

GROUNDING THEORY (Adapted from Myers, 2013, ch. 9)

INTRODUCTION

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that seeks to develop theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. Grounded theory is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data. One of the main differences between grounded theory and other qualitative research methods is its specific approach to theory development - grounded theory suggests that there should be a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis.

Many qualitative researchers in business and management use grounded theory solely as a way of coding their data. As a coding technique, grounded theory is certainly very useful. However, there is more to grounded theory than this; it is also a comprehensive method of theory generation. In fact, one of the attractions of grounded theory for researchers in business and management is the promise that it will help to develop new concepts and theories of business-related phenomena, theories that are firmly grounded in empirical phenomena. Hence, the true potential of grounded theory is only realized if researchers use the method to progress from coding to theory generation.

However, if all you want to do is use some of the grounded theory coding techniques for your qualitative data analysis, and some other theory as an overarching framework for your study, then that is acceptable.

DEFINING GROUNDING THEORY

In 1967 Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published a seminal work in grounded theory entitled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This book outlined a research methodology that aimed at systematically deriving theories of human behaviour from empirical data. Subsequently, grounded theory became an accepted qualitative research method within the social sciences, nursing, and many other fields.

Originally Glaser and Strauss defined grounded theory as 'the discovery of theory from data - systematically obtained and analysed in social research' (1967. p. 1).

It can be seen that a grounded theory researcher does not start with a set of hypotheses that he or she seeks to test. Grounded theory is not really designed for hypothesis testing. Rather, the concepts and the theory are supposed to emerge from the data. To ensure that the concepts do indeed emerge from the data, as a general rule the researcher should make sure that he or she has no preconceived theoretical ideas before starting the research.

This injunction to have no preconceived theoretical ideas before starting the research is sometimes interpreted as meaning that the researcher using grounded theory should not conduct a literature review before starting the empirical research. If this were the case, it would go against the advice of almost every other kind of research, including qualitative research. However, the originators of grounded theory did not argue against conducting a literature review per se; they only argued that the grounded theory researcher should make sure that a reading of the prior literature does not stifle creativity. A grounded theory researcher must be careful to avoid having preconceived theoretical ideas about what he or she might find. The key thing is to be creative and have an open mind, particularly in the early stages of the research.

Once the qualitative data have been obtained, the researcher moves on to qualitative data analysis.

HOW TO DO GROUNDING THEORY RESEARCH

After you have collected and transcribed your data, the first stage of qualitative data analysis in grounded theory is called *open coding*. Open coding involves analysing the text (e.g. a sentence or paragraph) and summarising this text by the use of a succinct code. Open codes are descriptive: that is, they identify, name, and categorise phenomena found in the text. Descriptions are the most basic of conceptual constructs, where analysis has not proceeded beyond identifying concepts at the level of 'categories'.

As you continue to do the open coding, one of the most important activities is one of *constant comparison*. Grounded theory suggests that you should constantly compare and contrast qualitative data in the search for similarities and differences. This is done by comparing the codes that you produce. To start with, the codes and concepts that are produced have a provisional and tentative character, but as the analysis progresses they become more settled and certain. The differentiated concepts become categories. Categories may have detailed 'properties'.

After open coding, the second stage is the interpretation of categories and properties. This stage is sometimes called *axial coding* or *selective coding*. The main activity of this stage is to refine the conceptual constructs that might help explain whatever interaction occurs between the descriptive categories.

The third stage, *theoretical coding*, involves the formulation of a theory. The aim is to create inferential and/or predictive statements (often in the form of hypotheses) about the phenomena. This is achieved by specifying explicit causal and/or correlational linkages between individual interpretive constructs. The system of inferences covers the whole of the area under investigation.

Although as a general rule we tend to think of data analysis coming after data gathering, in grounded theory there is the principle of overlapping analysis and data collection. Probably the most distinctive feature of grounded theory is deciding on analytical grounds where to sample from next. This principle is called *theoretical sampling*. The idea is that as data analysis proceeds, the emergent theory develops. This emergent theory might suggest the need for a more focused period of data collection (i.e. theoretical sampling of the data). The research questions gradually become more refined as dimensions of the research problem become clearer through analysis.

Given this feature of the grounded theory method, I think it is advisable for researchers to think about the impact of this on fieldwork design. It may mean that you need to interview the same person a second time, or you may need to make several visits to the same field site.

Throughout every stage it is important that you put on your critical and creative thinking cap. I have come across quite a few students who assume that, because the grounded theory method provides such detailed procedures for analysing qualitative data, it virtually guarantees the production of results that are valid and rigorous. It is tempting to think that an excellent thesis can be guaranteed, as long as you use the grounded theory method. This idea, however, is a grave mistake. While the grounded theory method helps to bring some standardisation and rigour to qualitative data analysis, the use of grounded theory does not guarantee that you will come up with original and interesting results. Creativity is essential and grounded theory procedures should not be followed in a dogmatic and inflexible manner.

It is important, therefore, to follow the grounded theory procedures carefully, while at the same time trying to foster your own critical and creative inspiration.

REFERENCES

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company

Myers, M. D. (2013). *Qualitative research in business and management* (2nd edn). London: Sage.