Grounded theory refers simultaneously to a method of qualitative inquiry and the products of that inquiry. Like most discussions of grounded theory, this entry emphasizes the method of inquiry. As such, the grounded theory method consists of a set of systematic, but flexible, guidelines for conducting inductive qualitative inquiry aimed toward theory construction. This method focuses squarely on the analytic phases of research, although both data collection and analysis inform and shape each other and are conducted in tandem. The analytic strategies are inherently comparative and interactive; this method guides researchers to make systematic comparisons and to engage the data and emerging theory actively throughout the research process.

Grounded theory developed from the codification of the methods that its originators, sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967), used in their study of the social organization of dying in hospitals. Their pioneering book, The Discovery of Grounded Theory, set a new course for qualitative research in sociology and beyond and left a lasting imprint on both the grounded theory method and social scientific inquiry, in general.

The significance of Glaser and Strauss’s book must be placed in its historical context. Despite long-standing qualitative traditions largely at the University of Chicago and the impressive contributions of its faculty and students, qualitative research had waned by the early 1960s as sociologists and other social scientists increasingly turned to sophisticated quantitative methods. At that time, survey research was gaining dominance in sociology. As Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (2007) point out, survey research commanded funding, positions, and the development of research institutes while its proponents controlled departments, students, and major journals. A few doctoral departments had specialties in qualitative research and a small cadre of ethnographers published vibrant studies; nonetheless, qualitative research became increasingly marginalized in sociology.

Publication of the Discovery book stood as a methodological marker that countered the increasing hegemony of quantitative methods and changed the status of qualitative research. Glaser and Strauss challenged numerous sociological conventions of the day. They disputed the sharp divisions between data-collection and analysis phases of research. Throughout their book, Glaser and Strauss argued against the growing division between theory and research. They contended that the grand theory of mid-century scholars failed to explain empirical phenomena and the narrow empirical studies of quantitative researchers failed to generate theory. Moreover, Glaser and Strauss proposed that scholars could develop theory from qualitative research.

Not only did Glaser and Strauss put forth a powerful rhetorical statement about the place and promise of qualitative research, but also they provided a set of flexible strategies that guided the analysis of qualitative data. They presented the first detailed, systematic attempt to codify qualitative analysis—and, simultaneously, to develop middle-range theories through subjecting data to rigorous analytic scrutiny. Since 1967, Glaser and Strauss’s message inspired both students and seasoned researchers to pursue inductive qualitative research. Perhaps ironically, many more researchers claimed allegiance to grounded theory to justify their research than actually used the method itself for conducting it.
The guidelines that comprise the method reflect Glaser and Strauss’s divergent backgrounds. Glaser’s doctoral training in quantitative methods at Columbia University gave grounded theory its rigor. He sought to codify qualitative methods in an analogous way as his mentors had codified quantitative methods. Much of the logic and language of grounded theory reflects Glaser’s background and simulates that of quantitative research. This language has distinguished grounded theory from other qualitative approaches, but also it has led to obfuscating several of its major strategies.

Strauss’s contrasting background emanated from his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago where the traditions of pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and ethnographic fieldwork permeated his consciousness and lengthy career. Strauss brought pragmatist emphases on action, meaning, language and the provisional nature of truth to grounded theory. Strauss’s pragmatist and symbolic interactionist foundations imparted notions of individual agency, interactional indeterminacy, and the multiplicity of perspectives, all of which gave grounded theory its open-ended character. Both Strauss and Glaser emphasized inductive inquiry, emergent processes, and the modifiability of theory.

The Discovery book outlined key methodological strategies but Glaser’s (1978) manual, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, first elaborated the grounded theory approach, and Charmaz (2006) and Corbin and Strauss (1998) later offered distinctive versions. (See all these works for detailed descriptions of grounded theory strategies.) Glaser (1978) delineated his concept-indicator model of theorizing, outlined sets of loosely related theoretical codes, advocated line-by-line coding of data, and established the analysis of basic social processes as the focus of grounded theory studies. In all versions, grounded theory begins with very early close coding of collected data. The initial coding aims to ask what is happening in these data and invokes short analytic labels in the form of gerunds to identify specific processes and treat them theoretically. From the beginning, then, grounded theory coding differs from most types of qualitative coding, which rely on pre- established static topics and general characteristics. When researchers define a set of tentative codes, they use these codes to compare, sort, and synthesize large amounts of data. Throughout the process, grounded theorists write memos elaborating their codes by identifying their properties, the conditions under which the code arises, and comparisons with specific data and other codes. Memo writing (a) engages researchers with their data and emerging comparative analyses, (b) helps them to identify analytic gaps, (c) provides material for sections of papers and chapters, and (d) encourages researchers to record and develop their ideas at each stage of the research project. By writing successively more analytic memos, researchers raise the theoretical level of their work.

The strategy of theoretical sampling distinguishes grounded theory and makes it much more than a coding system. Theoretical sampling means that researchers seek and sample data that informs their theoretical categories. Thus, theoretical sampling differs markedly from representational sampling with which it is often confused. Researchers engage in theoretical sampling after they have selected key categories and need to elaborate and or refine them. Such further analytic work may prompt grounded theorists to sample in entirely new empirical areas from those in which they began their study.

Another major methodological concept, but one that is not so well articulated, is theoretical saturation. For grounded theorists, theoretical saturation means seeking data to identify and fill the properties of a theoretical category. Researchers often erroneously believe that they have achieved theoretical saturation when their data become repetitive. They may gather repetitive data without filling the properties of their categories. Further problems arise concerning what constitutes saturation. Most researchers assert saturation rather than provide evidence for it. Trite categories are easily saturated,
thereby leading to low-level analyses that do not account for variation in the category or process being analyzed.

After researchers have constructed a set of developed categories, they sort their memos, explicating these categories according to the logic of their theoretical analysis. This theoretical sorting of memos forms integrates the sections of the paper or chapter. Grounded theory strategies enable researchers to avoid being overwhelmed by unanalyzed data and incomplete ideas because grounded theorists write memos all along that give them readily available materials to sort and integrate. The method fosters developing sections of the analysis throughout the research process.

At least two other versions of grounded theory methods have emerged since publication of The Discovery of Grounded Theory and of Theoretical Sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin's 1998 methodological manual, Basics of Qualitative Research, first published in 1990, constituted the first major departure from the earlier books in that it lacked their depiction of a flexible approach, emphasized verification rather than emergence of concepts, and added two new technical procedures. Strauss and Corbin added another type of coding, axial coding, in which researchers would treat a category as an axis around which they identified the dimensions of its properties and established its relationships to other categories. In addition, they proposed that researchers develop a conditional matrix to map intersections of micro, meso, and macro conditions on actions and to outline connections between these levels of analysis. In Glaser’s (1992) rancorous response to Basics of Qualitative Research, he requested that Strauss and Corbin withdraw their book and rename their approach. Glaser viewed their emphases on preconceived procedures and verification as undermining the method, which he had based on emergent concepts and theory construction. Since then, he has presented his concept-indicator version of grounded theory as the classic statement, despite having abandoned several of his main strategies such as line-by-line coding and the analysis of basic social processes.

Constructivist grounded theory, as Bryant and Charmaz each first articulated separately (Bryant, 2002, 2003; Charmaz, 2000, 2005, 2006) and recently together (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) has emerged as the major alternative to the earlier versions. Constructivist grounded theory assumes that both the research process and the studied world are socially constructed through actions, but that historical and social conditions constrain these actions. The constructivist version of grounded theory retains, and even stresses the key facets of the method as outlined above, but recognizes that the researcher plays an active and vital role in the research process, particularly in the developing dialogue between researcher and data from which codes and categories, and eventually a grounded theory should result. Hence, this form of the method strengthens the basic guidelines by attending to issues such as reflexivity, the research context, the inescapable effect of prior knowledge and existing literature. It also offers insights into the ways in which new theoretical insights develop by engaging with epistemological issues, and so provides a more sophisticated account of induction and deduction than that contained in the early books on the method.

Adele Clarke (2005) also adopts constructivist principles and combines them with postmodernism in her revision of grounded theory, called situational analysis. Bryant, Charmaz, and Clarke advocate adopting key grounded theory strategies devoid of their positivistic underpinnings that include the discovery of an external reality, an objective social scientist, quest for explanation and prediction, and erasure of how the conditions of the research process, including the researcher’s experiences and subjectivities affect the research process. Instead, constructivism takes a relativistic view and emphasizes: (a) the social conditions of the research situation; (b) the researcher's perspectives,
positions, and practices; (c) the researcher’s participation in the construction of data; and (d) the social construction of research acts, as well as participants' worlds. Constructivism retains the central foci of action, process, and meaning in earlier versions, but favors theoretical understanding over explanatory generalizations. Constructivists attend to locating their analyses in the specific historical, social, and interactional conditions of their production, rather than constructing concepts abstracted and separated from their origins. In short, constructivists seek abstract understanding of empirical phenomena as situated knowledge.

See also
Axial Coding; Codes and Coding; Rigor in Qualitative Research; Theoretical Sampling

Further Readings

Kathy Charmaz
Antony Bryant

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https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/grounded_theory
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