

**EXPERIENCING  
GROUNDED THEORY**



# EXPERIENCING GROUNDED THEORY

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO LEARNING, DOING, MENTORING,  
TEACHING, AND APPLYING GROUNDED THEORY

**ODIS E. SIMMONS, PHD**



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*Experiencing Grounded Theory: A Comprehensive Guide to Learning, Doing,  
Mentoring, Teaching, and Applying Grounded Theory*

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*This book is dedicated to Barney Glaser*

*Mentor—Colleague—Friend*

*To whom I owe much*



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they continued to teach and mentor newcomers to grounded theory. Kara founded and administers a nonprofit online research training organization, “The Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies” from which students around the world can receive various forms of training in classic grounded theory and other methodologies.

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## Preface

This book follows my experience of grounded theory from the moment I serendipitously picked Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss' *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* from a shelf in my undergraduate college bookstore, to the present. It covers multiple categories of my experience. I did not write it as a guide into the grounded theory literature. A great deal of that is available and you don't need me to help you find it, particularly given the ease of finding it through an internet search. You would be a better judge of which of this literature would be relevant and interesting to you than I would. I did not cover or cite much of this literature because it has little to do with the content of the book. I also wanted the book to be a clean read without constant distractions with citations and discussions of external literature. About 95% of what I learned and know about grounded theory came from my having participated in graduate school seminars of the originators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss, from their publications, from many one-on-one conversations with them and other valued grounded theory colleagues over the years, and from my fifty years of experience conducting, teaching, and devising ways of using grounded theory for practical applications. A more direct way of putting this is if none of this literature existed, valuable as it is, the content of this book would have been little affected.

To avoid potential confusion I'll mention that before 1982 I used my stepfather's surname, Bigus. Subsequently, I returned to my birth surname, Simmons. My dissertation, early publications, and first two academic employments were under the Bigus name.

I decided to do something that is probably unusual. I placed a glossary of grounded theory-related terminology in this early location, rather than as an addendum at the end of the text. Reading through it now will enhance your understanding of the chapters that follow. It will be easy for you to refer back to it as you read through the text. I placed items in alphabetical order. This will make it easy for you to find each item. It will be of little help in portraying the process. I portray the process in Chapter Four. If at first you don't fully grasp the terms, not to worry, because they will become clearer later on as I guide you through the actual course of using them. And for those of you who intend to do your first grounded theory study, they will come alive for you when you begin your actual research.



# Glossary of Grounded Theory

## Related Terms

**Area of Interest (same as general topic area):** To avoid preconceptions, rather than a preconceived theory, hypothesis, research problem or question, a grounded theory study begins with a general area of interest.

**Axial coding:** Strauss (1987), Strauss & Corbin (1990, 1998), Corbin (1998) devised this paradigm for theoretical coding, which differs considerably from Glaser's classic grounded theory approach to theoretical coding.

**Basic social process:** A comprehensive organizing concept that refers to common, often universal patterns of social behavior that change over time, of which there are two types, basic social process, and basic social psychological process.

**BSP:** Initialism for basic social process.

**Category:** This term has been defined somewhat differently by different grounded theory authors, including Glaser and Strauss.<sup>1</sup> At times it is used interchangeably with concept and code and at other times it is applied to a cluster of related concepts. Be aware these usages are not contradictory; they merely represent different levels of abstraction or synonymous applications. Despite the historic lack of clarity over the use of these terms in grounded theory, many quality grounded theories have been produced over the years regardless of how the authors understood them. Don't labor over the issue. Just know all usages of these terms concern groups of items that share significant characteristics. In short, it is a grouping of related codes or concepts.

**Classic grounded theory (CGT):** The original grounded theory introduced in Glaser & Strauss' 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser's 1978 book *Theoretical Sensitivity*, and Glaser's many subsequent books and journal articles.

**Code:** A word or short phrase you use to represent an indicator (incident, pattern) in the data. Codes are the link between data and theory.

**Coding:** The process of perusing through data looking for incidents and patterns that have potential theoretical importance and "naming" them.

**Concept:** A word or short phrase that represents and "names" a pattern of indicators in data. Concepts raise your analysis from description to abstraction.

**Constant comparative analysis:** The unique approach to analyzing data exclusive to grounded theory. From its broadest perspective, constant comparison involves relating data to data, data to ideas, then ideas to ideas. This method was devised and introduced by Glaser in his 1965 journal article, "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative analysis." The article was reprinted as Chapter Five in Glaser and Strauss (1967).

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion of this see LaRossa (2005).



**Constructivism:** Constructivism refers to the supposition that individuals construct their own meaning and relevancies.

**Constructivist grounded theory:** Modified versions of grounded theory containing procedures that differ from classic grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theorists begin their research within a preconceived meaning framework, assuming it is impossible to do otherwise.

**Core variable (same as core category, core concept):** A variable related to participants' main concern that accounts for the most variation in the data and to which other variables are related. If change over time is a fundamental property, core variables are usually basic social processes. They can also be depicted as non-process categories, an example being Glaser and Strauss' (1965) awareness of dying theory that explains different types of social interaction that result from which involved parties (patients, relatives, nurses, doctors, etc.) are aware or not aware of a patient's impending death. Awareness is the core. In my early studies with Glaser he used the term "core variable." For consistency, I'll use that term.

**Data:** In grounded theory, as Glaser (2001, p. 145) said, "all is data," qualitative or quantitative. He identified several types of data that he termed "baseline data, properline data, vague data, interpreted data, and conceptual data."

**Dimension:** The scope, breadth, or extent of a concept. Dimensions are immutable features of concepts and categories. For example, time is a dimension.

**Earn, earned, earn its way:** In CGT, the term "earn" refers to the requirement that anything related to your theory (code, concept, theoretical code, literature, etc.) must be supported by data and found to be relevant after being subjected to the constant comparative method of analysis.

**Emergence:** Remaining open and allowing concepts and theory to systematically materialize through the grounded theory process as opposed to preconceiving or forcing them. One of Glaser's aphorisms is "trust in emergence."

**Explication de texte:** A French method of literary analysis that closely focuses on the author's literal meaning in a literary text without adding or inferring meaning. Coding in CGT closely resembles this technique by simply naming but not purposefully interpreting what's in the data.

**External, externally-derived:** A concept, theory, or data acquired from academic literature.

**Fit:** Fit is one of the criteria used to assess the value of a grounded theory. It represents the extent to which a theory and its concepts accurately represent the reality they are intended to explain. "Fit is another word for validity" (Glaser, 1998, p. 18).

**General topic area (same as area of interest).**

**Grab:** Grab is one of the criteria used to assess the value of a grounded theory. Grab represents the extent to which a theory seizes your attention and stirs reflection on the topic.

**Grand tour question or inquiry (same as spill question):** A very open, non-leading question/inquiry designed to prompt a respondent to say what they want about the topic, on their terms; a question that "instills a spill" (Glaser, 1998, p. 123, Nathaniel, 2008). Subsequent questions are framed by the respondent's previous responses.

**Grounded Action:** An applied systematic, multi-step classic grounded theory based method designed to ensure that actions, interventions, strategies, programs, models, and so forth are grounded in "what is actually going on, not what ought to go on" (Glaser, 1978, p. 14).

**Grounded Therapy:** A client-centered, non-pathologizing method of counseling/therapy that uses the logic, canons and procedures of classic grounded theory.

**Hypothetical probability statement:** An informal, non-statistical conditional statement about probable relationships between antecedents and outcomes.

**Incident:** A specific occurrence in the data. Unlike many methods, the focus of CGT is on behavior, not people or units (e.g. settings, cultures, populations, etc.).

**Indicator:** An incident or pattern in data that evokes a code, concept, property, or dimension of a concept. Indicator and incident are often used synonymously for interview and observation data.

**Indice:** Same as indicator.

**Interchangeability of indicators:** When different indicators evoke the same category or property. In addition to multiple indicators in the same context or situation, this includes indicators from other substantive areas. For example, instances of relationship cultivating and its properties occur in many contexts other than milkman-customer relationships.

**In vivo construct:** A concept created and used by participants in an action scene.

**Literature review:** A CGT study begins without a preliminary literature review. When beginning a CGT study, you intentionally avoid a preliminary literature review in your chosen topic area or any other literature that might lead you to preconceive or logically elaborate what is relevant to your study. At a later point in your analysis, you review literature that is related to your core variable and theory.

**Memo, memoing:** The informal write-up of ideas, immediately as they occur to you. Memos should be theoretical, about concepts and relationships between them, not summary descriptions from the data.

**Modifiability:** One of the criteria used to assess the value of a grounded theory. A grounded theory should have enough variation and diversity to allow for additions and modifications if new data are collected and compared in subsequent studies. If new variations are discovered they can easily be integrated into the theory. Newly discovered variations simply add to and deepen a grounded theory, rather than “refuting” it.

**Objectivism:** The supposition that (small t) “truth” is independent of the subjective understandings of individuals; in other words, an “objective” reality exists that can be objectively (impartially) understood through scientific research.

**Open coding:** The first step in the constant comparative method, in which you code for anything and everything you see in the data that you think may have potential theoretical relevance.

**Preconception:** Minimizing preconceptions, at the outset and throughout, is an important precept of CGT. This means you should take every effort to avoid importing what you think is relevant or what you think you already know into your research and instead let everything emerge from the data.

**Property:** A component or attribute of a concept. A concept is made up of multiple properties.

**QDA:** Initialism of “qualitative data analysis.” Qualitative data analysis is a general term that refers to multiple approaches for analyzing qualitative data. The specific form of qualitative analysis unique to classic grounded theory is constant comparative analysis. Glaser used “QDA” to refer to other forms of qualitative analysis.

**Relevance:** One of the criteria used to assess the value of a grounded theory. In grounded theory, what is relevant to participants takes precedence over what is relevant to researchers. The researcher’s relevance is in the choice of area of interest/general topic area. Beyond that, what is relevant emerges from the data.

**Sampling:** In grounded theory, sample size and source cannot be predetermined. Sampling begins within contexts or with participants from which information about the area of interest/general topic area may be found. In CGT, sampling is for theoretical coverage, not for generalizing to a population.

**Selective coding:** Once you have a core variable you delimit your coding to things that are related to that variable so that the properties, dimensions, and such of your theory emerge and remain grounded in the data.

**Sociological construct:** A code or concept created by a researcher/analyst.

**Sorting:** Arranging memos and pieces of memos into conceptual categories and integrating them into an overall theoretical scheme that can be depicted as a theoretical outline.

**Spill question:** Same as grand tour question or inquiry.

**Substantive code:** A word or short phrase that identifies and stands for content in data.

**Substantive coding:** Working through the substance of data, looking for indicators of phenomena and patterns that appear to have theoretical relevance, and “naming” them. There are two types of substantive coding:

**Open coding:** Coding for anything and everything.

**Selective coding:** You cease open coding and begin selective coding when you have discovered your core variable. At this point, you delimit your coding and code only for things that are related to this core variable.

**Symbolic interactionism:** At its core, symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective based on the assertion that human behavior is a product of meanings constructed through social interaction.

**Theoretical code:** Abstract, higher-level codes used to integrate and organize concepts into a theory. See Chapter Four for Glaser’s theoretical coding “families.”

**Theoretical coding:** Reading through and sorting your memos by comparing substantive concept to substantive concept to discern how they relate to one another as informal hypotheses.

**Theoretical outline:** The outline of your theory, derived through sorting your memos. Your sorted memos become a rough first draft of your theoretical write-up.

**Theoretical sampling:** Other methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, ordinarily follow a “collect data” then “analyze data” sequence in which the two activities are sequential. In CGT, data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously in a back and forth manner, referred to as theoretical sampling. Glaser and Strauss (1967) described it thusly:

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. (p. 45)

**Theoretical saturation:** The point at which collecting more data on a concept or category produces no new properties. This means it is time to focus on other concepts.

**Theoretical sensitivity:** A stance and aptitude in relation to data and theory. It consists of the ability to discern relationships between data and ideas, and to recognize the relevance of particular ideas to particular data, and particular ideas to particular ideas, through a process of emergent fit.

**What is actually going on:** Grounded theories are about “what is actually going on, not what ought to go on” (Glaser, 1978, p. 14).

**Work:** One of the criteria used to assess the value of a grounded theory. A theory that works adequately interprets and explains what is going on in the data and provides enough predictability to be useful in practical applications.

**Write-up:** Once memos have been sorted into a theoretical outline that best portrays the theory, that outline can be used to organize a first draft write-up of the theory.

## My Discovery of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has played a central role in my life. Although my experience of grounded theory is personal, because it is deeply rooted and extensive I think it is worth sharing. My experiences led me to many of the understandings and conclusions I discuss in this book. It began, serendipitously, in 1967, when I was a third-year undergraduate student at Sonoma State College (now Sonoma State University), in California. During the summer break before my junior year, I was pondering what field to declare as my major subject. Predicated on my prior studies and interests, I wanted my major to meet several criteria. I wanted it to be related to the study of human activity. I didn't want to select a major in which I would be a mere consumer. I wanted to be able to *do* the major, whatever it ended up being. I wanted it to be idea-oriented yet have the potential for practical action outside the academic world. In my mind, these criteria narrowed it down to the social/behavioral sciences.

I completed introductory courses at the College of Marin that gave me a sense of what the fields of history, psychology, anthropology, political science, political philosophy, economics, and what was advertised as sociology were about. The sociology course was taught by a psychologist rather than a sociologist. I later realized it wasn't actually about sociology. It was about what I later learned in my first (and only) year of graduate studies in the Social Psychology Program at the University of Nevada, Reno, to

be “psychological social psychology” (as opposed to “sociological social psychology”). I wasn’t particularly enamored by the material covered in the supposed sociology course. I sensed there was more to sociology than what was covered in that course. For various reasons, I was leaning away from all my other perceived options. Still suffering some ambivalence and lacking a clear understanding of what it entails, I headed for the library and the campus book store to take a closer look at sociology.

Being a serious student, without guidance I naively plunged into the deep end by selecting books from the classic sociology section. I first read Emile Durkheim’s *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1938). He made a case for sociology as a scientific discipline separate and distinct from the natural sciences, philosophy, and psychology, as well as a rationale for adopting the standard, positivist model of science as the primary methodological approach for sociology. I followed this with Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915). I then selected the works of several other notable sociological theorists, including Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, and the more contemporary sociologists, Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton.<sup>2</sup>

Although I found them to be fascinating and enlightening, albeit rather “heavy,” because of their abstract, often pedantic style, I couldn’t imagine them being understandable and therefore useful to laypeople. Even to those who did understand them, their generality appeared to render them unsuitable for practical use. At this point in my understanding, sociology appeared to be primarily an intellectual enterprise, confined to academics, and at that time I didn’t envision myself as an academic.

Furthermore, to a novice like me, the theories appeared to have been derived through a mystical process in the minds of geniuses, rather than through a discernible, learnable method. I didn’t suffer doubts about my general intelligence but I didn’t think I was smart enough to do that. I feared this would relegate me to being a mere consumer or philosophaster of sociology rather than someone who “does” sociology although, in my naive state, I didn’t yet know what that would entail. For this reason, despite my growing interest in the sociological way of viewing things, I continued

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<sup>2</sup> Merton was one of Barney Glaser’s major professors



to be ambivalent about selecting it as my major subject. To be employable after graduating, I entertained relegating sociology to my minor subject and selecting a more practical, less academic subject as my major. However, because it was a new campus of the California State College system with a small number of students, there were no suitable offerings of this sort.

I continued my foray into sociology. As I read more, my attraction to sociology persisted and grew. I kept on haunting the library and the campus book store. During one of many random browsings in the book store, I fortuitously picked off the shelf Barney Glaser's and Anselm Strauss' newly published book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As I began skimming to see if it was worth buying, several items caught my eye. The first was the chapter titled, "Applying Grounded Theory." The second was their assertion that one of the jobs of sociological theory should be, "to be usable in practical applications—prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations" (p. 3). The third was "We contend also that it does not take a 'genius' to generate a useful grounded theory" (p. 11). These entrees suggested to me that maybe I didn't need to be a genius to do sociology and I could learn to do sociology that could be put to useful ends. This was enough to convince me to purchase and read the book.

In less detail than their future writings, the book laid out an accessible methodology by which one could generate concepts out of data and integrate them into a useful theory. Even though they led me to this point, the sociological works of the "great men" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 10) I previously read seemed less intimidating and of less personal relevance to me. Primarily through the influence of Glaser and Strauss' seminal grounded theory book, I decided to declare sociology as my major and see where that led me. I then enrolled in several upper-division sociology classes for the fall semester.

I was fortunate to have small, seminar-type classes taught by outstanding professors during my sociology undergraduate years at Sonoma State, including Stanford Lyman, John Lofland, Robert Nicholson, and R. Stephen Warner. In addition to a broad range of sociological theories, these professors introduced me to the symbolic interactionist perspective, which I found to be very appealing. Lyman, Lofland, and Warner completed their PhDs and Nicholson was ABD from the Department of Sociology at the