

The Grounded Theory Method of Qualitative Research

The grounded theory method was developed in the 1960s by two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, as a new way to develop theory in their discipline. They worked out a way of developing theory empirically, ‘from the bottom up’, as a challenge to the more conventional way of developing it rationally, ‘from the top down’. Since its inception, the method has been taken up in fields additional to sociology, including counselling and psychotherapy.

Procedurally, the decision to study a given social phenomenon whether, say, the trajectory of dying from a terminal illness or the experience of being a client in counselling, leads to the collection of data about it. In principle these data may be published reports, quantitative indicators of various sorts, or verbal reports on experience and conduct. Historically, however, they have usually been of the latter kind. These reports may take the form either of observers’ notes on participants’ conduct or participants’ observations of their own experience and conduct, whether given orally and transcribed by the researcher or in written form.

A key constituent of the method is the constant comparative analytic procedure. This procedure can be carried out in a variety of ways but the general idea is that text is broken into units of analysis (e.g., a line of text, or a paragraph or more), and in one way or other the interpreted meanings among the units come to be represented as categories. Thus, at this stage, it is the data that are constantly compared. As the number of categories increase, they themselves are compared, leading to more abstract categories. This abstracting may continue until a central or “core” category is conceptualized. This category organizes the theory. Electronic data-based programmes have been developed to facilitate management of the data during constant comparative analysis and for that matter ordinary word processing programmes are useful in this regard as well.

In virtue of the interpretive nature of the method, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on his or subjective engagement in the material and to make note of the reflections in what Glaser and Strauss call “theoretical memos”. This subjective experiencing may be a mix of error-ridden projection and intuitive insights. Only the development of categories that are grounded in the text enables discrimination between these two possibilities. Accordingly, once the main work of descriptive categorizing is completed, researchers are encouraged to review their theoretical memos in search of insights that have proven to be grounded. In this way the researcher is aided in the creation of abstract categories, including the core category.

Ideally, the collection and analysis of data are conducted concurrently. Thus, initially two or three sets of data drawn from reasonably homogeneous sources are acquired and analyzed resulting in an initial set of categories, which in turn guides the selection of new data, and so on. This concurrent collection and analysis of data continues until, in the researcher’s judgment, the meanings of additional data are accounted for by the categories already developed. It is at this point that the categories are declared “saturated”, as Glaser and Strauss put it, whence the seeking of yet other sources of the

kind used can come to an end, and so the researcher can bring the study to a close. And so, for example, the experience of getting married for white, middle-class, well-educated women in their 20s could lead to saturated categories after, say, the interviews with 10 such women were analyzed. As long as the researcher is content to limit generalization of the understanding to the 'kind' of women represented by these 10, he or she may stop the study at this point. However, the understanding of these women's collective experience may be different in some respects from the experience of women in their 30s or older, or of those of a different socio-economic bracket, or of those getting married for a second time, and so on. In order to see if the understanding achieved applies to such alternative groups, inquiry into and analysis of their experiences would be required.

Thus, the thrust of the method is to develop understandings of what is common among a set of data; in the case of data bearing on human experience and conduct, it assumes that there are kinds of experience or modes of conduct and is directed toward conceptualizing what they are. Analysis of particular instances leads to an understanding of the particulars taken as a whole, and it is the latter understanding that is represented by a given category. Reciprocally, the meaning of the category may be illustrated by a given particular instance. Meanwhile, it is assumed that provided the understanding is grounded, it will resonate with anyone sharing the culture of those under study. It is on this assumption, as opposed to the logic of sampling theory in quantitative research that claims to generalize, that generalization applies.

In principle the method can lead to either the structure of the phenomenon or the processes entailed in it, or both. In his own version of the method, however, Strauss drew more directly on his affiliation with the Chicago school of American pragmatism (i.e., Dewey, Mead and Blumer) when emphasizing that social life is constituted of processes involving conditions, inter/actions and emotions, and consequences (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Glaser is inclined to dispute this emphasis. In any case, the hallmarks of the method are the concurrent collection and analysis of data; the application of the procedure of constant comparative analysis in the creation of categories; and theoretical memoing as an aid to both objectifying and abstracting their relationships -- all done in the interest of creating a grounded understanding of the phenomenon.

Suggested Readings

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