Grounded Theory: A New Theoretical Approach to Qualitative Research

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Abstract:

Qualitative approach is increasingly becoming important in research. The purposes of qualitative research are to describe, explore and explain phenomenon being studied. The general area of qualitative research includes several research methods, such as ethnography, ethno methodology, case studies, participant observation, phenomenology, ethno methodology and grounded theory. This paper offers a brief introduction of grounded theory as research methodology, its historical origins, and clarification of the methods, meanings and stages of grounded theory in research.

What is Grounded Theory?

During the last thirty years sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss have formulated and developed in great detail their grounded theory perspective on social science research. In their work they have consistently argued for the inductive discovery of theory grounded in systematically analyzed data.Their inductive perspective has stemmed in part from their dissatisfaction with the prevalent hypothetico- deductive practice of testing "great man" sociological theories. Grounded theory is a method that has been extensively across a variety of social science disciplines. The basic tenet of this approach is that, a theory must emerge from the data, or in other words, a theory must be grounded in the data. Grounded theory describes a methodological approach to the discovery and generation of "adequate sociological theory"(Wells 1995) directly from qualitative data. This approach was articulated by Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss in their seminal work" The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative research" (1967). The objective of the grounded theoretical approach as interpreted by Wells (1995) is that it is an exploration of the validity in social interactions, the social structural conditions that support the interaction, the consequence of the interactions and the conditions that support changes in interactions over times. Strauss and Corbin observed grounded theory as (-- inductively derived from the study of the phenomena it represents', that is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomena. Therefore, data collection analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other." (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) These factors assist the rapid application of the methods of Grounded theory and also provide a framework for the interpretation

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of results. Grounded Theory also employs a rigorous methodology based on the canons of scientific research.

Grounded Theory is not a theory at all. It is a method, an approach, and a strategy. "Grounded theory is best defined as a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data"(Keith F Punch 1998).Grounded means that the theory will be generated on the basis of data 'the theory will therefore be grounded in data'. It means that the objective of collection and analysis of research data is to generate theory. Grounded Theory has already been emerged as a leading paradigm in empirical qualitative studies in social sciences and psychology. As an inductive method it attempts to construct new theories of human actions and experiences of social world."

An important feature of Grounded Theory is theoretical sensitivity. It is related to personal quality of the researcher and relates to understanding the meaning of data. Glaser (1978) has theoretical sensitivity as the process of developing the insight with which a research comes to the researcher situation. Such insights should be conceptual rather than concerts. It is often referred to as a creative aspect of Grounded Theory. It involves the researcher working in the area to obtain experience and expertise. These areas, by gaining theoretical sensitivity, the researcher will be able to recognize important data and formulate conceptually dense theory.

In an important context, grounded theory is generally regarded having evolved from and continues to be compatible with the symbolic interactions approach to the study of human behaviors(Robrecht 1995, Wells 1995) which characterized the work of sociologist George Herbert Mead and later that of Blumer (19996). Symbolic interactionism, as articulated by Blumer, is based on three key premises." Human beings act toward things based on the meaning that the things have for them: the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that the individual has with his fellows: and meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process and by the person dealing with the meanings that the encounter" (Blumer 1996)

Methods

The basic idea of the grounded theory approach is to read (and re—read) a textual data base (such as a corpus of fields notes) and "discover" or label variables (called categories, concepts and properties) and their relationships. The ability to perceive variables and relationships is termed "theoretical sensitivity" and is affected by a number of things including one's reading of the literature and one's use of techniques designed to enhance sensitivity.

The Generations of Grounded Theory

The foundation process of grounded theory is a constant comparative analysis of the qualitative data. These are collected and in turn the dynamic interrelationship these data have with hypothesis development and ultimately, in generating a theory. In grounded theory, data collection and theory generation are considered as "two parts of the same process" (Robrecht 19995, Glaser& Strauss 1967).

The original derivation of grounded theory focused critically on the generation of theory from data without reference to the researcher's prior knowledge of the phenomena under investigation, arguably lacked clarity and precision in defining the methodological procedures or steps required to the researchers in correctly undertaking the process (Schatzman 1991)

In generating Grounded Theory, Glaser& Strauss emphasized that a balance should be maintained between prescription and generality. They outlined the following steps for the generation of grounded theory:

a) **Data collection**—Grounded theory is a tool foe qualitative investigation. In Grounded Theory the commonly referred forms of data collection are social interaction, field studies, participant observation and semi- structured interviews. This is not to suggest that other techniques for capturing qualitative data on human interaction may not be appropriate in a given situation for data collection.

b) **Data analysis**- Grounded theory focuses on the constant comparison of the data leading to coding and then categorization of the same.

Constant comparison focuses on "the simultaneous conceptualization and assessment of the similarities and differences in social interactions" in search of a "core idea that could explain variability in interactions" (Wells 1995). In the process of data collection, data analysis and hypothesis is interrelated and cyclical in that, each may influences the other.

To assist the researcher in coding/ categorization of data and the selection of the core idea that explain the phenomena under investigation, Schatzman (19991) proposed a new model of naturalistic qualitative research as an alternative to, and an extension of grounded theory that he called' Dimensional Analysis'. Schatzmans model, taking very much the symbolic intractionist approach, arguably offers greater operational guidance to the researcher in categorizing or dimensionalising the data through a process of inductive and deductive reasoning.

C) Theory delimitation—once the core idea has been identified, new data on interaction is sought to "confirm and disconfirm the elaborated concepts and the relationship among them" (Wells 1995). This process is continued until no new insights into these relationships in terms of his core idea or dimension rerevealed.

d) Theory definition—Definition of the theory is the final stage of the process. The resulting

Grounded theory is intended to be a rich "powerful and parsimonious explanation of the investigated phenomenon" (Wells 1995). The better view seems to be that, as it is a form of inductive reasoning, once a theory has been arrived at, the process itself is complete and testing of the theory is not required to confirm its status as the validly is grounded (Miller& Fredericks 1999).

Judging Grounded Theory

But now the question is, how does one determine at the conclusion of the process that a grounded theory has been arrived at? What are tests will be applied to judge the applicability of the theory to the phenomena under investigation? In answer to these questions, Glaser & Strauss (1967) propose four criteria for judging a theory as grounded: 1) It should fit the phenomena, provided it has been carefully derived from diverse data and is adherent to the common reality of the area; 2) It should provide understanding, and be understandable; 3) Because the data is comprehensive, it should provide generality, in that the theory includes extensive variation and is abstract enough to be applicable to a wide variety of contexts;4) It should provide control, in the sense of starting the conditions under which the theory applies and describing a reasonable basis for action.

The guidelines for theory judgment suggested by Glaser & Strauss, it is referred that the resultant grounded theory is abele to be readily applied in practice by both laymen en practitioners and academic researchers.

Stages in Grounded Theory:

Strauss and Corbin (1990) described an important feature of the 'Grounded Theory' method involves systematic process of data collection and analysis that are summarized below:

Data acquisition

In 'Grounded Theory methodology' data are collected in the same way, using the same techniques as in other research methodologies. Data may be qualitative or quantitative or combinations of both types. The analysis of collected data in research is often referred to as 'coding'. Codes are tags, names, or labels and coding is therefore the process of putting tags, names or labels against pieces of the data. The pieces may be individual words, or small or large volumes of the data. The point of assigning label is to attach meaning to the pieces of data, and these labels serve a number of functions. Coding indexes the data, providing a basis for storage and retrieval. Data is coded differently depending on the purpose of the data and the stage of the project. Three stages of data analysis are involved in Grounded Theory. These are open coding, axial coding and selective coding

a) Open coding

Open coding is the process of selecting and naming categories from the analysis of the data. It is the initial stage in data acquisition and relates to describing overall features of the phenomena under study. Variables involved in the phenomenon are identified, labeled, categorized and related together in an outline form. In this stage, the properties of a category are described or dimensionalised. This involves placing or locating the property along a continuum within a range of possible values. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the processes as follows:

"Open coding is the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examinations of data---. During open coding the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data. While various questions are asked, the key questions is the one above—'what is this piece of data an example of?'

b) **Axial (or theoretical) coding**

Axial coding is the next stage after open coding. In axial coding data are put together in new ways. This is achieved by utilizing a 'coding paradigm'; i.e. a system of coding that seeks to identify causal relationships between categories. The aim of the coding paradigm is to make explicit connections between categories and sub- categories. This process is also often referred to as the 'paradigm model' and involves explaining and understanding relationships between categories in order to understand the phenomena to which they relate.

c) **Selective coding**

Selective coding involves the process of selecting and identifying the core category and systematically relating it to other categories. It involves validating those relationships, filling in, and refining and developing those categories. Categories are integrated together and a Grounded Theory is arrived at. In selective coding, therefore, the objective is to integrate and pull together the developing analysis. The theory to be developed must have a central focus, around which it is integrated. This will be the core category of the theory. Keith F Punch illustrated the key concepts in grounded theory analysis in the following Table:

Table: Key components in Grounded Theory analysis

1. Overall process	Constant comparative method	
	Coding- memoing- elaborating	
	Theoretical sorting and integrating	
2. Types of coding	Coding	Codes
	Open	Substantive
	Axial	Theoretical
	Selective	Core
3. Guidelines	Theoretical sensitivity	
	Theoretical sampling	
	Theoretical saturation	
4. Other	Basic social problem	
	Basic social process	

Source: Keith F Punch (1998): Introduction to Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approach. London. Sage publication.

Memoing

Memoing is the second basic operation in qualitative data analysis and it begins at the start of the analysis, along with coding. Glaser's widely used definition of memos:

"A memo is the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding—it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages--- it exhausts the analyst's momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration". (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 72; Glaser 1978: 83-4)

The memos can cover many things. They may be substantive, theoretical, methodological or even personal. When they are substantive and theoretical, these memos may suggest still deeper concepts than the coding has so far produced. Thus they may point towards new patterns, and a higher level of pattern coding. They may also elaborate a concept or suggest ways of doing, that, or they may relate different concepts to each other. This last type of memos produces propositions:

Conclusion:

Grounded Theory has been accepted as an important research, methodology in the investigation of complex social interaction in the social science fields. Grounded Theory originates as an inductive method to construct new theories of human actions and experiences of social world. The human interaction that occurs in organizations, grounded theory should conceivably be a potentially useful methodology for the exploration and examinations of organizationally contexted human interaction. It is of greatest value when the researcher has little knowledge about the subject of field qualitative inquiry that is likely to be the case in relation to the investigation of many organizationally contexted phenomena. Grounded theories greatest strengths are two fold. First it permits the investigation of higher level and lower level factors of causation, which is critical when investigating and seeking to explain variability in complex human interactions (Miller& Fredericks 1999). Second, as arguably as extension of Mill's (1970) methods of inductive reasoning, grounded theory is a unique form of theory construction (Miller & Fredericks 1999)

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