Grounded Theory as a Thesis Research Method: A Critical Analysis of the Challenges and Risks

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Introduction

This paper sets out to critically analyze the use of grounded theory as a research method in pursuing a doctoral thesis. Topics included in this analysis are the background of Grounded Theory, its particular use in this research project, the challenges as they relate to the research process, and the risks as they relate to the project's research outcomes.

Grounded Theory Background

What Grounded Theory Is

This study will take a *grounded theory* approach (Charmaz, 2006; Centre for Labour Market Studies [CLMS], 2003; Creswell, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; (Morse et al., 2009), attempting to develop a theory of how CLO's rise to their roles, what they are responsible for doing (and are capable of), and how they develop professionally along the way. It should be noted that this is just a starting point for the study; other methods and pathways may be explored as they emerge. For example, a key aspect of qualitative design is that the researcher is situated in the project; the fieldwork is highly personal (Patton, 2002). How the researcher chooses to search for, construct, interpret, and report has a significant impact on the final findings of the project. This subjectivity is not only acknowledged in this project, it is embraced, along with the changes the researcher will undergo due to the experiences derived from the project.

Grounded theory is an *inductive* approach to qualitative research, meaning the theory—the explanation of the phenomenon—emerges from the data collected and its analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This differs from more traditional *deductive* approaches, where the research questions (and possibly theory) are derived from an up-front literature review (Allan, 2003). Grounded

theory uses a statement of the phenomenon to be studied instead of pre-fabricated research questions (Backman & Kyngas, 1999); the researcher begins with general questions or ideas and then works to develop them further (Charmaz, 2006). The result is theory developed and grounded in the data gathered; theory building is not obscured by theory testing (CLMS, 2003).

Grounded theory involves *continuous analysis*. Rather than waiting for the entire data collection process to be completed, the researcher analyzes the data collected immediately after collection (Charmaz, 2006), permitting the researcher to make decisions about what further data to seek while still in the collection process. This is called *theoretical sampling* (CLMS, 2003), and it focuses the data collection on the themes emerging from the data (and its analysis) and towards building a theory to explain the phenomenon under investigation.

Grounded theory is a method that is inclusive regarding what data might be collected, analyzed, and used to build theory. In fact, <u>everything</u> is data when using grounded theory (Glaser, 1998; CLMS, 2003). It permits the researcher to explore the phenomenon without many preconceptions (Backman & Kyngas, 1999), yet still leaves room for some prior knowledge and at least a preliminary review of the literature (McGhee & Atkinson, 2007).

What Grounded Theory Is Not

Suddaby (2006) provides a solid summary of what grounded theory <u>is not</u>. It is not:

- An excuse to ignore the literature. In fact, the literature is included in the continuous analysis <u>and</u> after theory development in order to situate the new theory into the extant literature (Backman & Kyngas, 1999).

- A presentation of raw data. Instead, the data collected during grounded theory research is subject to a great deal of analysis, meaning-making, and code/category/theory development (Saldana, 2009).

- Theory testing, word counts, or content analysis. Again, grounded theory seeks to find meaning and, ultimately, an explanation of the phenomenon under study (Charmaz, 2006).

- A simple routine application of formulaic technique to data.

- Perfect. Because of this genealogy, grounded theory techniques are inherently "messy" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 638).

- Easy. This paper examines some of the challenges and risks associated with doing grounded theory.

Origins

Grounded theory was introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 (CLMS, 2003), and has gone under considerable refinement since (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 2009). Originally, Glaser and Strauss "….argued that the actual process of generating theory was being neglected by the need to test theories" (CLMS, 2003, p. M1U4-15). In other words, quantitative (inductive) methods based upon hypothesis testing were pushing out the deep research necessary to formulate good theory in the first place. Further, Glaser and Strauss wanted to demonstrate that qualitative methods were legitimate and could be used to create and confirm theories (CLMS).

Styles

According to Creswell (2007), grounded theory has two popular approaches: systematic and constructivist. (This also reflects a schism between grounded theory's two founders, with Strauss taking the systematic approach and Glaser the constructivist route). In systematic grounded theory, the researcher conducts field interviews until no more new data is discovered ("saturation"). The researcher begins analyzing the data by "open coding," where each fragment

of the data is analyzed and categorized (CLMS, 2003). Then "axial coding" is conducted, where the different categories are compared and relationships are determined. This may also cause the researcher to pursue follow-up data (CLMS). One category is selected as the "core" category, with other categories—through their relationship to each other and to the core—linking back to the core (CLMS), resulting in a "conditional matrix" (Creswell, p. 65) a sort of visual depiction of the categories and how they form the emergent theory. In addition to interviews, the researcher may examine literature to inform the emerging theory (CLMS).

A second approach to grounded theory, constructivist, "….lies squarely within the interpretive approach to qualitative research with flexible guidelines, a focus on theory developed that depends on the researcher's view, learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships…." (Creswell, 2007, 65). Proffered by Charmaz (2006) this approach to grounded theory eschews much of the positivism seen in the systematic approach, is wary of forming firm conclusions about proving theories (as opposed to developing them), and takes into account much more of the subjective side of qualitative research (Creswell). This study will employ the constructivist approach, with the intent of building a theory to describe the studied phenomenon (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003).

Analytical Framework and Methodology

Intended Approach

Initially a series of interviews will be conducted with Chief Learning Officers (or equivalent). *Theoretical sampling* will be employed to select the candidates most likely to inform the topic and provide useful data *as the data collection and analysis is being conducted* (Charmaz, 2006). Each piece of data gathered will be analyzed immediately after collection so it may inform further sampling. Data will be gathered until no significant new information is

emerging—sufficiency and saturation (Seidman, 2006). The interviews will be semi-constructed, based initially upon the notional areas of interest listed earlier, but subject to change as the continuing analysis occurs.

Following the constructivist approach, other data forms (literature, websites, inquiries to non-CLOs, etc.) will be examined to further inform the research, fill gaps, and suggest new areas for exploration. "All is data" (Glaser, 1998, 8). Still, the quality of the grounded theory will be measured by four criteria: fit (how closely the concept/theory matches up with the observed data), relevance (it deals with a real concern of the participants), workability (the theory explains the problem/phenomenon under observation), and modifiability (the theory can be altered to accommodate new relevant data) (Glaser, 1998).

Coding Structure

Fitting the grounded theory approach, several coding methods have been considered, with five selected and others available should they fit the data. All are appropriate for grounded theory studies (Saldana, 2009). They are described in the following table:

Method	Purpose
In Vivo	To the extent possible, codes are developed from the terms used by the participants ("in vivo" means "that which is alive"). Particularly effective for new researchers.
Process	Uses gerunds to capture the action in the data. Search for consequences from the actions.
Initial	"…breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (Saldana, p. 81).
Focused (2nd level)	Follows Initial coding to search for the frequent or significant Initial codes in order to develop the most relevant categories.
Theoretical (2nd level)	An umbrella code that accounts for all the other codes/categories. It connects the other codes/categories into a comprehensive theory that explains the phenomenon under study. The goal of this study.

In the table above, two codes are labeled "2nd level." These codes are created when "coding the codes"; a second-level analysis of the first round of coding. To support theoretical sampling, this coding is done on an ongoing basis as indicated by the results of the 1st level coding, which is also done continuously. The process is depicted below:
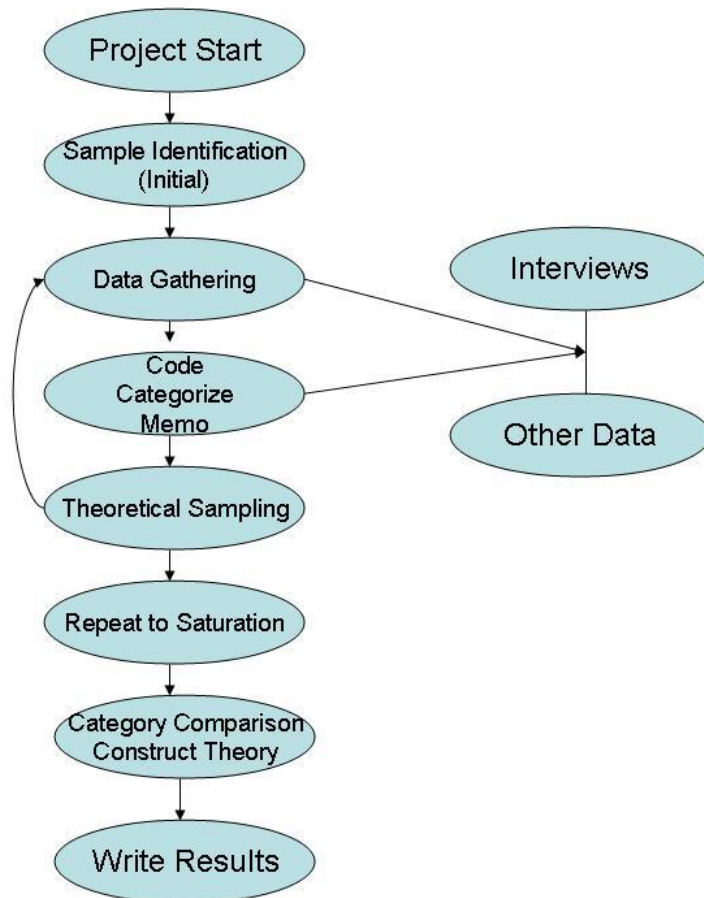
The end state of the study will occur once theoretical saturation is achieved, coding and analysis is complete, a theoretical code emerges, and the results are analyzed and presented.

Challenges to the Process

There are many challenges unique to using grounded theory as a research method. These are described below, along with commentary regarding mitigating factors relevant to easing such challenges.

Deep Understanding of Issues

When using deductive qualitative approaches to research, particularly within the scope of a doctoral thesis, the researcher undertakes a thorough review of the literature in order to understand the salient issues related to the research topic, determine gaps in the literature (and, thus, potential areas for study), and to situate the research into the extant literature. While one of grounded theory's co-founders insists the researcher refrain as much as possible from being influenced too deeply by the extant literature and conventional thinking (Glaser, 1998), the researcher must still understand the relevant issues sufficiently to determine the purpose and initial direction of the study (Goulding, 2002). After the theory is substantially developed, the literature should then be thoroughly reviewed in order to situate the new theory into it (Goulding).

Comment: The researcher provided a brief literature review as part of the doctoral thesis proposal, and has extensive professional experience and knowledge in leadership development, research methodologies, and the learning and development profession. Additionally, literature will be used as data sources to further inform theoretical sampling choices, data coding and analysis, theory development, and to situate the theory into the extant literature.

Lack of Structure

Because grounded theory has such structural flexibility, the researcher can be overwhelmed with the amounts of data and the number of key ideas emerging—challenging the

data analysis process and potentially causing the researcher to miss key emergent points (Backman and Kyngas, 1999). Further complicating matters, grounded theory's founders, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, did not prescribe a particular coding philosophy (CLMS, 2003), yet over-coding can deflate creativity (Selden, 2005) and be time-consuming and confusing (Allan, 2003). No matter the specific approach, the process itself can be unwieldy (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003; Fassinger, 2005). Thus, a significant challenge facing the researcher is to choose between the two philosophies suggested by grounded theories founders: more structure—Strauss (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) or less structure—Glaser (Glaser, 1998).

Comment: Generally, less structure encourages the emergence of concepts and theory. More structure will be helpful in analyzing data, where the use of *in vivo* coding and emergent axial coding will be used to draw meaning and examine relationships in the emergent data. To mitigate the challenge presented by the amount of data, coding will be done for concept, not just literal meaning or "labeling." (This risks introducing researcher bias, but will be balanced by the researcher's prior knowledge of the field and continuous reflection by transcripting interviews writing memos to record contemporaneous reactions to the data being gathered for analysis.) Also, as described above, the coding method will provide enough structure to manage the data while still allowing (by coding for concepts) for meaning to emerge.

Saturation

Traditionally, "saturation" occurs when the researcher notes no new, significant themes emerging from the data—additional data collection will not be particularly revealing (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). However, this form of saturation does not pose unique challenges to using grounded theory. Instead, grounded theory presents the challenge of "theoretical saturation," where, in creating the theoretical construct emergent from the data analysis, the researcher

"…identifies a point where no further conceptualization of the data is required…" to explain the phenomenon (Dey, 2008, p. 8). The theoretical construct is complete. However, theoretical saturation can be difficult to identify (Allan, 2003; Cresswell, 2007). The researcher can be overwhelmed by the large amounts of data and codes/concepts with no clear approach to analyzing it (CLMS, 2003).

Comment: The researcher will employ continuous analysis, coupled with a defined coding structure so the emerging theoretical construct can be recognized during data gathering, not after some arbitrary and pre-determined limit is reached. Also, the developing theory will be compared to extant theory for completeness and fit, and "discriminant" sampling—gathering information and feedback from individuals similar to those included in the original data gathering process—will be employed to "try out" the new theory to see how well it holds up. Finally, the nature of the thesis process will be somewhat limiting. Time, funding, and even word constraints may each or all serve to delimit the study, requiring the researcher to build the best concepts available within these limitations (Allan, 2003).

Waiting for GT to Emerge

Very much related to theoretical saturation, another challenge to the researcher is to wait for the concepts and theory to emerge (CLMS, 2003), to set aside preconceived notions until late into the research (Bryman, 2004), and to avoid introducing too much prior knowledge too early in the research process (Selden, 2006). Failure to do these may "force" the theory to emerge artificially (and falsely), introduce skewed results because of biases introduced by the researcher, or even closing off potential lines of inquiry because of the influence of conventional thinking, prior research, and extant literature published on the subject.

Comment: As discussed earlier, the extant literature will be sought through theoretical sampling decisions, treated as data sources to be considered, and woven into the analysis of new data as appropriate. Open and *in vivo* coding will be employed initially to limit the researcher's preconceptions from influencing the emergent data. And as with the "Lack of Structure" issue discussed above, the researcher will use memoing and reflection periodically to examine the process not as a subject of it, but as an object to be explored and understood.

Translating Meaning

Using positivistic methods, it is assumed there is one commonly shared meaning available to explain data, and the challenge is to find it and communicate it. However, using a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006), the researcher is interested in how the participants themselves make meaning. But then one is challenged with making the same meaning of data gathered from the participants as was intended by them (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). Another challenge is to provide every-day meaning to participants' statements (Selden, 2005) so that other consumers of the research will also be able to understand the phenomenon fully.

Comment: The challenge of making meaning of the data gathered from participants will be met with several mitigating efforts. First, the researcher will seek to analyze the data to determine its scholarly meaning, rather than merely resorting to labeling and superficial interpretation. Related to that, it is key to remember that the data do not generate theory; the researcher—through careful and thorough analysis of that data—does. Yet *in vivo* coding—the use of the participants words to develop codes—will help ensure their original meanings are kept intact through the analysis process. Finally, the researcher will check and compare the theoretical construction against participants' meaning of the phenomenon by following up with them near the conclusion of the study.

Risks to the Outcomes

Closure

In undertaking a grounded theory study, the researcher risks closing the study too soon (Goulding, 2002; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996), thus halting data gathering and analysis prior to the emergence of a useful theory. But the researcher also risks a study that never seems to end (Goulding, 2002). (This element of the Closure risk is further examined below under "Results.")

Comment: To mitigate the risk of premature closure, the researcher will use continuous analysis and reflection to gauge the emergence of the theoretical concepts and construct, seeking to determine if the theory explains the phenomenon under study, seeking out new data (and analyzing it) until it does. This is a guard against prematurely closing the analysis as well as data gathering. To guard against the study that never seems to end, continuous reflection and memoing will, again, help reveal to the researcher the study's progress, health, nearness to completion, etc., coupled with external reviews of the ongoing study by both the researcher's advisor and his peers. Both the internal and external review processes are intended to provide the researcher perspectives regarding the research that are not necessarily a natural part of the research process itself.

Data Analysis

Anytime the researcher summarizes the data gathered (often by coding for concepts and theoretical constructs), the loss of context is a potential risk (Bryman, 2004). This is especially true if the researcher conducts an overly generic analysis (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). Another, related risk is that the concepts do not emerge from the data (Selden, 2005), or the researcher fails to identify the basic social process—the underlying theoretical explanation of the

phenomenon being studied (Cutcliffe, 2000). Finally, competing accounts of meaning might be present (Bryman, 2004), which can complicate analysis and interpretation of the data.

Comment: The key to overcoming the risk of lost context when data is "chunked" during analysis is to focus on finding meaning, not merely literal translation of what was said in the interviews. This will also help guard against an overly generic analysis of the data. A well-structured coding system coupled with robust theoretical sampling should help ensure the emergence of the basic social process. And multiple meanings of the data are not to be guarded against. Instead, they will be embraced in the spirit of constructivism (Charmaz, 2006), knowing that the participants' meaning add rich elements of understanding when exploring the phenomenon.

Preconceptions

This risk was partially discussed in the "Challenges" section above. In this case, the potential impacts of preconceptions on the study's outcomes are examined. First, the influence of preconceptions—firmly held ideas regarding the phenomenon being brought into the research process—can corrupt the findings by causing the researcher to merely echo the conclusions of those who have gone before, thus breaking no new ground (Glaser, 1998). Yet having no preconceived ideas is hard to achieve (Allan, 2003) and having a *tabula rasa* not really all that valuable (Charmaz, 2006)—the researcher should know some things about the phenomenon under study.

Comment: This is particularly troublesome for researchers with extensive experience in their fields (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). Allen (2003) recommends the researcher openly acknowledge prior knowledge and biases, then continuously reflect upon them during data analysis. The readers of the research may be introduced to them—and the researcher may

document his/her reflection on them—through the inclusion of an autoethnography (Chang, 2008) as a chapter of the thesis (Sir Bob Burgess, personal communication, November, 2010).

Results

This final section examines other potential risks to the results of the study when using grounded theory as the primary research and analysis method. First, there is real possibility that no theory emerges from the data collected and analyzed (Cutcliffe, 2000; Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003; Goulding, 2002). Then there is the risk that the theory is not grounded (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003), either in the data itself or in its connections to the extant literature and other theories. Or that the theory will not be credible (Cutcliffe, 2000), or it will not be of sufficient quality (Fassinger, 2005).

Comment: Even a "failed" study—one that was properly conceived and conducted—provides value to the field and can make an academic contribution. A grounded theory might fail to emerge because there is no basis for a theory to explain the phenomenon, or because extenuating circumstances truncated the research effort. But there may still be valuate data that emerge from the study. Or perhaps the results will indicate the need for a new study with different methods. Still, the risk of failing to develop a theory can be mitigated through the use of continuous analysis, revisiting the literature to make connections and contrasts with extant theories, staying "open" during the study to allow the theory to emerge (and not forcing it), using a concrete coding structure/process (as described above), and searching for meaning instead of settling for description. Finally, applying good criteria in evaluating the new theory—Cutcliffe (2000) suggests four: fitness, understanding, generality, and control—will help ensure the theory rises to praxis (Fassinger, 2005).

Conclusion

This paper set out to critically analyze the use of grounded theory as a research method in pursuing a doctoral thesis. Topics examined included the background of Grounded Theory, its particular use in this research project, the challenges as they relate to the research process, and the risks as they relate to the project's research outcomes. And while the challenges and risks are readily understood and acknowledged, they can be mitigated a great deal by the use of effective, established grounded theory research practices, continuous analysis, continuous reflection, and a willingness to stay open to the emerging theory while simultaneously pursuing the data and its analysis as aggressively and creatively as possible. In traditional qualitative research, theories— if they exist at all—are derived from the extant literature to be examined with by posing and answering research questions. Its focus is on theory testing, not theory building. Grounded theory, through its inductive approach, does not test theory, it creates theory grounded in research, theories that use the analyzed data to explain a particular phenomenon. That is its unique contribution to the literature, as well as the intended outcome of this study.

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