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19 July 2022

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/114970/>
MPRA Paper No. 114970, posted 15 Oct 2022 14:03 UTC

Constructivist Grounded Theory: A New Research Approach in Social Science

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Abstract

This article tries to explore the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) in qualitative research. American sociologist Kathy Charmaz has developed a new qualitative research field “*Constructivist Grounded Theory*” for the first time in 2006. Constructivist grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that draws comparison between the ethical principles of deontology, utilitarian and virtue ethics, and individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work. It is a popular method for research studies mainly in psychology, education, and nursing. In social sciences, it represents culture, context, literacy, personal

experiences, as well as application of knowledge. It also presents the theoretical substructures of symbolic interactionism and constructivism. Constructivism is used for research, learning, and teaching with peers. There are various types of constructivism, such as social, psychological, personal, radical, and contextual constructivism. On the other hand, symbolic interactionism is the process of human interaction that provides the meanings for the experiences through language, symbols, and social interactions. This study tries to investigate how constructivist grounded theory has developed in times from the original grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss. The paper also tries to highlight characteristics, application, and importance of constructivist grounded theory.

Keywords: Constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz, knowledge, social science

1. Introduction

Grounded theory (GT) is a qualitative research that reflects the objectivist/positivist worldview of two US sociologists Barney Galland Glaser (1930-2022) and Anselm Leonard Strauss (1916-1996), which is the merge of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches in social science (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is largely deductive and focuses on testing rather than developing theory, which has its roots in both positivism and pragmatism (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Edwina & McDonald, 2019). It is a systematic analysis consisting of several flexible strategies for constructing theory through the integration of inductive, deductive and abductive thinking (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Khanal, 2018).

Kathy Charmaz, sociologist and student of both Glaser and Strauss, is the first researcher to describe a more modernized and constructivist approach towards GT

and her work explicitly recognized as constructivist grounded theory (CGT). In 2006, she has published the seminal work “*Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*”, which has a pragmatist ontology with a relativist epistemology (Charmaz, 2006). She endeavors to maintain the presence of the participants throughout the research. CGT joins researchers and research participants’ language, meanings, and actions (Charmaz, 2016). Rigorous theory development in CGT happens through the constant comparison by data and categories improvement with the interaction between the field data and the existing literature (Khanal, 2018). In CGT, neither data nor theories are discovered; researchers are a part of the world they study and the data that they collect. They construct GT through “*past and present involvements and interactions with people, practices and research practices*” (Tan, 2010).

There are several tenets of CGT that have been most relevant for interpretation and use of the body, identity, and emotions in the research (Hordge-Freeman, 2018). CGT is differentiated from classic grounded theory largely for its insistence on offering strategies that bring the researchers’ subjectivity into focus, acknowledging that there are multiple realities, and emphasizing methodological self-consciousness (Charmaz, 2017).

There are numerous views of CGT, such as identity and emotions in the research that have been most relevant to the interpretation and the use of the body. CGT captures the interplay between the form and content of data where the individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work (Charmaz, 2017). It is a contemporary version of Glaser and Strauss’s original statement (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A social constructionist approach of GT deals with the best way what

people construct and how it unfolds. It allows us to address while preserving the complexity of social life (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Charmaz, 2008).

2. Literature Review

Cassandra Groen and her coworkers conduct GT research into three overarching sections: i) introduction to the methodology of GT, ii) a comparison between two types of GT traditions; and iii) strategies for implementation of GT. They have established an initial understanding of GT methodology by providing a brief introduction. Then they have compared and contrasted two approaches of GT: i) classic GT developed by Glaser and Strauss, and ii) constructivist GT developed by sociologist Kathy Charmaz. Finally, they have provided strategies for methodological implementation as situated within a current GT study exploring professional identity formation in undergraduate civil engineering students (Groen et al., 2017). Mariann Edwina and Sakenya D. McDonald investigate all possible GT processes or steps providing in-depth explanation for each step. In the study they have realized that it is crucial for researchers to identify which iteration of GT is the most appropriate to their research goal by scrutinizing the advantages and limitations while simultaneously retaining an awareness of their position as a researcher, including bias, positionality, and driving inquiry (Edwina & McDonald, 2019).

Tebogo Mogashoa has studied the various types of constructivism, such as personal, radical, social, and contextual constructivism (Mogashoa, 2014). Gina Higginbottom and Erica Lauridsen have shown overtimes how original GT of Glaser and Strauss has evolved to CGT of Charmaz. They have also discussed the aspects of GT and CGT to display the whole evolve process efficiently. They have

realized that CGT offers a valuable methodology for researchers in the field of nursing (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Kathy Charmaz has studied Glaser and Strauss GT that have explored the chronic illness of people, their strategies of managing their lives and effects on self and identity (Charmaz, 2010). Andrew Gardner and his coauthors have deliberated the CGT research methodology and also have analyzed comparisons between the CGT position and the ethical principles of deontology, utilitarian, virtue ethics, and fidelity that inform contemporary mental health nursing practice (Gardner et al., 2012).

Jane Mills and her coauthors have discussed landmark work of Charmaz on CGT relative to her positioning of the researcher in relation to the participants, analysis of the data, and rendering of participants' experiences into GT. They have also developed the implication of constructivist analysis concerning counteracting the power imbalance and role of reflection in GT inquiry and examine CGT on ontological and epistemological backgrounds. They have explored the implication of constructivist research design regarding counteracting the power imbalance and the role of reflection in GT method (Mills et al., 2006). Kul Prasad Khanal has shown that theory construction in CGT is performed through the interaction of both data-indicated and extant theoretical concepts. He has also revealed that in various stages of this process integration of three reasoning: inductive, abductive, and deductive are happened. He is sure that CGT is not only the data saturation, but also of researcher's satisfaction (Khanal, 2018).

Andrew Gardner and his coauthors have scrutinized the origin of CGT research methodology and the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism and constructivism. Comparisons are drawn between the CGT position and the ethical principles of deontology, utilitarian, virtue ethics, and fidelity. They have shown

that CGT is an appropriate and consistent approach to use when researching mental health nursing practice (Gardner et al., 2012). Elaine Keane has considered the practical implementation of CGT principles in a study of widening participation in Irish higher education. In the study she has examined the objectivist constructivist nexus with social justice-oriented research (Keane, 2014). Adele E. Clarke has realized that GT creates CGT and researchers can use it to study organizations, social worlds, and policies beyond the individual level of analysis (Clarke, 2005). Haradhan Kumar Mohajan has tried to discuss grounded theory in briefly (Mohajan, 2018). He has also taken attempts to show aspects of feminism and its structures, waves, and categories in some details (Mohajan, 2022a,b).

3. Methodology of the Study

Sandra Harding has carefully distinguished between method and methodology as: method is “*techniques for gathering evidence*” and methodology is “*a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed*” (Harding, 1987). Methodology of any research should reflect the ontological and epistemological standpoints of the researcher. Obviously, it displays the research design and analysis procedures (Hallberg, 2006). We have already realized that both GT and CGT are inductive, systematic, and qualitative research methods that reflect the nature of reality and generate theory, which is “*grounded*” in actual data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz was influenced by Strauss’ symbolic interactionist perspective and iterative research approaches (Charmaz, 2014). CGT maintains the importance of the researcher’s background throughout the entire study and perceives bracketing as an iterative process that may appear at any time (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Since, CGT is well-fitted with the theoretical substructures of symbolic interactionism and constructivism. Hence, at the beginning of the study we have highlighted on constructivism and symbolic interactionism. Then we have briefly described the origin and procedure of GT. We have tried to present the evolution of original GT that is developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Then we have worked on the origin and development of CGT. American sociologist Kathy Charmaz has developed the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) in 1995. We have tried to introduce the characteristics and benefits of CGT. We have seen that researchers of nursing and healthcare settings are very fond of CGT research.

This paper works with secondary data sources of GT and CGT that have been written by famous authors in these fields. We have tried to well-furnish the article by the help of previous published famous journal articles, printed books and e-books of popular and famous authors, recent conference papers, research materials of scholars' contributions, internet and websites, etc. (Mohajan, 2018, 2020; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). In this paper we have tried to maintain the reliability and validity as far as possible (Mohajan, 2017, 2020). Ethical dimensions and considerations are key concept for any qualitative research study. CGT research is involved with human participants and ethical conduct is necessary throughout the research. Human welfare and justice must be ensured to perform a good research (Punch, 1998).

4. Objective of the Study

Main objective of this paper is to analyze the aspects of constructivist grounded theory. Some other minor but related objectives are;

- to focus the evolution of original GT,
- to discuss the characteristics of CGT, and
- to highlight the benefits and application of CGT.

5. Constructivism and Symbolic Interactionism

The human world is different from the natural and physical world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas but not by imitation (Hein, 2007). Human behavior and action is based upon the meaning that individuals place on people and things, and how such meaning is interpreted and communicated through language (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivists study with the multiple realities is constructed by people, and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others are essential (Duffy, 2006).

Constructivism: Constructivism is an epistemology (theory of knowledge) that offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). It is a theory of knowledge, which argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and ideas (Duffy, 2006). It is a research paradigm that denies the existence of an objective. It indicates that, “*asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals*” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It is a theory of learning that is related to the acquirement of knowledge to a process of building. It is considered as the researchers’ wish to establish how learners learn and teachers teach (Duffy, 2006). Epistemologically, constructivism emphasizes

the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and participants, and the co-construction of meaning (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997).

Symbolic Interactionism: Symbolic interactionism is a dynamic theoretical perspective that views interpretation and action as reciprocal processes, each affecting the other, recognizes that we act in response to how we view our situations (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014). The symbolic interactionism consists of three key assumptions as: i) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them, ii) meaning is constructed through the interaction between people, rather than meaning being assumed or “*intrinsically emanating*” from the symbol, and iii) these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things s/he encounters (Blumer, 1969).

Symbolic interactionism refers to the premise that the process of human interaction provides the meanings for the experiences that individuals may have. It assumes that reality is constructed through language, symbols, and social interactions that are utilized by individuals to construct, make, and enact meaning and action (Charmaz, 2014). The term “*symbolic interactionism*” was invented by an American sociologist, Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) in 1937 that is a key influence on grounded theory (Blumer, 1937). Meaning is an essential element in symbolic interactionism and is interpreted through language and communication that is shared (Charmaz, 2017).

6. Grounded Theory

Two American sociologists; Barney Galland Glaser (1930-2022) and Anselm Leonard Strauss (1916-1996), for the first time have collaboratively developed the grounded theory (GT) of qualitative research in social science (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Their work has come at a time when qualitative research methods were under attack for a lack of systematic processes (Baker-Korotkov, 2020). They have worked together to conduct a study of the treatment of dying patients in hospitals and clinics to establish GT, which becomes one of the most commonly and widely recognized approaches to qualitative research (Stern, 2009; Birks & Mills, 2011). The crucial components for GT are: simultaneous data collection and analysis, code and category construction, the constant comparative analysis, and literature review after the analysis of data (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014).

GT attempts to generate theory based on data collected and analyzed simultaneously as the research progresses (Howell, 2012). It aims to develop an *“integrated mid-range theory that is grounded in and fits the data”* and empowers the researchers to disclose the complexities of qualitative analysis efficiently to understand mysteries and moments of human life. It provides tools for developing theoretical analyses of psychological data from concentrated interviews, personal stories, case studies, and field observations (Charmaz, 2011, 2020). It uses the information, which arises from the data itself, rather than forcing preconceived ideas onto the coding and subsequent analysis. After original data are coded and categorized, new data are added through theoretical sampling until saturation occurs (Hood, 2007).

7. Evolution of GT

Since the creation of original GT by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the method has undergone several modifications. Overtimes Glaser and Strauss constructed independent, but inconsistent versions of GT (Khanal, 2018). Glaser demands that his version of GT is the classic and no need of further development. On the other hand, Strauss diverges from the concept of Glaser (Glaser, 1992). In the published book “*Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*” Strauss and Corbin remarkably diverged from the original GT that is developed in 1967. They have worked to improve the method by introducing open, axial, and selective coding in their research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By the early 1990s, two US authors Glaser and Strauss were disagreements in many cases in their research area and consequently, parted in their future research works. Then they have rarely seen in same academic activities (Heath & Cowley, 2004; Birks & Mills, 2011). The main cause of their disagreements is laid in their ontological and epistemological differences of the research origin (Devadas et al., 2011).

Consequently, by the 1990s, two distinctive versions of GT have emerged: i) positivist version of Glaser, and ii) postpositivist version of Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Seidel & Urquhart, 2013). Each route of their own versions of the original methodology is labeled by “Glaserian” and “Straussian” GT respectively. Also the latter is co-developed with Juliet Corbin (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Richards & Morse, 2007). Glaserian version is considered as “*traditional or classic*” GT and it is founded in critical realism, post-positivism, and objectivity (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). Glaserian version tries to develop a conceptual theory, where the researcher is passive, theoretical sensitivity comes from immersion in the data, theory is grounded in the data, data reveal the theory,

and coding is less rigorous (Jones & Alony, 2011; Edwina & McDonald, 2019). Glaser believes that the researcher should remain removed from the process of collecting and analyzing data (Glaser, 1992).

Recent fellow GT researchers are encouraged to consider their experiences and positions as researchers and how these subjectivities would inform the data collection process (Edwina & McDonald, 2019). Ultimately, GT has slowly evolved from its traditional form into other forms presented by Strauss and Juliet Corbin, and finally by Kathy Charmaz in the mid-1990s (Glaser, 2005; Charmaz, 2017).

8. Origin and Development of CGT

Kathy Charmaz, a US sociologist, has been known as the third-generation grounded theorist, who has developed a new approach called constructivist grounded theory (CGT) in 1995, based on the ideas from two of her mentors: Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 1995a, 2017; Birks & Mills, 2011). In 1995, she began to publish articles and book chapters on CGT, and became the leading proponent of this research area (Charmaz, 1995b). She has named her research approach as “*Constructivist Grounded Theory*” that is situated between positivism and postmodernism (Charmaz, 1995a). Her landmark work is flourished from 1994 through the release of her book “*Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*” in 2006 (Charmaz, 2006). Antony Bryant and Charmaz have written a series of books to enrich CGT (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b). CGT is “*marked by differences of opinions and divergences in paradigm, philosophies, genres, approaches and methods*” (Ralph et al., 2015). It is a qualitative research methodology that draws comparison between the ethical

principles of deontology, utilitarian and virtue ethics and individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work (Morse et al., 2009; Gardner et al., 2012). It is considered as a characteristic, and strength of action learning that has ability to turn personal understanding into shared knowledge (Bourner & Simpson, 2005; Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). It takes an epistemological position of subjectivism and it is acknowledged that an interrelationship exists between the researcher and the participant (Mills et al., 2006). In CGT, neither data nor theories are discovered, but are constructed by the researcher as a result of his or her interactions with the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Original CGT procedure is arranged through the systematic process of collecting, coding, analyzing and theoretically categorizing data. Its theoretical base is derived from symbolic interactionism and social constructivism (Blumer, 1969). CGT is predominantly suitable for social justice-oriented studies, as it “*attends to context, positions, discourses, and meanings and actions and thus can be used to advance understandings of how power, oppression, and inequities differentially affect individuals, groups, and categories of people*” (Charmaz, 2010).

On the other hand, Straussian version stresses that the theory is historically rooted and it is accepted as pragmatic and relativist. Strauss and Corbin are influenced by the symbolic interactionism and have taken constructivist approach to develop Straussian version and acknowledge existence of multiple socially constructed realities (Mills et al., 2006; Devadas et al., 2011). Straussian version has conceptual description, where the researcher is active, theoretical sensitivity comes from methods and tools, and stresses the structured questions, theory is interpreted by an observer, data are structured to reveal the theory, and coding is more rigorous and defined by technique (Jones & Alony, 2011; Edwina & McDonald,

2019). Strauss believes that the researcher should remain active in obtaining the data by asking semi-structured questions to be answered by the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Glaser reportedly argues that Straussian version is too “forceful”. It essentially pushes the data into “*preconceived categories*” to develop theory and it cannot be considered true GT (Charmaz, 2006; Birks & Mills, 2011; Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014).

Philosophically, Charmaz aligns closer to Strauss than Glaser, which is toward symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz has decided to move away from these two versions and chooses to pass through a constructivist lens. She has defined constructivism as “*a social scientific perspective that addresses how realities are made*” (Charmaz, 2008, 2016). Melanie Birks and Jane Mills pointed out that Charmaz was influenced by third moment termed as “*blurred genres*” and fourth moment termed as “*the crisis of representation*” of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Birks & Mills, 2011; Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Charmaz suggests that “*the researcher is simply proposing a theory that reflects the experiences and interactions of the participants and the researcher*” (Charmaz, 2006).

Pioneering work of Charmaz on CGT allows us to identify a number of key principles for a constructivist research design and practice that emphasizes researcher reflexivity, participant involvement, and the maintenance of contextual detail (Charmaz, 2006, 2010). CGT has explored the chronic illness of people, their strategies of managing their lives and effects of CGT on self and identity. It is considered as a process of socially created knowledge that is produced in the real world (Charmaz, 2011; Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). In GT, neither theories

nor data are discovered and theories are generated by the mutual formation of knowledge by the participants and the researcher (Khanal, 2018).

A CGT assumes that neither data nor theories are discovered, but are “*constructed*” through the interactions between the researcher the participants. Then the research procedures are colored by the researcher’s perspectives, values, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations to obtain satisfied fruitful research (Charmaz, 2006; Gardner et al., 2012).

9. Characteristics of CGT

Methodologically CGT is interpretivist in nature, that is, the notion of a shared reality is interpreted or discovered by the researcher (Charmaz, 2000). It is situated between positivism and postmodernism, adopting epistemological subjectivism and ontological relativism (Hallberg, 2006; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Gardner et al., 2012). Reality, society and the self are socially constructed, and sense is made through the social interaction with others is known as social constructivism (Gardner et al., 2010; Charmaz, 2020). CGT aims to develop a detailed understanding of the underlying social or psychological processes within a certain context by exploring in more detail social interactions and social structures (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). It locates the research process and product in historical, social, and situational conditions (Charmaz, 2009).

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) is a most popular research approach in the disciplines of psychology, education, and nursing (Mills et al., 2006). It is also appeared as most appropriate research in many healthcare settings (Charmaz, 2009). It seeks “*knowledge as socially produced that takes a reflexive stance, and*

assumes that knowledge is produced by grappling with empirical problems” (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz has observed that in CGT research the theories are affected by the researchers’ lifelong interactions with people, places, education, opinions, and so on (Charmaz, 2006).

CGT has some similarities and some different features from the original GT of Glaser and Strauss (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). In CGT, knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through participants’ prior experience that is built on her cultural and historical context through interaction. After full satisfaction of researcher data collection process in CGT terminates (Charmaz, 2006; Khanal, 2018). CGT maintains the researcher’s responsibility to examine the methods by which participants construct their meaning and to further interpret their reality in the social structures and discourses of which they may be unaware (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). CGT rejects claims of objectivity, and willingly allows researchers that *“it cannot help but come to almost any research project already knowing in some ways, already inflected, already affected, already infected”* (Charmaz, 2017).

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) takes an epistemological position of subjectivism, that is, a researcher cannot be completely objective and the researchers use collaborate knowledge (Charmaz, 2000; Mills et al., 2006). It is an appropriate and consistent approach to use in research area of social science (Charmaz, 2016). CGT reflects constructivist worldview and maintains relativist ontology with a subjective and interpretivist epistemology. Charmaz has developed CGT that is different form of GT, which has maintained the basic strategy of original GT (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Charmaz, 1995a). CGT is differentiated from

classic grounded theory (cGT) in many areas. It focuses in multiple realities, and emphasizes in methodological self-consciousness (Charmaz, 2017).

9.1 CGT in Nursing and Healthcare

CGT is very well-fitted in social justice orientation research for its recognition of the co-construction of theory (Charmaz, 2011). The constructivist worldview is common in nursing research, since it is imperative for nurses to understand the subjective experience of each patient (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). CGT methodology has been applied by nurse researchers in numerous healthcare settings. In clinical nursing practice, CGT has been used to study the perspectives of nurses and patients in healthcare interactions and nurse education (McCreddie & Payne, 2014; Morberg et al., 2009). CGT approach provides a practical methodological framework for the healthcare professionals to study the patients in close contact, rather than the distance participants from the researcher (Gardner et al., 2012).

9.2 Benefits of CGT

The CGT is particularly suitable where prior subject area knowledge and close interactive dialogue between researcher, and participants may be essential in realizing new insights and generating new theory (Charmaz, 2009). It has the potential for the free researchers to demonstrate higher order thinking and to generate more innovative and insightful theory (Charmaz, 2006). It offers the researcher the opportunity to be part and parcel of the research process through proactive mutual co-construction and reflexivity (Alemu, et al., 2015).

10. Conclusion

In this study we have observed that grounded theory is a methodological approach, and it has discovered in the 1967 by two US sociologists Glaser and Strauss. Kathy Charmaz is the first researcher to describe her work explicitly as “*Constructivist Grounded Theory*” that is grounded in a strong philosophical framework. Constructivist grounded theory is an appropriate and consistent approach in social science research. In this study, we have provided an overview of the constructivist grounded theory approach to identify, choose, and implement it in any form of grounded theory research. We have also tried to give a brief feature of two versions Glaserian and Straussian grounded theory. In the analysis we have realized that the popularity of the constructivist grounded theory is increasing very rapidly and the researchers in this research field are working worldwide eagerly.

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