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Grounded Theory

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we present, discuss and illustrate works of some of the many, differently situated researchers who have, over the last 40 years, originated and developed, employed and reflected upon their use of a now well-known methodological approach and associated set of inquiry methods known as 'grounded theory. These methods provide flexible, successive analytic strategies for constructing inductive theories from the data. We largely speak about these methods from our two cognate, but sometimes quite different disciplines – sociology and psychology – although we draw on other contributions, notably those from key grounded theory researchers and researcher-practitioners within allied health and social disciplines.

While our chapter is, of course, targeted on issues customarily discussed about a particular methodology and set of inquiry methods, we limit our historical view of the method and instead write very much from the perspective of the present. We want our readers to have ready, up-to-date access to the substance, character, and developing use of grounded theory method, and to current debates about these methods. Grounded theory, as one of us has previously argued (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2003), is not a unitary method but a useful nodal point where contemporary issues in qualitative social science are discussed. The method originated in sociology but has become a general method that has informed qualitative inquiry across and between disciplines. We aim to capture these discussions adequately here.

THE LOGIC, USE AND EMERGENCE OF GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory logic

Grounded theory methods consist of a systematic inductive, comparative, and interactive approach *to* inquiry with several key strategies *for* conducting inquiry (Charmaz, 2006a). Grounded theorists integrate and streamline data collection and analysis through making systematic comparisons throughout inquiry by interacting with their data and emergent analyses. We start analysing data from the beginning of our data collection and begin building inductive theoretical analyses but do not stop with inductive logic. Rather, the logic of grounded theory requires comparisons and checks that enable us to shape our emerging theoretical ideas about the data while keeping these ideas grounded in data. We gather data, compare them, remain open to all possible theoretical understandings of the data, and develop tentative interpretations about these data through our codes and nascent categories. Then we go back to the field and gather more data to check and refine our categories. In this sense, grounded theory methods are abductive (Peirce, 1938; Deely, 1990; Rosenthal, 2004) because we rely on *reasoning* about experience to entertain all conceivable theoretical explanations for the data and then proceed to checking these explanations empirically through further experience – more data collection – to pursue the most plausible theoretical explanation. Thus, a strength of grounded theory is that our budding conceptualizations can lead us in the most useful – perhaps a new or unanticipated – theoretical direction to understand our data.

Both the positivist heritage in psychology and growing interest in constructivism make grounded theory particularly appealing. Researchers with either objectivist or constructivist proclivities can adopt grounded theory strategies. Objectivists assume that they make discoveries in a real world separate from themselves and develop theories whose generalizations transcend particularities. Constructivists view their data and ideas about it as constructions reflecting specific standpoints, situations, and conditions.

In practice, the lines blur, yet grounded theory is fundamentally an interactive and interpretive method (Charmaz, 2006a). Not only do we interact with our research participants but also we interact with and interpret the resulting data about them through successive levels of analysis. We select and use grounded theory strategies according to our interpretations of the data and assessments of our emerging analyses of them. The entire process relies on creating these interpretations. We construct theory through engaging in progressively more abstract levels of comparative analysis. By using grounded theory methods, we learn *how* to raise the level of abstraction at each stage of the analytic process.

Grounded theory strategies provide ways of working with data – of seeking, interrogating, managing, and conceptualizing data – but how we use these methods depends on our repeated scrutiny of our data and nascent analyses. Thus, grounded theory is an emergent method rather than a method of formulaic application.

This method holds significant potential for increased adoption by psychologists for five major reasons: (1) grounded theory offers a rigorous approach to qualitative analysis; (2) it can be used in conjunction with numerous qualitative approaches such as ethnographic, biographical, or discursive analyses; (3) it fosters viewing individual behaviour as embedded in situations and social contexts; (4) it fits either constructionist (interpretive) or post-positivist (quantitative) epistemologies; and (5) it can bridge qualitative and quantitative traditions in psychology. Psychologists have been moving away from atomized analyses of individuals and moving toward understanding the varied contexts in which they live. Adopting the logic of either objectivist or constructivist grounded theory furthers this move. Researchers with both epistemological leanings will find that grounded theory strategies increase their efficiency and effectiveness in gathering useful data and in constructing focused analyses. These strengths combined with the logic and rigour of grounded theory make the method a good choice for mixed method studies.

Using grounded theory guidelines

Grounded theory studies begin with open-ended research questions to explore but follow the ideas that researchers generate once in the field (Locke, 2001; Pidgeon and

Henwood, 2004). Grounded theory guidelines invoke at least a two-phased type of qualitative coding that fosters analytic

BOX 14.1 Basic Grounded Theory Methods*

General Strategies

Engage in Simultaneous Data Collection and Analysis – early data analysis informs subsequent data collection, which then allows the researcher to define and follow leads in the data and to refine tentative categories.

Invoke Constant Comparative Methods – involves making comparisons at each level of analysis, including data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with categories, category with category, category with concept.

Develop Emergent Concepts – analyses the data by constructing successively more abstract concepts arising from the researcher's interactions with these data and his or her interpretations of them.

Adopt an Inductive-Abductive Logic – starts by analysing inductive cases but checks this emerging analysis by entertaining all possible theoretical explanations and confirming or disaffirming them until the most plausible theoretical interpretation of the observed data is constructed.

Specific Guidelines

Initial Coding – begins data analysis early while collecting data by asking 'What is happening in the data?' The researcher examines the data for its potential theoretical importance, uses gerunds to code for processes, and remains open to the emergence of all theoretical possibilities. Codes are short, analytic, and active. Line-by-line coding

fosters close scrutiny of the data and minimizes forcing them into preconceived categories and extant theories. Interrogating each bit of data for its theoretical implications begins the move from description toward conceptual analysis.

Focused Coding – takes the most frequent and/or significant initial codes to study, sort, compare, and synthesize large amounts of data. Focused codes become tentative categories to explore and analyse.

Memo-writing – occurs throughout the research process to raise the analytic level of the emerging theory, identify tentative categories and their properties, define gaps in data collection, and delineate relationships between categories. Memos become increasingly theoretical as analysis proceeds.

Theoretical Sampling – entails seeking specific data to develop the properties of categories or theory, not to achieve representative population distributions.

Saturating Theoretical Concepts – means that gathering more data reveals no new properties of a theoretical category nor yields further insights about the emerging grounded theory.

Theoretical Sorting and Integrating – involves weighting, ordering, and connecting theoretical memos (1) to show how the theory fits together, (2) to make relationships explicit between theoretical categories or between the properties of one theoretical category, (3) to specify the conditions under which these categories or this category arises and (4) to state the consequences of the theorized relationships.

*See Charmaz (2003a, 2003b, 2006a) discussion.

treatment of processes from the start. (See Box 14.1 for an outline of grounded theory guidelines.)

Coding defines and designates what the data are about and indicate. Traditional grounded theory coding has favoured examining actions and events rather than the entirety or unity of research participants narratives. Initial coding opens the data to in-depth views. Depending on our research proclivities and/or type of data, we study our data closely in one of the following ways: word-by-word, line-by-line, segment-

by-segment, or incident-by-incident. Line-by-line coding works well with certain types of interview and textual data. It forces us to look at bits of data anew, dissect them, and label them. Segment-by-segment coding is useful for ethnographic, narrative, or behaviouristic data. Incident-by-incident coding provides a strong basis for making comparisons between data, particularly with intensive interview and ethnographic data.

Grounded theory codes are short, active, and specific. These codes address three fundamental questions: (1) What is happening? (2) Of what process are these actions a part? and (3) What theoretical category does a specific datum indicate? (Glaser, 1978). At this point, grounded theorists remain open to as many theoretical directions as conceivable. After engaging in initial coding, we adopt the most frequent and/or significant initial codes as focused codes to examine large amounts of data. From the beginning, we compare datum with datum, datum with code, and code with code in written memos, or extended notes.

Memo-writing is the pivotal analytic step between coding and writing drafts of papers. Because memo-writing encourages us to stop and think about our data, codes, and/or emerging theory, it helps to write them at every stage in the analytic process. Grounded theorists write memos that range from notes to themselves or a co-author (see Strauss, 1987) to analytic statements that take a code apart and explore its potential for development as a theoretical category (see Charmaz, 2006a). Memo-writing prompts us to develop our ideas about our codes and to treat significant ones as tentative categories to explore and to check through data-gathering. As a result, later memos are more analytic and may serve as sections of the first draft of the researcher's report.

After establishing some tentative categories, we engage in theoretical sampling to collect more data to fill out the properties of a theoretical category, find variation in it, or delineate relationships between categories. Theoretical sampling is a strategy to advance theory construction, not to achieve any approximation of population representativeness. This sampling keeps the analysis grounded and makes it fit the studied phenomenon. As grounded theorists, we presumably sample until we achieve theoretical saturation, which means that we see no new properties of the theoretical category or connections between categories. Criteria for saturation rest on a

researcher's claims but not all claims to saturation are merited. An analysis with several major categories that rests on skimpy data can hardly be saturated.

After researchers have created a set of memos, we sort them to fit our theoretical categories and to integrate the theoretical framework of the analysis and then write the first draft of the report. Standard grounded theory practices include creating the theoretical explication before revising the piece for a particular audience and positioning it in the literature. These practices encourage us to develop our ideas first and then compare them with earlier theories and studies.

In essence, grounded theory is a method of data analysis with the intent of constructing theory. Until recently (Charmaz, 2001, 2002a, 2006a; Clarke, 2003, 2005; Scheibelhofer, 2006), grounded theorists gave scant attention to data collection and some have reduced concerns about it to slogans such as Glaser's (2001: 145) 'All is data. These grounded theorists argue that the quality and quantity of data are not problematic as long as the analyst achieves 'saturation' of categories. Yet they do not delineate useful criteria for what should constitute either viable categories or saturation. Consequently, a number of grounded theory studies skimp on data collection and tout description as theory.

Emergence and evolution of the method

In their revolutionary book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss created an explicit method of constructing middle-range sociological theory from data. They led the development of qualitative inquiry by offering the first systematic set of guidelines for managing and analysing qualitative data. Prior to that time, students learned to conduct qualitative research from mentors and immersion in the field (Rock, 1979).

Consistent with its logic, the grounded theory method has an empirical foundation. This method emerged as Glaser and Strauss (1967) explicated how they studied the social organization of dying in hospitals (Glaser and Strauss, 1965). Glaser and Strauss departed from mid-century conventions about conducting research because they advocated: (1) integrating data collection and data analysis, (2) developing

middle-range theories from research grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories, (3) treating qualitative research as rigorous and legitimate in its own right, and (4) viewing qualitative inquiry as a means of constructing theory. All these ideas challenged conventional positivist notions of qualitative research as impressionistic, unsystematic, atheoretical, anecdotal, and biased.

A long tradition of qualitative research in sociology had arisen during the early decades of the twentieth century at the University of Chicago. By mid-century, however, sophisticated quantitative methods had gained hegemony in the United States; the gap between theory and research widened, and qualitative methods waned. Glaser and Strauss countered this trend with grounded theory and, simultaneously, codified a systematic method for analysing qualitative data.

The objectivist and constructivist threads in grounded theory have their antecedents in Glaser and Strauss's contrasting intellectual heritages. Glaser drew on his rigorous training in quantitative methods at Columbia University to frame central ideas about grounded theory and to form its language. He sought to bring an analogous rigour to qualitative analysis that his mentor, Paul Lazarsfeld (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg, 1955), had brought to quantitative methods. Glaser imported positivist assumptions of objectivity, parsimony, and generality to grounded theory. To some extent, Strauss shared his notions of objectivity because qualitative researchers of the day juxtaposed their work against positivist notions and, thus were concerned with robust data, accuracy, and neutral observations of a real world. Yet Strauss also brought pragmatist emphases on agency, action, language and meaning, and emergence to grounded theory that supported its constructivist leanings. Both Glaser and Strauss emphasized process and saw grounded theory as a method that facilitated studying processes. Glaser (1978) particularly viewed grounded theory as a method for studying a basic social or social psychological process.

The founders have each taken grounded theory in different directions since their original statement. Glaser (1998, 2001) still adheres to positivist principles of discovery, generality, parsimony, and objectivity and emphasizes neutrality of data, variable analysis, and an objective, authoritative researcher. He has, however, disavowed the quest for a basic social or social psychological process as forcing the data into a preconceived framework, rejected line-by-line coding in favour of incident-by-incident

coding, and reversed his earlier insistence that participants will tell the researcher what the major issue is. Glaser (2003) now advocates using grounded theory methods to discover how research participants resolve a main concern, which they may not directly state. Glaser's commitment to comparative methods has become more explicit over the years; his defence of small samples has grown more strident, and his dismissal of typical methodological concerns such as attention to accuracy, standpoints, and reflexivity has become more transparent.

Strauss (1987) moved the method toward verification and with his co-author, Juliet Corbin (1990, 1998), added technical procedures that spawned Glaser's (1992) charges that their method was not grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin's techniques made the method more formulaic because researchers could apply these techniques *to* their data, rather than developing ideas – and analytic strategies – that emerge *from* their interpretations of data. They introduced axial coding as means of reintegrating the fractured data into a coherent whole after taking it apart during initial coding. In this coding, the researcher treats a category as an axis to delineate its relationships and to specify its dimensions. In keeping with their focus on conditions, causes, and consequences, Strauss and Corbin also introduced the conditional/consequential matrix, which is a coding technique for charting intersections of micro and macro conditions/consequences and clarifying the connections between them.

Consistent with Strauss's pragmatist assumptions, Strauss and Corbin's 1990 book made action the centre of the matrix but their 1998 book placed the individual at the centre. If grounded theory methods remain an approach amenable to studying processes, then we must preserve a central focus on action. Whether or not axial coding and the conditional matrix advance grounded theory, make it cumbersome, or abandon its comparative principles remains unsettled (see Glaser, 1992; Stern, 1994; Robrecht, 1995; Charmaz, 2000, 2006a). Glaser (1992) argues that axial coding forces the data into preconceived categories and contends that his theoretical codes eliminate the need for axial coding. At the least, technical procedures add to the specialized language of grounded theory and make it more scientific.

Glaser's version of grounded theory remains positivist and Strauss and Corbin's retains elements of positivism such as investigator neutrality and reliance on method but

also promotes postpositivist inquiry in their recognition of narratives, description, and social structure. Charmaz's (2000, 2002a, 2006a) distinction between objectivist and constructivist grounded theory offers an epistemological handle for moving grounded theory out of its positivist roots and further into interpretive social science. She sets forth a constructivist agenda that adopts grounded theory strategies for coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling but shows how the resulting theory is constructed rather than discovered. A constructivist grounded theory is located in time, space, and circumstance, rather than general and separate from its origins, and aimed toward abstract understanding rather than explanation and prediction. Constructivists assume that (1) the researcher is a part of what he or she sees, not apart from it; (2) facts and values are connected, not separate; and (3) views are multiple and interpretative, not singular and self-evident. These assumptions lead to attending to the processes of producing data – and theories – and of representing research participants.

Clarke (2003, 2005, 2006) extends grounded

theory by integrating postmodern premises in her explication of situational analysis. She rejects twentieth-century grounded assumptions of generality, truth, discovery, and objectivity in favour of a situated grounded theory analysis that takes into account positionality, relativity, and reflexivity. Like numerous other scholars (e.g.

Charmaz, 1990, 2000, 2006a; Bryant, 2002, 2003; Henwood and Pidgeon, 2003, 2006),

Clarke sees grounded theories as constructed, not discovered. She states that researchers already have theoretical knowledge and likely considerable knowledge about the substantive area and specific situation of study before entering the field. Consistent with Strauss's intellectual heritage, Clarke (2006) not only constructs situational analysis from symbolic interactionist sociology and pragmatist philosophy, but argues that symbolic interactionism and grounded theory form a theory-method package in which ontology and epistemology are co-constitutive and non-fungible. Her position (1) builds on the pragmatist agenda of empirical study of experiences and practices in obdurate, but multiple realities; (2) assumes that perspectives on these realities, including researchers, are partial, situated, and constructed; and (3) takes the situation of inquiry as the unit of analysis. Clarke constructs this situation of inquiry

through augmenting grounded theory analytic strategies with maps depicting complex situations, social worlds/arenas, and positions taken and not taken.

Grounded theory methods offer a path toward constructing theory, but not a direct route. If grounded theory methods point the way to theorizing, why do numerous grounded theory studies remain descriptive? Three fundamental problems impede theoretical development. First, many grounded theorists do not attain the level of intimate familiarity (Blumer, 1969; Lofland and Lofland, 1995) with their studied phenomenon that permits looking at it from multiple perspectives. Instead, their view may remain partial and superficial. If so, they reproduce commonsense understandings of the phenomenon (see also Silverman, 2000) rather than regard such understandings as problematic objects of inquiry to take apart and begin to conceptualize. Subsequently, the finished categories remain mundane and descriptive; they lack theoretical incisiveness. A lack of intimate familiarity also reduces the researcher's awareness of the range of variation of the phenomenon, its reach, and connections with other phenomena and levels of analysis. Some grounded theorists (e.g. Glaser, 2001, 2003; Holton, 2007) express less concern about the limits of limited data collection. They argue that the inherent modifiability of a grounded theory allows extending or refining a theory later. Perhaps. But does it occur? Usually not. Thus, researchers need to aim for thoroughness and theoretical understanding of variation.

Second, the analytic process starts with coding in grounded theory but most coding remains topical, descriptive, and general. This coding leads to synthesizing, sorting, and summarizing data. All are useful but do not fracture the data analytically. A grounded theorist must take data and codes apart and define what constitutes them. While coding, we define points and moments in the data that suggest analytic leads or illuminate telling issues. What we do during initial analytic stages informs what we can develop during successive phases of the analytic process.

Third, many researchers who claim grounded theory allegiance do not move back and forth between data collection and refinement of abstract categories. The logic of grounded theory calls for successively raising the level of abstraction of the analysis through interrogating it with emergent questions, filling and checking categories through theoretical sampling, and asking which theories best account for this analysis. If a researcher's main category is descriptive, theoretical sampling remains at a low level

of abstraction and, moreover, many researchers who claim to adopt grounded theory strategies do not conduct theoretical sampling at all. Recognition of these problems can prompt researchers to gain the theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978) that leads to posing theoretical questions and pursuing theoretical connections.

THE TAKE-UP OF GROUNDED THEORY IN PSYCHOLOGY AND EMERGENCE OF QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Why and how has grounded theory become accepted as belonging not only to sociology but within psychology? What role has it played in the emergence of qualitative psychology? In this section we trace grounded theory's insertion into, and influence upon, psychology's methodological repertoire as it has expanded to include qualitative approaches and methods. It took 20 years for grounded theory to come to the attention of psychologists; however, having done so, it rapidly came to occupy a position in the vanguard of the qualitative approaches and methods used by psychologists.

The earliest grounded theory impetus: Clinical/practitioner psychology

The first psychologists who took up grounded theory principles and practices did so in the late 1980s (Rennie, Phillips and Quartaro, 1988). These psychologists worked primarily in the clinical psychology (mental health) research arena, and articulated two key areas of methodological concern (1) the need to seek out and utilize holistic methods for understanding and representing clients and research participants lived experiences and actions, *in situ*, and in their full complexity and (2) the importance of fostering forms of theorizing within psychology which can satisfy the demands of those seeking to combine their clinical/practical interests and academic research. Qualitative methods, and in particular grounded theory, were deemed to be important in both regards.

Researchers such as Rennie et al. found themselves outside the mainstream of an academic clinical psychology preoccupied with conducting controlled experimental studies – as was the discipline of psychology as a whole – and with emulating the standards and practices of a laboratory-based, natural science. To a large extent, this situation persists today, as the research concerns and priorities of academic clinical psychologists resist change for institutional reasons. Most recently, though, new demands significantly undercut, at least interrupt, traditional priorities. Clinical psychology research must now show itself to be more directly relevant to patients expressed concerns, as well as applying itself to the development and evaluation of treatment regimes and psychological/mental health services.

This latter situation has considerably strengthened the hand of those advocating the need for clinical (and its later derivative, health psychology) to adopt more flexible, qualitative, and contextualized methods. They aim to afford a better fit between clinical psychologists theories and practices and the meanings their clients assign to their experiences and problems, in the contexts of their lives and worlds. Hence, qualitative research methodologies and methods have gained acceptability, noticeably as part of clinical and health psychology's development in the UK. Grounded theory is one of the most popular and widely well regarded of such methods (e.g. Chamberlain, Stephens and Lyons, 1997; Marks and Yardley, 2004;

Slade and Priebe, 2006).

Questioning scientific orthodoxy, expanding psychological methods: Critical groundwork for grounded theory in the UK

Interest intensified in grounded theory from the early 1990s in the UK, as part of more general arguments for challenging scientific/methodological orthodoxy and creating a space for qualitative research within an experimentally, quantitatively and statistically defined discipline (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, 1994; Henwood and Nicolson, 1995). A major concern was with the unnecessary narrowness

of psychology's preoccupation with the control, prediction, and measurement of human behaviour and individual cognition (Hayes, 1997). Social psychologists who critiqued ideas typically taken for granted within psychology about the practices and procedures of knowing and science (Harré and Secord, 1972; Gergen, 1973, 1982; Parker, 1989) – and who are now often known as social constructionists (Burr, 1995) and critical psychologists (Stainton Rogers, 2003) – did the early groundwork. Proposals for an early progenitor of qualitative psychology, in the form of an approach called 'ethogenic' psychology (Harré, Clarke and De Carlo, 1985), were also put in place. Research following this approach would analyse meaningful activity *in situ*, along with participants' everyday understandings or subjective accounts. Intelligibility and orderliness of conduct would be established in relation to normative expectations, and its predictability by positing 'real generative psychological mechanisms and structures as opposed to abstract cause-effect (or in behavioural terms, stimulus-response) sequences. Although ethogenic psychology never really took hold, other than as an interesting but marginal set of theoretical ideas with a few published studies using the methods (e.g. Marsh, Rosser and Harré, 1978), it did flag the possibility of psychologists refusing to privilege modernist/dualistic practices such as the measurement of behaviour over the study of meaningful conduct and people's subjective accounts, and the use of non-objectivist inquiry methods. In this way it established the context of critical debate about psychological science, and prepared the ground for the entry of grounded theory into UK (and later US) psychology.

Grounded theory and qualitative psychology

In their contribution, which made grounded theory visible in the UK (and later in US psychology), Henwood and Pidgeon (1992, 1995, 2003) argued directly for the uptake of grounded theory in psychology, as part of their wider observation that psychology had too long neglected the potential benefits of qualitative research approaches and methods. In making this claim, Henwood and Pidgeon echoed one of the main arguments of critical, social constructionist and ethogenic psychologists – that psychology's (dualistic) way of defining itself as an objective science opened

up serious gaps in the logic and practice of psychological science. Additionally, they pointed out how grounded theory was a tried and tested qualitative social research method, developed within a cognate discipline (sociology), *epitomizing* many of the real potentials qualitative research offered to psychology. The reprinting of their 1992 article 'Qualitative research and psychological theorising in the edited volume *Social Research: Philosophy, Politics and Practice* (Hammersley, 1993) signalled a belated but welcome entry of psychological discussions of quality-quantity issues into the social science methodology literature. Shortly thereafter, Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove (1995) forecast the possibility of fundamentally changing the discipline of psychology through qualitative research methods. By including Charmaz's (1995b) chapter on grounded theory in their edited volume, they brought the method into the classroom and increased its visibility among disciplinary colleagues.

Grounded theory offered psychologists a set of clearly articulated principles and practices for working outside the confines of their discipline's highly prescriptive stance on the need to conduct experiments, utilize psychometric measures, and test hypotheses derived from universalizing prior theories. This method provided an entrée into the rigorous work of empirically gathering and analysing initially ill structured, qualitative data, and of making sense of them in theoretical terms. It opened up a no less trustworthy or valid, but far more creative and exploratory logic of inquiry than hypothetico-deductive theory and practice: 'a kind of research in which order is not very immediately attained, a messy intriguing kind of research in which the conclusions are not known before the investigations are carried out' (Gherardi and Turner, 1987: 12). It provided individual researchers with a set of working principles and practices aimed at both 'disciplining' and 'stimulating' the theoretical imagination.

Psychologists using grounded theory could inquire into research problems with substantive relevance to specific problem domains (sometimes called 'real world' inquiry). Although universalizing theories have their role in scientific research, they can engender researchers' excessive investment in winning arguments over highly generalized truth claims, making these theories of questionable value to researchers seeking to create useful knowledge. In this regard, and as specified by grounded theory, one's primary concern must be developing a close and meaningful understanding of a particular, substantive problem or social arena (e.g. the involvement of patients in decisions about their care; the introduction of new technology into a clinical setting; the

management of risks in hazardous industries). Out of such understanding comes the possibility of research knowledge of close relevance to the lives of people inhabiting such domains, and also to the work and decisions of practitioners and policy makers dealing with problems people encounter in their everyday worlds.

Grounded theory's specific intellectual antecedents in American pragmatist philosophy and the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1996) provided a further reason for its relevance to psychology, and role in stimulating the development of qualitative psychology. This linkage should not be surprising since both look back to the late nineteenth century psychological writings of Dilthey, who insisted that it would be mistaken to pursue causal explanation at the expense of understanding or *verstehen*, and that psychological and social investigations, alike, should ask questions about the creation of meaning. Pragmatist philosophy instantiates the idea that the value of any theoretical proposition or explanatory claim depends less on testing it against some absolute, transcendent reality, and more on considering the kinds of actions and consequences it allows for as people encounter and negotiate their empirical world (what, as a meaningful construction, it is 'good for'; Camic, Yardley and Rhodes, 2003). Symbolic interactionism articulates a coherent justification for studying not the factors leading to behaviour but how and why people come to attach meaning to their own and others' conduct, other objects of experience, and their efforts at understanding and representation (Blumer, 1969; see also Nicolson, 1999). Symbolic interactionism also addresses action as a central concern and, in this regard, the combination of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory creates the potential for forging stronger links between psychology and sociology.

Grounded theory, then, provided a serious option to those psychologists who found themselves too constrained by psychology's traditional experimental and psychometric outlook. It posed a different mode of inquiry, creditably located in more expansive and constructive discussions of how to pursue human inquiry and social science methods. It allowed psychologists to contemplate – many for the first time – how they might undertake exploratory research utilizing qualitative, real world data, and with the goal of understanding and theorizing about people's lived experiences and meaningful worlds, so that their research might – in the manner highlighted by Dey (2004) and Punch (2005) – make some contribution to the ways in which people live with their daily problems. Although ethogenic psychology tried to achieve some of these goals earlier,

especially centring the study of the meaningfulness to people of their conduct and experiences in their everyday worlds, its designation as a separate type of psychology had, perhaps, not helped to sustain it within psychology's institutional structures.

Of course, the prospects of any newly introduced perspective on method having longevity and impact are uncertain. Grounded theory's social science credentials could have made it seem too cumbersome for a discipline wedded to emulating a natural science model, while critical psychologists might have alighted upon more worthy voices and trajectories of science criticism and psychological practice (but see

Charmaz (2005) for developing a critical grounded theory). What seems to have happened in the case of grounded theory is that initial interest in, and discussion of, grounded theory's potentials has translated into considerable demand to know 'how to do psychological research using the method. The demand has come from clinical and health psychology research, as already noted, but also from social, critical, and applied psychology. The plethora of edited, introductory compilations of qualitative psychological methods texts appearing rapidly since the earliest days have almost invariably dedicate a chapter to grounded theory (e.g. Smith et al., 1995; Richardson, 1996; Hayes, 1997; Willig, 2001b), as have texts developed to support training in inter- and multidisciplinary human and social research including psychology (e.g. Rice and Ezzy, 1999; Ezzy, 2002). Increasingly, such chapters also draw upon a body of original research studies, a selection of which feature and are used to exemplify specific methodological points throughout the remainder of this chapter.

DIFFERING APPROACHES TO GROUNDED THEORY IMPLEMENTATION IN ORIGINAL RESEARCH STUDIES

One important message in introductory chapters on grounded theory as a methodology within qualitative psychology concerns the do-ability of research using grounded strategies and methods within this new field. Another concern we wish to highlight, is how researchers conduct original grounded theory over time, across a range of different

sub-areas of psychological research, and in the form of smaller and larger scale studies by single researchers (e.g. Bolger, 1999; Hirst, 1999; Nicolson, 1999); students and their supervisors (e.g. Sque and Payne,

1996; Tweed and Salter, 2000; Hussein and Cochrane, 2002; 2003); collaborative research partnerships – often between clinicians and academics (e.g. Borrill and Ijion-Foreman, 1996); and as part of funded psychological and multidisciplinary projects often having a medical focus (e.g. Michie, McDonald and Marteau, 1996; Yardley, Sharples, Beech and Lewith, 2001), although not always (Pidgeon, Blockley and Turner, 1986; Henwood and Pidgeon, 2001; Cox et al., 2003).

Looking across this range of studies, grounded theory ideas and practices have now been implemented and used in psychology, and in multidisciplinary studies involving psychology, in at least three different ways: (1) as a methodological approach supporting research that distinctively differs from traditional quantitative, hypothesis testing, experimental, psychological studies; (2) as a set of research principles and practical methods for describing, understanding and explicating substantive problems in less distinctive ways in its methodological approach to the quantitative, psychological mainstream; and (3) as a means of beginning an in-depth, qualitative investigation so that inquiries produce outcomes well grounded in data, while other complementary approaches and methods are used to complete theoretical explication and interpretation. This diverse set of interests is one reason behind the continuing, robust commitment shown in the perspective and methods of grounded theory within psychology, while consideration of these interests can illuminate debate about certain quite common practices.

Grounded theory as a ‘big Q’ qualitative methodology

Willig (2001a) and Stainton Rogers (2003), following Kidder and Fine's (1987) suggestion, introduce the terms ‘big Q’ and ‘little q’ to highlight the major differences brought to the tasks of designing, executing and reporting psychological studies when working outside the canon of hypothetico-deductive method. Willig describes the

meaning of the two terms as follows: ‘ “big Q” refers to open-ended, inductive research methodologies that are concerned with theory generation and the exploration of meanings, whereas “little q” refers to the incorporation of non-numerical data techniques into hypothetico-deductive designs

(Willig, 2001a: 11). The place of grounded

theory studies within this schema is clear: they cannot be ‘little q since ‘ “little q” methods of data collection and analysis do not engage with the data to gain new insights into the ways in which participants construct meaning and/or experience their world; instead they start with a hypothesis and researcher defined categories against which the qualitative data are then checked (Willig, 2001a: 11). Accordingly, Willig depicts grounded theory as the first of her ‘big Q methodologies enabling psychologists to explore ‘lived experiences and participants’ meanings’ (Willig, 2001a: 11).

In discussing the position of grounded theory within Willig's schema, characterizing grounded theory as more ‘inductive in nature does not mean reverting to a naively dualistic way of thinking about qualitative inquiry. Grounded theory procedures and practices are inductive in the sense of not seeking to confirm extant theory. But, as previously noted in this chapter and in earlier writings (Charmaz, 1990, 1995, 2003), they are also much more because they involve pushing forward understanding and theorizing through the researcher engaging intensively with the data, investigating its potentially varied and multiple contextual meanings. Within psychology, Henwood and Pidgeon have referred to this mode of inquiry as more ‘exploratory and ‘generative, and (following Bulmer, 1979) as involving a ‘flip-flop’ between data and its conceptualization. Willig (2001a) describes the qualitative inquiry process as epitomized by grounded theory as more ‘investigative in nature, always seeking to find out answers to questions, and never merely seeking to find out whether a single hypothesis is false or true when tested against a particular sample or quota of data.

One arena illustrating how psychologists have harnessed the exploratory/generative and questioning/investigative potential of grounded theory as ‘big Q’ psychology is critical, qualitative social psychological (specifically feminist) studies into women ‘s life experiences and mental health. Hirst (1999) chose to conduct a qualitative, grounded theory study of seven women who had experienced depression because

extant research on the causes of depression had used androcentric models that took men's experiences as the normative standard, and 'divorced (theorizing) from the perceptions of those who have actively experienced depression (Hirst, 1999: 180). In such circumstances, grounded theory constituted the perfect antidote given its methodological objective to 'create theory that is intimately linked to the reality of the individuals being studied ' (Hirst, 1999: 180). Grounded theory studies showing a partial commitment to questioning the presumed value of prior, externally derived, universally applicable (i.e. etic) theories might be censured for lacking critical reflexivity. Nonetheless, Hirst 's study illustrates this practice when she writes reflexively about her expectation that a particular theoretical category in the prior literature – the constraints operating on women's self-perceptions through cultural constructions of the 'good woman ' – would feature centrally within the psychosocial transactions leading women to understand their positions in ways that rendered them 'feeling depressed. Following from her methodological stance of gleaning theoretical explication only through creatively and rigorously interacting with her (in this case interview) data, her emergent theory turned out to be surprising and quite different. Specifically, through charting her participants experiences of a legacy of betrayal in relationships with significant others, and how this led to a process of 'becoming demoralized (e.g. through feeling unloved, unworthy, and unable to change their lives for the better), she was far better able to account for the aetiology of the unhappiness and, ultimately, depression, of the women involved in her study.

The big Q/little q distinction encapsulates grounded theory's potential in supporting the practice of more 'critical ' forms of applied, social and health/clinical psychology. Grounded theorists and critical psychologists concerns overlap as both seek to introduce a freshness and newness into arenas of investigation that are not well served by working within the parameters of normal, theory-testing, quantitative experimental science. Both specifically question reliance upon forms of prior theorizing – and also reality defining forms of public discourse (e.g. Hallowell and Lawton, 2002) – that embody dominant frames and values. Grounded theory also offers a specific set of principles and practices that can strengthen critical psychologists goal of understanding and explicating people's own life experiences, everyday problems, and the complexity of psychological and social processes within particular, substantive inquiry domains.

Grounded theory forms outside 'big Q' psychology within psychology and related disciplines

In order to include recognizable forms of grounded theory studies lying outside the concerns and achievements of critical psychology, we now consider at greater length how medical sociologists and practitioner-researchers have used grounded theory methodology and method. Medical sociology has had a long and vibrant history of major grounded theory studies in the social psychology of health and illness (e.g. Strauss and Glaser, 1975; Corbin and Strauss, 1988; Charmaz, 1991; Karp, 1996, 2003; Baszanger, 1998). This area shares overlapping interests with psychologists as evidenced in Charmaz's and Karp's work, which we discuss here. Charmaz (1987, 1991,

1995a, 2002b, 2006b) emphasizes individual experience and meaning construction in her studies of people with chronic illnesses. She uses grounded theory strategies to plumb ordinary meanings and makes them interesting objects of study, such as 'being supernormal' (1987: 296) 'having a "good" day' (1991: 50), 'making trade-offs' (1991: 143) and 'setting priorities' (2006b: 30). This strategy simultaneously fosters remaining open and curious about studied life, learning the logic of research participants worlds, and minimizes importing disciplinary concepts that contain imputed judgments, whether of participants motivations or their worlds.

Charmaz (1991) begins with sensitizing concepts including self, identity, meaning, and duration, and explores possible connections with time. She ends with major ideas about the self situated in time and links the self with specific categories such as 'unchanging time, 'drifting time, 'good days, 'identifying moments, while challenging professional concepts such as 'denial of illness along the way. Grounded theory provides a lens for seeing beyond established professional concepts rather than only seeing through them. David Karp (1996) begins with self, identity, and illness career as sensitizing concepts and traces how people with depression progressively reinterpret the locus of trouble from relationships and situations to having an impaired self. He contends that they assume careers as mental patients with distinctive identity transformations by

coming to view their depression as a sickness of the self. The following phases result in identity turning points: (1) a period of inchoate feelings when the person lacks words to express what he or she feels, (2) a phase of concluding that something is wrong with me, (3) a crisis that pinpoints illness and initiates formal help-seeking, and (4) reformulation of identity based upon illness. Karp supplies direct cues to his use of a realist grounded theory throughout the book. For example, when arguing against anti-psychiatry advocates who deny the existence of mental illness, Karp says that he 'would rather stick with verifiable lines of analysis that arise out of my interview materials (Karp, 1996: 55).

In his later study of caregivers of mentally ill persons, Karp (Karp, 2003; Karp and Tanarugsachock, 2000) found that they experience a parallel career of predictable moments of redefining their obligations to their family member who has mental illness. His treatment of an *in vivo* category, 'drawing the line', reflects a sophisticated grounded theory processual analysis. Like most researchers, Karp does not detail his analytic methods in his book; however, he does specify them in his co-authored article. In the book, Karp writes about his data-collection methods of participation in a support group and six early interviews as preliminary to conducting 54 in-depth interviews (although he continued to attend support group meetings throughout the project). Karp does tell us that drawing the line emerged as a category over and over in caregivers stories. Identifying this major process gave him the grist for analysing fundamental meanings of obligation and family.

Practitioner-researchers have also adopted grounded theory methodology and method within psychological and related subjects allied to medicine (especially nursing studies). These scholars show fidelity to the grounded theory methodological package, and commonly seek a strict application of the approach as one among a number of more varied and specific forms of research practice. To be at their best such studies must avoid merely setting out to emulate grounded theory by imposing standardized procedures, thereby falling foul of robust criticism in medical sociology for reducing methodological practice to technical essentialism (Barbour, 2003) and in psychology to 'methodogma' (Reicher, 2000). As far as we know, discussions and reflections on this situation are few: whereas the risks posed by poor methodological practice are a subject of discussion (both in medical sociology and nursing studies), addressing

questions of appropriate variation in practice is rarer. Yet, paying attention to both is likely to prove enlightening, as exemplified by Henwood and Pidgeon's (1995) and Pidgeon and Henwood's (2004) discussion of how organizational schema, taxonomies and typologies may represent alternative, perhaps more achievable, goals for smaller scale grounded theory studies than the development of an explanatory theory. Accordingly, in our following remarks, we begin to identify such variations across a range of useful examples of practitioner-researcher studies that we have found, and treat the question of their methodological fidelity/flexibility as a foothold for appraising them.

Cohen's (1995) study of how families with a child suffering from chronic, life threatening illness manage the stress of uncertainty about the child's prognosis exemplifies a grounded theory study in nursing studies. It provides a clear and specific description of how the key, defining features of grounded theory design and practice contributed to the process and products of the reported study (see, for example, discussion of its implementation of the principles and practices of *emergent design*, *theoretical sampling*, progressive identification of *categories of analysis* from consideration of the data, presentation of a *theoretical model*). Nonetheless, an *essential openness* characterizes how even this study, with its apparent 'textbook-style' fidelity to the grounded theory method, 'adopts' some of grounded theory's defining features. Cohen speaks of employing Strauss and Corbin's (1990) refinements to Glaser and Strauss's original grounded theory thesis, refinements many read as recommending building a theory around a core, emergent, theoretical category model in order to explain it (e.g. Tweed and Salter, 2000). Yet Cohen's primary object of explication is not, in fact, its core emergent category of uncertainty per se, but the stepwise process as families moved from one discernable stage to another (from a 'lay explanatory', to a 'legitimation, to a 'medical diagnostic stage) and an effort to account for 'significant variation in the parents behaviour that might have heuristic value (Cohen, 1995: 42). Accordingly, the study illustrates well how multiple options for finding analytical and interpretive pathways are held within the framework of grounded theory methodology and methods. Grounded theory was, to all intents and purposes, adopted as a complete and coherent set of strategies and methods, but still choices had to be made on how to use it to meet the emergent demands of the project.

In health and clinical psychology, grounded theory is the methodology of choice typically because of the close attention it enables investigators to pay to articulating the categories of experience and meaning that make up people's subjective/phenomenal worlds. This is considered as both a major objective itself, and an inextricable part of investigations into the social and psychological problems, questions and issues under investigation – often concerning dynamic social psychological processes. Nochi (1998: 874), for example, uses the grounded theory method to 'clarify the categories around the experiences of self that people with traumatic brain injury (TBI) are likely to have, and 'to discover main themes and categories in the experiences of loss of self (Nochi, 1998: 870). Bolger (1999: 343) aims to 'describe the phenomenon of emotionally painful experiences that occur as a result of life events and as a consequence of exploring those events within a therapeutic context and then 'identify the processes involved in working through emotional pain, highlighting both the transformative qualities in the painful experience and the components responsible for the continued avoidance of pain. Wright and Kirby (1999) sought to clarify and explicate the *in vivo/in situ* categories of experience and meaning of 'adjustment to chronic illness relevant in the lives and worlds of people suffering end stage renal failure (ESRF), as a strategy to overcome poor conceptualization of the term in a research literature dominated by notions of adjustment as 'a return to normal social roles (e.g. work), an absence of psychiatric caseness (e.g. on depression) or compliance/adherence with treatment (Wright and Kirby, 1999: 259).

Clearly, for certain research purposes, and following some of the general principles of qualitative inquiry (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1985), charting or mapping out such categories of experience and meaning in more depth and detail than is possible in other forms of research aiming to count occurrences of events and establish general patterns, can be a valid research goal in and of itself. To an extent, this can also be the case, in grounded theory studies, when reporting early 'descriptive' stages of a project. In addition, conducting and reporting a detailed, rich or 'thick' (Geertz, 1973) description can be a primary means for researchers to demonstrate that they have, indeed, 'grounded any theoretical abstractions they make in familiarity, immersion and process of working with the data. Nonetheless, grounded theory studies that report primarily descriptive findings have elicited criticisms from numerous different perspectives. In the case of psychology, three main criticisms have arisen: (1) merely

presenting the details and structure of experience does not amount to articulating a theory (a criticism that possibly insists on only using a complete version or a single 'true' definition of grounded theory); (2) arriving at categories of meaning and experience does not articulate or interpret their psychological meaning from the perspective of individual actors; and (3) simply reporting categories of experience and meaning does not provide for an analysis of social dynamics or process, nor does it answer specific questions about or explore the theoretical and practical implications of the data (e.g. Willig, 2001b). From a sociological point of view, the weakness of such descriptive grounded theory studies lies in their reliance on a loose presentation of themes derived from the data in the manner of abstract empiricism, as if the data merely speak for themselves, and where the researcher fails to provide any analytical framing or reading of the data (Silverman, 2000). Note that, while these criticisms can point to areas of weakness in grounded theory studies, they do not argue against researchers showing variation in the way they balance the demands for detailed description and analytical/theoretical explication of participants experiences and meanings.

A further, notably different manifestation of grounded theory practice occurs when the method is no longer treated as a distinctively descriptive and analytical, open-ended/exploratory and investigative, creative/generative and exhaustive/rigorous *mode of inquiry*, but rather as a stage in an overall research process adopting a verificationist approach to method. For example, Michie et al. (1996: 455–6), in their study of family members attending a clinic for those at high risk of inheriting bowel cancer, used grounded theory data analysis methods with interview data as a 'pilot study to generate hypotheses about how people respond to predictive genetic testing 'to be tested in a prospective, wider scale, quantitative study. Borrill and Iljon-Foreman (1996), having established a plausible model of therapeutic change following a short course of cognitive behavioural therapy, turned to discuss the need to 'validate the grounded theory in order to determine which components of the model were necessary and sufficient to produce change. Yardley, Sharples, Beech and Lewith (2001) used grounded theory, in an interview study of people receiving chiropractic treatment for back pain, as a starting point for a more complex, evolving, multi-phased design, shifting from an exploratory/generative to a verificationist study in order to ascertain whether it was (dynamic) symptom perceptions, other factors (such as abstract illness representations and/or communication by and confidence in the therapist) or a

combination of factors that influenced treatment perceptions and acceptability. Each of these studies points to the continuing pull of discrete variable analysis and generalist hypothesis testing within clinical research, while also highlighting the valued (if, in its own terms, limited) role played by grounded theory within it.

Grounded theory used in combination with other approaches to achieve theoretical explication and interpretation

A further variation in the implementation of grounded theory within psychology is its use in combination with other approaches. Studies in this mould clearly depart from the idea of grounded theory being a standardized package, conceiving of it instead as part of a flexible toolkit of methods. In recent years, a good deal of interest has emerged in social science internationally in developing principled and practical forms of 'methodological combining' – interest that will further encourage researchers not to think of methods as hermetically sealed (e.g. Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2000; Todd, Nerlich, McKeown and Clarke, 2004; Henwood and Lang, 2005; Moran-Ellis, 2006). Within qualitative psychology, in fact, investigators have always made decisions and choices about methodology and method in the light of a broadening comparative, possibly critical, awareness and understanding of a range of qualitative perspectives and methods with first 'homes' within and beyond psychology (e.g. discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenological theory and method, voice relational psychology).

Grounded theory and discourse analysis have been used as co-contributors as psychologists have worked across methodological boundaries. In their investigation into how men's sense of masculinity is implicated in their involvement in crime, Willott and Griffin (1999:449) used grounded theory tactics to identify a stratum of *in vivo* codes (e.g. earning, money, and the family) in the form of 'words and phrases used repeatedly by discussants. These codes were then used 'to divide the huge quantity of data into manageable pieces, before moving onto the more theoretical phase of the analysis (Willott and Griffin, 1999: 449). At this phase, the researchers began to attach greater significance to ideas and practices from discourse theory: focusing in particular on how

men positioned themselves in their accounts and arguments, and cultural discourses of gender, masculinity and criminality. In their study of Northern Irish women's experiences of abortion, Boyle and McEvoy (1998: 291), again, used grounded theory procedures at earlier stages of analysis for: 'coding descriptions of the women's experiences in terms of a chronological sequence', 'identifying reference to context at each stage in the abortion process, and using the resulting 'themes to guide further reading ... to try to ensure as full as possible use of the women's accounts. In the theoretical explication and interpretation that followed these authors devised an analytical account relating to the 'contradictions, apparent uncertainties, and silences in the women's accounts *and* the 'chronological stages of the abortion process, in order to encapsulate key concerns emanating from the discourse analysis and grounded theory readings conducted throughout the study, respectively.

Typically, techniques for achieving theoretical abstraction, integration and explication in grounded theory studies are through the constant comparative method, Strauss and Corbin's three C's coding framework, Glaser's integrating families of theoretical codes, and Charmaz's theoretically sensitive interaction with and interpretations of data – which is perhaps the culmination of grounded theorists aim to pay constant attention, from the outset, to theoretical possibilities in the data. In the two cited exemplar studies, such tactics are not discussed, and do not seem to have been used, although some comparisons may be made with Charmaz's approach. Rather, a final framework for reporting the results was arrived at as the authors drew upon a range of ideas drawn explicitly from theory and the extant literature, to assist them in interpreting, integrating and explicating the varied, inconsistent and ambivalent meanings in their data. This practice points to the range of ways in which it is possible to bring analytical closure to studies using grounded theory in combination with other qualitative perspectives and methods.

CONCLUSION

In summary, grounded theory studies in psychology attest to the strength of the method for producing fresh ideas and challenging past truths. The rapid acceptance and ascendance of the method in the discipline confirm its usefulness in developing qualitative psychology. Like other scholars, perhaps psychologists first adopted

grounded theory as a method of managing data and engaging in substantive coding (see also Urquhart, 2003). Yet grounded theory offers much more than coding strategies and data management. Raising the analytic level of initial coding practices is a start. Psychologists can enjoy a privileged place of access to people's concerns and experience and a sensitivity to felt meanings. Grounded theory gives these psychologists tools to treat them analytically in ways that ultimately afford individuals new ways of understanding their experience.

For academic as well as clinical psychologists, creating increasingly more theoretical memos advances the analytic process and can spark reflexivity about it. Engaging in theoretical sampling to sharpen abstract categories and to dig deeper into the phenomena can also give clarity and precision. The potential of grounded theory's constant comparative method has yet to be mined as fully as it might be for constructing persuasive critical analyses to effect change. In short, taken to its logical extension, grounded theory holds much promise for new theorizing in psychology, for critical inquiry within the discipline, and for innovative links between academic ideas and clinical practice.

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