out exactly what is going on in social situations. This approach allows researchers to generate a theory of what they have found through observation interview or documentary analysis that is grounded in the data itself and reflects the social reality of the participants being studied.

One of the strengths of grounded theory is that it enables the viewpoint of the participant to be heard, as the process enables individuals’ lives to be considered holistically. Grounded theory is characterised by inductive reasoning a process whereby the researcher moves from making specific observations about the data to a position whereby broader generalizations and theories about the data start to emerge. Inductive reasoning involves looking for patterns in the data and making tentative hypotheses before a plausible theory that explains the data can emerge.

As a grounded theory method develops, patterns emerge during the data generation and analysis processes. These patterns may formulate a basic social process that encompasses how phenomena change over time. The researcher names the basic social process according to their interpretation of the data. Basic social processes link all of the data together and illustrate the patterns in the process. A basic social process is one type of core category that explains exactly what is going on in the data. Core categories emerge towards the end of the data collection and analysis process. Although a core category is clearly connected to other categories that emerge from the data, this is the central category that sums up the data.

**Grounded Theory is**

A *research method* that enables a researcher to

1. develop a *theory* which
2. offers an explanation about the main area of concern of the population being studied
3. by providing an explanation of how that concern is resolved or processed by the research subjects.

**The history of Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory first came to prominence in the mid 1960’s following the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research,* by two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967. The focus of the grounded theory method is to develop a theory which is achieved by a process of induction by gathering data that focuses on the primary concerns of those individuals being studied.

**Roles in Grounded Theory**

Charmaz (1995, 2002) identified a number of key features that all grounded theories have:

* Simultaneous collection and analysis of data
* Initial Coding – a process of creating analytic codes and categories developed from data and not by pre-existing conceptualisations (theoretical sensitivity)
* Theoretical sampling to refine categories
* Writing analytical memos as the stage between coding and writing
* Constant comparative analysis
* Integration of categories into a theoretical framework
* Theoretical sensitivity
* Intermediate coding/Axial Coding
* Identifying a core category

**Simultaneous Collection and Analysis of Data**

This is fundamental to the grounded theory research design and is characterised by a process of concurrent data generation or collection and analysis. To achieve this, the researcher generates or collects some data with an initially purposive sample. The data from these initial encounters is coded before more data is collected or generated. It is this concept that differentiates grounded theory from other types of research design that required the researcher to collect and subsequently analyse the data, or to construct a theoretical proposition and then collect data to test their hypothesis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Initial coding and categorization of data**

Initial or open coding is the first step of data analysis. It is a way of identifying important words, or groups of words, in the data and then labelling them accordingly. Here important words or groups of words (usually verbatim quotes from participants) are used as the label, while categories are groups of related codes (Holloway, 2008). Categories are referred to as theoretically saturated when new data analysis returns codes that only fit in existing categories, and these categories are sufficiently explained in terms of their properties and the dimensions.

**Theoretical sampling** Researchers use theoretical sampling to focus and feed their constant comparative analysis of the data. During this iterative process, it becomes apparent if more information is needed to saturate categories under development. To sample theoretically, the researcher makes a strategic decision about what or who will provide the most information-rich source of data to meet their analytical needs.

**Writing memos**

Memos are written records of a researcher’s thinking during the process of undertaking a grounded theory study. As such, they vary in subject, intensity, coherence, theoretical content and usefulness to the finished product. Memo writing is an ongoing activity for grounded theorists as memos are generated from the very early stages of planning a study until completion.

**Constant comparative analysis** Part of the process of concurrent data collection and analysis is the constant comparison of incident to incident, incident to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to categories. This is termed constant comparative analysis and is a process that continues until a grounded theory is fully integrated.

**Theoretical sensitivity**

Theoretical sensitivity is (Glaser and Strauss 1967) a two-part concept. Firstly, theoretical sensitivity is deeply personal; it reflects the researcher’s level of insight into both themselves and the area that they are researching. Secondly, theoretical sensitivity reflects a researchers intellectual history, the type of theory that they have read, absorbed and now use in their everyday thought. As a grounded theorist becomes immersed in the data, their level of theoretical sensitivity to analytical possibilities will increase.

**Intermediate coding/Axial Coding**

Intermediate coding is the second major stage of data analysis following on from initial coding. Here, the researcher moves between initial and intermediate coding during the process of concurrent data generation or collection and analysis, and the constant comparison of data. The researcher employs intermediate coding in two ways: firstly, to develop fully individual categories by connecting sub-categories and fully developing the range of properties and their dimensions; and, secondly, to link categories together. Initial coding fractures the data, while intermediate coding reconnects the data in ways that are conceptually much more abstract than would be produced by a thematic analysis. Axial coding is the most advanced form of intermediate coding (Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin 1990).

**Identifying a core category**

Developing categories through the process of intermediate coding will increase the level of conceptual analysis apparent in the developing grounded theory. At this time, the researcher may choose to select a core category that encapsulates and explains the grounded theory as a whole.

A grounded theory generally provides a comprehensive explanation of a process or scheme apparent in relation to particular phenomena. It is comprehensive because it includes variation rather than assuming there is a one-size-fits-all answer to a research question.

**This text has been taken and adapted from Chapter One Essentials of Grounded Theory**

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