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7 October 2022

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/115789/>  
MPRA Paper No. 115789, posted 27 Dec 2022 08:24 UTC

# **Classic Grounded Theory: A Qualitative Research on Human Behavior**

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## **Abstract**

Grounded theory is an inductive methodological approach in social sciences and other related subjects. It generates theory about social processes, which are grounded in reality. Classic grounded theory is a unique inductive research approach with language, rules of rigor, procedures, and a final achievement, which is different from other research methods. The purpose of classic grounded theory is to theorize and facilitate an understanding of an effective knowledge, which is happening on the lives of people of the society. It represents grounded theory in a pure form, which emerges from the original work of Barney Galland Glaser (1930-2022) and Anselm Leonard Strauss (1916-1996) that is developed in 1967. It is the development of a theory from data with open ideas that comes from the data. This study tries to discuss a qualitative research design following a classic grounded theory approach through ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of grounded theory. This study explores classic grounded theory approach including strengths and challenges of development in the social science.

**Keywords:** Classic grounded theory, Glaser, qualitative research, social science

## 1. Introduction

Grounded theory (GT) is the generation of theory, and it stresses on human social behavior that is grounded in data, which are systemically collected through social research (Glaser, 1978; Morse & Field, 1995). It is inductive and developmental, and represents views of the participants relative to a substantive area of interest (Glaser, 1992a). It is the most popular qualitative research methodology in social sciences, and mostly inductive and conceptual, rather than descriptive (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is a systematic flexible method that emphasizes simultaneous data collection and analysis, and finally provides tools for constructing theories (Charmaz, 2011). It can be used by any theoretical perspective, and should therefore not be appropriated by any perspective (Glaser, 2005b).

A revolutionary and successful research, GT is first proposed by two American sociologists; Barney Galland Glaser (1930-2022) and Anselm Leonard Strauss (1916-1996) in 1967 through the publication of their book “*The Discovery of Grounded Theory*” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Before their publication, global research area was deductive and quantitative approach dominant, and this publication was challenging (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Since then, GT has become a global concern of qualitative research and is used in various disciplines (Glaser, 1992a). Overtimes, two authors Glaser and Strauss show methodological disagreements in some matters and parted in the research procedures. Each route of their own “*versions*” of the original methodology are labeled by “*Glaserian*” and “*Straussian*” respectively. Barney Glaser is always faithful to the methodology in its original one, and is referred as “*Classic Grounded Theory*” (Glaser, 1978, 1992a; Thulesius, 2019).

The classic Glaserian grounded theory (CGGT) or simply classic grounded theory (cGT) is a unique inductive research method with language, rules of rigor, procedures, and a final outcome is different from other research methods (Thulesius, 2019). It exposes latent forms of human behavior, and it makes use of all kinds of data (Tossy, 2015). It is popular methodology in social sciences. It is inductive, data directed, and systematic. It uses theoretical sensitivity, coding, and constant comparative analysis of the data (Glaser, 1978). It designs results in the generation of hypotheses from data. In cGT, the categories and theory emerge through the analysis and

constant comparison of the data. According to one of the founders of classic grounded theory, Glaser, cGT study is a “*simple procedural method formulated to generate substantive, conceptual theory*” (Glaser, 2009). It is called classic because of its supreme loyalty to the primary ideas of Glaser and Strauss that is published in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Many scholars have agreed that Glaser’s approach is of course a classical approach (Cooney, 2010).

## **2. Literature Review**

Kendra L. Rieger has briefly discussed the history and origins, philosophical perspective, role of the researcher, data and data analysis, and strengths and critique of cGT (Rieger, 2019). Henny Suzana Mediani has tried to discuss “*what is grounded theory, how it came about, and how it is used that may be useful for novice researchers and graduate nursing students as they interested in using Classical or Glaserian grounded theory methods for the first time*” (Mediani, 2017). Judith A. Holton observes that classic grounded theory (cGT) is a fundamentally distinct methodology and does not fit within the established qualitative or quantitative research procedures (Holton, 2007). Krzysztof T. Konecki has offered some possibilities for developing cGT consistent with Glaser’s approach (Konecki, 2018).

Nieky van Veggel explores the use of cGT successfully to inspect the experiences of subject leaders in small specialist higher education institutions with evidence-based practice (van Veggel, 2022). Abdullahi Usman Bello has discussed the classic approach that is less prone to confusion and contradiction, which should be carried out in the field to produce a robust research contribution (Bello, 2015). Jenna Breckenridge has focused on the five key areas in data analysis of her research: i) getting conceptual, ii) choosing a core category, iii) recognizing theoretical saturation, iv) achieving theoretical integration, and v) manual versus computer assisted analysis (Breckenridge, 2014).

Hans Thulesius and his coworkers have observed that even though grounded theory is elegant, it requires autonomy, openness to emergence, and a respect for preconscious processing. They have presented the teaching strategies of the experienced, multidisciplinary, international classic grounded theorists with one major caveat (Thulesius, 2019).

Khaldoun M. Aldiabat and Carole-Lynne Le Navenec have introduced a hypothetical example about smoking among college students to illustrate historical relationship between the GT and symbolic interactionism. They also provide a thorough and precise discussion about the congruency between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011). Titus Tossy investigates how to create and sustain transparency in Information System (IS) research when using the cGT research method. He has discovered that there are only two categories of GT in the social science research: classic (original) grounded theory and modified grounded theory methodological approaches (Tossy, 2015).

Carol Roderick tries to discuss the confusion, challenges, insights, and growth that the graduate students face when they study cGT. She has advised to the new researchers for embarking as: seek expertise, engage in community, just do it, know self, and balance challenge and support (Roderick, 2009). Barney Galland Glaser has realized that classic grounded theory is complicated for novice researchers (Glaser, 1998). Barry Chametzky has taken attempt to grow novice researcher's interested in the cGT analysis based in theory and has supported with practical examples (Chametzky, 2016). Virpi Timonen and her coworkers provide a refinement of core principles underpinning existing GT approaches that can aid further engagement with the different variants of GT. They are very hopeful that GT is more comprehensible and accessible for new researchers (Timonen et al., 2018). Haradhan Kumar Mohajan has tried to analyze the GT methodology in some details (Mohajan, 2018). He has also tried to highlight on feminism and its different forms (Mohajan, 2022a,b).

### **3. Methodology of the Study**

The aim of the cGT is the generation of theory from the data, which have explanatory power and grounded in the reality (Glaser, 1998). In a research analysis, researchers face various problems in data collection and statistical calculations. To obtain accurate results and ultimately to prepare a good research, they have to manage and arrange them (data) efficiently. Quantitative and qualitative approaches have both their advocates and critics. Additionally, qualitative research

aims to discover meaning and understanding (Parahoo, 2014). This qualitative study tries to enable a deeper meaning and understanding of the phenomenon (Mohajan, 2018).

In this research analysis we have taken various attempts to make the article meaningful. At the beginning of the main research analysis we have briefly analyzed grounded theory. Then we have tried to discuss the development and use of classic grounded theory research. Finally, we have briefly discussed strengths, weaknesses and challenges of classic grounded theory. In any seminal research work, ethical approval is essential to uphold the possible benefits, and minimize harm to participants, science, and society (NASW, 2021). A qualitative researcher must be sincere about the reliability and validity. Throughout of this research we have tried to maintain the reliability and validity as far as possible (Mohajan, 2017, 2018).

To prepare this article we have used secondary data that are collected from both published and unpublished data sources. The published data are collected from various sources, such as websites, national and international journals and e-journals, books and handbooks of famous authors, internet, etc. (Mohajan, 2017; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022a-f).

#### **4. Objective of the Study**

The chief objective of this paper is to analyze the aspects of classic grounded theory. Some other explicit objectives are;

- to provide a core concept of grounded theory,
- to focus on origin and development of classic grounded theory,
- to highlight on strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of classic grounded theory.

#### **5. Highlights on GT**

Two US sociologists, Barney Galland Glaser (1930-2022) and Anselm Leonard Strauss (1916-1996) have published some books on the support of grounded theory, such as “*The Social Loss of Dying*” published in 1964, “*Temporal Aspects of Dying*” published in 1965, and “*Awareness of Dying*” published in 1965. Both of the authors have tried to establish a powerful research method, which can be used to investigate dying processes in an institutional setting. Their

published revolutionary book “*The Discovery of Grounded Theory*” provides a response to these inquiries (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thulesius, 2019). This book has laid down the foundation of a new attractive research approach. Later, Glaser has written many books and papers to analyze the method, such as “*Theoretical Sensitivity*” published in 1978 and “*Doing Grounded Theory*” published in 1998 (Glaser, 1978, 1998).

Grounded theory (GT) is a multivariate process that happens sequentially, subsequently, simultaneously, serendipitously and in a scheduled manner (Tossy, 2015). It has been used by nurses and other researchers for decades to generate substantive theories. It reflects the complexity and variability of phenomena and of human action. It reveals latent patterns of human behavior (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011). It is developed to create a new theory rather than testing existing theory. It is a fundamentally distinct methodology that tries to collect rich and unbiased data (Farragher & Coogan, 2018). In GT, the researcher is considered as a neutral observer and can discover data in an objective way with an open and impartial mind (Glaser, 2005a). Research procedures of GT are; using constant comparison methods data are collected and analyzed, then memo-writing is conducted, sampling proceeds towards the theory construction, and finally new or developed theory is prepared (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

In Grounded theory (GT), perspectives and social perceptions are defined, developed, negotiated, and contested through interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is particularly popular in nursing research, which was the research area of the founders that provided the essential tools in healthcare from real-life observations, but it soon spreads to other fields, such as in healthcare, physiotherapy, education, sociology, anthropology, psychology, management, information systems, business, management, computer science, and many other such branches (Charmaz, 2006; Smith, 2011). It deals with both qualitative and/or quantitative research methodology and main objective of it is to discover a strong empirically derived hypothesis or core variable that articulates the main concern of the respondents (Tossy, 2015; Mediani, 2017). It has two distinctive aspects, namely constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A researcher of GT, studies early data and begins to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding (Glaser, 2016). During the last sixty years original GT has undergone a considerable adaptations and evolutions. Overtimes it has created a complicated intellectual history as it is originated from different ontological foundations (Hunter et al., 2011). Since the invention of GT, the period first decade (1960-1970) is called the discovery decade, the second decade (1970-1980) is called the development decade, the third decade (1980-1990) is called the diffusion decade, the fourth decade (1990-2000) is called the diversification decade, fifth decade (2000-2010) is called objectivist/postmodern decade and sixth decade (2010-2020) is called constructivist decade (Benoliel, 1996; Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011; Yu & Smith, 2021).

## **6. Development of cGT**

In the 1990s, methodological disagreements arise between Glaser and Strauss, and they pass through different paths. Overtime grounded theory (GT) has evolved to comprise several different variants. It has been also adapted and modified in various disciplines to fit specific knowledge areas and interests (Morse et al., 2009). Strauss changes original GT methodology substantially with his new collaborator Juliet Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Glaser is considered to have stayed faithful to the methodology in its original form. He has forbidden applying any specific philosophical settings in original GT (Glaser, 1992b). Two scholars, Judith Holton and Isabelle Walsh, have studied GT with Barney Glaser. Their work captures the essence of both grounded theory and classic grounded theory (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Therefore, the term “*classic grounded theory*” is used to refer any work by Glaser (Glaser, 1998). The term “*classic*” comes from the fact that the first two theorists Glaser and Strauss have developed this qualitative research design for the first time in 1967 having a high quality. Later, numerous other researchers have developed what they have described as other types of grounded theory designs (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When a classic grounded theory researcher discovers a theory, it must be suitably fitted, also will be relevant, workable, modifiable, and essential criteria for further a grounded theory research (Cooney, 2010). It has been successfully used to investigate phenomena in education (van Veggel, 2022).



The classic Glaserian grounded theory (CGGT) or classic grounded theory (cGT) is a straightforward approach that has remained largely consistent over the years (Bryant, 2009). It is a systematic, rigorous means of gathering and analyzing data that explains a social procedure (Engward, 2013). It is positivist by nature, as it assumes an objective reality and a neutral observer. It takes attempts to create hypotheses and theories about experiences of people, rather than testing and validating the existing theories (van Veggel, 2022). In the cGT, a researcher is needed to review on how existent knowledge and collected data can be joined into the developing theory. The theoretical sampling must be used not quantitatively but gets applied to explain behavior (Glaser, 1992a).

Classic grounded theory (cGT) seeks the main concerns of participants and tries to generate a theory that explains how they resolve accordingly (Glaser, 2005a; Bryant, 2009; Cooney, 2010). It is a powerful tool for discovering theories that are relevant. It is relatively unstructured, so that it is easy to use for generating a theory (Thulesius, 2019). It has unique language, criteria for rigor, and procedures that are inviolate and cannot be mixed with other iterations of GT (Birks & Mills, 2014). In cGT, data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously, i.e., data are collected and coded, after which new data are collected and coded, and these codes are compared to the previous codes to find patterns. The codes are then compared to develop categories. Finally, the emerging theory is compared to the literature (Holton, 2007). In 1998, Barney Galland Glaser observed that research on cGT is complicated for novice researchers (Glaser, 1998).

In cGT, Glaser has extended GT of the original text to explain in more detail concepts, such as theoretical sampling, theoretical coding, and use of theoretical memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). The cGT is multivariate and a process that happens sequentially, subsequently, simultaneously, serendipitously, and in a scheduled manner (Glaser, 1998). It is the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by rigorous research method. It is mainly inductive and not evidence based (Glaser, 2009). It is a non-linear process and reveals latent patterns of human behavior and transcendent of time, place, and people (Chametzky, 2016). Whether the data are qualitative or quantitative, cGT tries to discover a robust empirically derived hypothesis or core variable that are generated through constant coding and analyzing of data (Tossy, 2015).

In cGT, coding is crucial for the generation of categories and theory. There are two phases of coding in cGT; substantive coding and theoretical coding. Substantive coding incorporates two sub-phases of open and selective coding (Glaser, 1998). It produces categories, and identifies a core category for comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. It is very first attempts to highlight the data which the analyst believes may have importance beyond the simple description of the context of the data (Tossy, 2015).

On the other hand, theoretical coding occurs at the conceptual level that involves the use of coding families in some studies, and weaves the categories into a grounded theory. It arises from the synthesis of the substantive codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). cGT also contains examples of reflexive theoretical memos that are written by students. Theoretical coding can be achieved by examining the interplay between theoretical memos (Tossy, 2015). The memos describe the experiences of the analysts and ensure that the explanations come directly from the data by the research analysis and the researchers cannot create them (Konecki, 2018).

## **7. Strengths of cGT**

Classic grounded theory (cGT) approach has a number of strengths and opportunities. It represents flexibility, and allows an open, free-flowing exploration of the phenomenon, enabling concepts to emerge the realization of a new theory. The cGT researchers carry few preconceived notions, some asserts, and the approach results in greater theoretical completeness (Urquhart, 2013). Consequently, it is rigorous in theoretical completeness that results a high level of abstraction (Evans, 2013; Heath & Cowley, 2004). cGT has come under significant critique for its lack of explicit discussion of the philosophical assumptions that inspire it (Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). It supports new concepts and ideas to analyze the collected data elaborately and to develop a core category and the discovery of a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is easy to use, because it is relatively unstructured, and the procedures follow to generate a theory (Melia, 1996).

The researchers in cGT analysis must be theoretically sensitive, and can differentiate more significant data that have insight into their meanings (Glaser, 1978). Numerous scholars have argued that the concept of the pure researcher is a naïve notion that is not congruent with the tenets of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Kelle, 2007; Mills et al., 2006). Other critiques include that cGT has a limited ability to explicate a meaningful understanding due to a reliance on participants' overt concerns (Charmaz, 2000), an overdoing of sociological terms and laissez-faire guidelines (Charmaz, 2000; McCann & Clark, 2003), and a tendency to privilege the researcher's knowledge by valuing a distance between the researcher and participants (Mohajan, 2016). In the absence of strategies to address this power differential, researchers can elevate their own assumptions and interpretations to an objective status (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Hall & Callery, 2001). In cGT, a researcher has failed to follow the core procedures of the approach (Annells, 1996). Classic grounded theory is strictly a qualitative method, whereas, grounded theory is a general method that can be used with different types of data (Glaser, 1978).

## **8. Weaknesses and Challenges to cGT**

Classic grounded theory (cGT) also faces a number of challenges and some limitations. In cGT, the constant comparisons of data are very complex (Glaser, 1998). cGT requires the simultaneous analysis and comparison of data during the data collection. It also follows line-by-line open coding. As a result, in both cases cGT research seems time-consuming (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). On the other hand, cGT is researcher bias due to professional background and previous knowledge (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Sometimes experienced GT researchers face difficulties at theoretical abstraction from description to theory (Schreiber, 2001). Obviously, research in cGT seems to be complicated for new researchers (Glaser, 1998). It suffers from internal misalignment. Because, it stems from a positivist and objectivist approach whereas using interpretivist and constructionist tools (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). It does not aim to represent participants' experiences, but rather generates an abstract representation that explains them (Cooney, 2010).

## 9. Conclusion

In this study we have discussed the classic approach of grounded theory. We have observed that classic grounded theory is a standard research method in qualitative research arena. It is a qualitative methodology that aims to generate a theory rather than using a pre-existing one. It explains the basic psychosocial process to understand human phenomena. Classic grounded theory is one of the most frequently used methods of qualitative research. It has different characteristic and cannot be mixed with other iterations of grounded theory. We have already observed that classical grounded theory is different from other variants of grounded theory. Because it is consistent, rigorous, and effective, so that we can easily achieve its main purpose. Although classic grounded theory is one of the most frequently utilized research methods globally, many novice researchers have faced it difficult but not problematic.

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