GROUNDED THEORY

A Straightforward and Complicated Exposition

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Abstract: Grounded Theory is a popular and yet much-contested approach to research. Attempting to steer a course through the many shades of meaning which employ the label Grounded Theory, this narrative outlines Grounded Theory's origin, subsequent development, and techniques, highlights what the author finds it useful to see as its defining distinctions and tenets, and explores the philosophical and epistemological implications of those distinctions and tenets. In so doing it seeks to communicate a better sense of Grounded Theory, both within and without the context of Archival Science.

Introduction

Grounded Theory was first formulated by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, but it has long defied clear definition and has engendered ongoing debate and disagreement. This chapter seeks to steer a course through the many shades of meaning which employ the label Grounded Theory. It also seeks to give those interested in employing it themselves a better sense of what 'it' is, and what embracing all the necessarily concomitant confusion and complexity might mean for them in their research.

To this end, Grounded Theory will be presented in two different ways; firstly a straightforward one, outlining the story that is conventionally told of its evolution and development, as well as discussing the activities involved in following a Grounded Theory approach to research; and secondly a complicated one, highlighting what I have found to be the defining distinctions and tenets within Grounded Theory that allow me to establish

a philosophical and epistemological position in respect of my research. Later sections will therefore draw on my own experience of undertaking Grounded Theory and will be more auto-ethnographic in tone. To conclude, some observations will also be made on the subject of Grounded Theory in Archival Science.

A Straightforward Exposition of Grounded Theory – Evolution

Despite the multiplicity of narratives concerning the origins of Grounded Theory, there is a fixed inception point in the 1967 publication of Glaser and Strauss' volume entitled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. This work was the original formulation of what was thenceforth known as Grounded Theory, but it was also only the opening move in an ongoing quest for a definitive formulation of the same. It was followed in 1978 by Glaser's book *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*; and then in 1990 by the publication of a work by Strauss and a new collaborator, Juliet Corbin, entitled *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedure and Techniques*. This last work marked the beginning of a difference of opinion between Strauss and Glaser, with Glaser publishing his own volume, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs. Forcing*, in 1992, in which he sought to distinguish his view from that of Strauss and Corbin in the following way; "Anselm's methodology is one full of conceptual description and mine is Grounded Theory. They are very different, the first focusing on forcing and the second on emergence".[1]

The debate between Strauss and Glaser was curtailed by the death of Anselm Strauss in 1996, but the debate about Grounded Theory has been continued by a second generation of Grounded Theory proponents, alongside the continuing work of Barney Glaser. One of the most prominent of these is Kathy Charmaz, whose works on Grounded Theory include *Constructing Grounded Theory: a Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* and (with Janice Morse, Phyllis Stern, Juliet Corbin, Barbara Bowers and Adele Clarke) *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*.[2] The distinction between first and second generation Grounded Theory is often made in terms of an epistemological difference between positivist or objectivist perspectives

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1   Barney Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence versus Forcing*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 1992, p.122.

2   Kathy Charmaz. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006; Janice Morse, Phyllis Noerager

and constructivist ones, such that, as Charmaz has put it, the difference is between "Objectivist and Constructivist Methods".[3] As a result and, as stated by Bryant and Charmaz in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* "Most scholars would agree that GTM [the Grounded Theory Method] has three versions", these being "the Glaserian school of GTM, the Strauss and Corbin school, and the Constructivist".[4]

Within the frame of this general agreement, however, the differences between the Glaserian and Strauss and Corbin schools tend to receive less attention than those between both these schools (first generation Grounded Theory) and that of the Constructivist school (second generation Grounded Theory.) Where it is specifically discussed, the difference between the Glaserian and the Strauss and Corbin schools tends to be couched in terms similar to those employed by Heath and Cowley, who speak of a different emphasis on induction, deduction and verification, with Glaser being seen as more purely inductive, in contrast to Strauss and Corbin for whom "deduction and verification dominate".[5] According to Heath and Cowley, "it is methodological rather than ontological and epistemological aspects that have been cited as the main source of divergence" between Glaser and Strauss and Corbin and they themselves assume the two schools have a shared ontology, albeit with "slight epistemological differences".[6]

Slight differences tend not to make as dramatic a narrative as large ones, and this is perhaps one of the reasons for the greater attention paid to the difference between first and second generation Grounded Theory, a difference which, as has already been stated, is seen very much in the epistemological terms of an opposition between positivist and constructivist outlooks. It is in these terms that a story can be constructed that places Grounded Theory against the backdrop of the vital questions about knowledge and its acquisition that underpin all research activity. We shall return to this backdrop later in

Stern, Juliet Corbin, Barbara Bowers, Kathy Charmaz and Adele Clarke. *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2009.

3   Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory Objectivist and Constructivist Methods," in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, eds. 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), pp.509–35.

4   Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Introduction. Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices" in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), p.10.

5   Helen Heath and Sarah Cowley, "Developing a Grounded Theory Approach: A Comparison of Glaser and Strauss." *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 41 (2004): 144.

6   Heath and Cowley, "Developing a Grounded Theory Approach", 142.

this chapter, since an examination of these questions is perhaps better suited to a complicated, rather than a straightforward exposition. For now then, we return to the story, a story which is also seen as the history of Grounded Theory and which can be found in greater detail in many texts including those of Bryant and Charmaz, and Thomas and James.[7]

In this story Grounded Theory is seen as a child of its time in that it was a challenge to the dominant and predominantly quantitative research orthodoxy of 1960s social science academic circles in the United States of America. As such a challenge, the feeling seems to be that it has been both phenomenally successful and fundamentally contradictory. For example, Thomas and James state that: "there can be little doubt that it has been a major – perhaps *the* major – contributor to the acceptance of the legitimacy of qualitative methods in applied social research" (original emphasis).[8] However, both they and Bryant and Charmaz assert that this legitimacy arose, at least initially, by "imposing a positivist mantle on that process".[9] And so, Charmaz for one, characterises Glaser's position as coming; "close to traditional positivism, with its assumptions of an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data […] and objectivist rendering of data".[10] Strauss, on the other hand, she characterises as post-positivist, in keeping with the earlier assertion by Heath and Cowley that the two first generation schools had only "slight epistemological differences".[11]

Looking back at Grounded Theory as a product of its time allows its perceived positivist position to be excused to an extent. As Byrant and Charmaz put it:

> The reputability and quest for legitimate academic status of qualitative research demanded that it should claim some basis of validity equal to that of quantitative practices, so why not try to establish a 'scientific' basis for applying and validating qualitative research?[12]

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7   Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective: An Epistemological Account" in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), pp.31-57. Gary Thomas and David James, "Reinventing Grounded Theory: Some Questions about Theory, Ground and Discovery," *British Educational Research Journal* 32 no. 6 (2006): 767-795.

8   Thomas and James, "Reinventing Grounded Theory", 767.

9   Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective", 48.

10   Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 510.

11   Charmz, "Grounded Theory," 510. Heath and Cowley, "Developing a Grounded Theory Approach", 142.

12   Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective", 35.

In the current context however, such a position can no longer be excused. As Preben Mortensen points out in his article discussing archival theory, "philosophers and historians of science have discredited the positivist idea of science, according to which science is beyond and above historical, social, cultural and political contexts."[13] Times and thinking about epistemology have changed and the idea of the researcher as a neutral, objective observer distinct from an external reality is more or less untenable, with constructivism becoming instead the dominant paradigm of the day. Some researchers, therefore, such as Bryant and Charmaz, choose to reformulate Grounded Theory in a more constructivist vein, repositioning it "in the light of the current philosophical and epistemological landscape".[14] Others, such as Thomas and James, choose to reject it outright, arguing that: "Continued allegiance to grounded theory procedures – or strangely, loyalty simply to the term "grounded theory," unstitched from its procedures or putative ends – stunts and distorts the growth of qualitative inquiry".[15]

Those who choose to continue the tradition of Grounded Theory have a difficult job to, as Byrant and Charmaz put it, "distinguish between the core aspects of the method without which it wouldn't be GTM, and the aspects which can be traced back to the historical context within which GTM developed, and which can therefore be dispensed with."[16] This job is made even harder since the epistemological claims made within the founding texts of Grounded Theory are, as noticed by Bryant and Charmaz, "often couched in ambiguous terms."[17] I therefore choose not to take this task on at the current time, and will turn instead to outlining my personal and present understanding of what it is to undertake Grounded Theory.

A Straightforward Exposition of Grounded Theory – Procedures

On the surface doing Grounded Theory appears to be a fairly straightforward process involving the following stages, as characterised on the Glaserian-leaning Grounded Theory Online site:

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13   Preben Mortensen, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (1999), 1.

14   Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective", 50.

15   Thomas and James, "Reinventing Grounded Theory", 790.

16   Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective", 50.

17   Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective", 32.

1. Identify your substantive area – your area of interest. […]

2. Collect data pertaining to the substantive area. […]

3. Open code your data as you collect it. […]

4. Write memos throughout the entire process […]

5. Conduct selective coding and theoretical sampling […]

6. Sort your memos and find the theoretical code […]

7. Read the literature and integrate with your theory through selective coding […]

8. Write up your theory. Job done![18]

The complexity underlying this overview is not difficult to find and it is clear that there is a degree of overlap and fuzziness concealed within the simple linear model. For example, stages 2 and 3 are acknowledged to occur simultaneously, 4 seems to run through 1–8 and both 5 and 7 involve something called selective coding.

Many explanations of how to do Grounded Theory therefore eschew linear narratives and instead consist of more discursive narratives that cohere around outlining a number of specific activities or techniques that permeate the process, such as coding, theoretical sampling and memo-writing. For example, Charmaz writes as follows:

On coding –

> Analysis begins early. We grounded theorists code our emerging data as we collect it. Through coding, we start to define and categorize our data. […] Coding starts the chain of theory development.[19]

On theoretical sampling –

> As we grounded theorists refine our categories and develop them as theoretical constructs, we likely find gaps in our data and holes in our theories. Then we go back to the field and collect delimited data to fill those conceptual gaps and holes – we conduct theoretical sampling.[20]

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18   "What is Grounded Theory," www.groundedtheoryonline.com/what-is-grounded-theory.
19   Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 515.
20   Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 519.

On memo-writing –

> This step helps to spark our thinking and encourages us to look at our data and codes in new ways. […] Through memo writing, we elaborate processes, assumptions, and actions that are subsumed under our codes.[21]

In this way, accounts of the Grounded Theory process tend to be more descriptive than prescriptive and clear instruction is not easy to find. For example, even Strauss and Corbin, who, of all the proponents of Grounded Theory, are generally held to have placed "much stronger emphasis on its [Grounded Theory's] proceduralisation and formalisation into a series of techniques"[22], write that its techniques and procedures "are not meant to be used rigidly in a step-by-fashion" and that the characteristics of a grounded theorist "will never develop if researchers focus solely on the procedures presented in this text and apply them in a rote manner".[23]

This sentiment is echoed by Yazdan Mansourian who, writing in the context of highlighting a number of "common questions that arise for researchers who want to use GT [Grounded Theory] for the first time," notes that "GT should not be considered as a step-by-step manual for researchers", and that "researchers should interpret the nature of GT in the way that suits their research context and then clarify the reasons for each step in the research".[24] I too am in sympathy with this view and consider that, just as Grounded Theory was discovered by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, so too it must be re-discovered anew by each researcher attempting it.

Nevertheless, I will attempt to relate how I currently choose to explain the process of Grounded Theory to others. It is an account that is structured around what might be seen as Grounded Theory's central tenets or principles: open-ness, emergence and integration. These can also be seen as temporal stages.

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21   Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 517.

22   Inaam Idrees, Ana Cristina Vasconcelos and Andrew Cox, "The Use of Grounded Theory in PhD Research in Knowledge Management A Model Four-stage Research Design," *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives* 63 no. 2/3 (2011): 190.

23   Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998, pp. 8, 14.

24   Yazdan Mansourian, "Adoption of Grounded Theory in LIS Research," *New Library World* 107 no. 9/10 (2006): 397.

Open-ness

Open-ness relates to the beginning of the process (roughly equivalent to stages 1–4 of the framework previously outlined) and is an idea that sees expression in both the concept of theoretical sensitivity and the dictum that Grounded Theory does not start with a literature review, or a preconceived problem, question or hypothesis. Theoretical sensitivity is dealt with extensively in a book of the same name published by Glaser in 1978 and it may be thought of as a state of mind as well as "the ability to conceptualize and organize, make abstract connections, visualize and think multivariately".[25] Those embracing the ideas of theoretical sensitivity and of open-ness start from no other point than the selection of an area of interest and a desire to work out the main concern of the participants in that area and how they (the participants) resolve it.

Data collection in Grounded Theory starts early and "all is data" because "the researcher does not need to buy into any particular data as sanctified, objective or valid".[26] As Charmaz notes, "Grounded theorists have been accused, with some justification, of slighting data collection." I would agree that Grounded Theory is not strong in its consideration of data and how to acquire it.[27] For my own study, much of the data I deliberately collected came from interviews.

Data analysis also starts early, at the same time as data collection, through the initiation of open coding. Open coding, or "running the data open" involves looking at the data line-by-line and creating as many codes and categories as necessary to represent and delineate what is going on within it.[28] In undertaking this coding, researchers also employ the constant comparative method, which involves constantly questioning how the codes and categories being created are the same or different, how they relate or do not relate. This questioning is captured in the writing of memos which detail the ideas inherent in the codes and categories as well as any others triggered by the process or the critical reflection of the researcher. Ultimately it is envisaged that as data collection, data analysis and memo-writing continue,

25   Barney Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 1978; and Barney Glaser, "Remodeling Grounded Theory," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 5 no. 2 (2004): 43, http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/607/1315.

26   Barney Glaser, "All is data," *Grounded Theory Review* 6 no.2 (2007), http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2007/03/30/1194/; and Barney Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press, 1998, p. 8.

27   Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 514.

28   Glaser, "Remodeling Grounded Theory," 48.

the researcher will start to gain a sense of what it is that lies at the heart of the matter.

Emergence

As we have already seen, emergence (in opposition to forcing) is one of the definitional distinctions employed in Grounded Theory. This aspect will be addressed in more detail at a later stage, but for now emergence is presented as that stage in the process (roughly equivalent to stages 4–6 of the framework previously outlined) when the researcher starts to formulate what it is that is important within the substantive area in question. It is at this point that the techniques being used move away from open coding and more towards theoretical sampling and selective coding. Theoretical sampling is the process whereby further data collection is driven by the questions arising from the analysis of the data already collected. Selective coding is the process of distinguishing the so-called core category (that lies at the heart of the matter) and concentrating on exploring that core and its related categories until the point of theoretical saturation. The core category is identifiable through its being "central, relating to as many other categories and their properties as possible and accounting for a large portion of the variation in a pattern of behavior".[29] Theoretical saturation is defined as the point when, "no additional data are found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category".[30]

During this phase, the limits of the data under consideration will probably expand beyond that being explicitly collected as such, to include the memos written alongside the previous data collection and analysis process. The process of memo-writing nonetheless continues throughout this phase as well. At its end, the researcher will have ceased data collection and will start to look towards writing up.

Integration

Integration is the final phase of the process of Grounded Theory (roughly equivalent to stages 7–8 of the framework previously outlined). It starts with the researcher having achieved a sense of what seems to lie at the heart of

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29   Glaser, "Remodeling Grounded Theory," 54.

30   Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1967, p 61.

the matter under examination and ends with the production of something (ordinarily a written text) that crystallises what that is and places it in a context. To this end the data under consideration expands again at this point to include the sort of literature that would normally have been read earlier as part of a traditional literature review.

In this way the literature also becomes subject to the kind of questioning and comparison applied to all the previous data and must earn its place within what has already started to take shape, rather than shaping it from the outside. Equally, this point means that the selection of which literature to read should not be driven by the idea of its being a comprehensive representation of a specific field, area or discipline, but rather, by a process akin to that of theoretical sampling, whereby the questions that arise during the formulation of the end product, drive what should be read next.

Given the contested nature of Grounded Theory, the above account would almost certainly not meet with universal agreement from all those who consider themselves grounded theorists, but it is offered in the spirit of providing a starting point for those considering undertaking Grounded Theory for themselves. That starting point however, comes with the proviso that embarking on Grounded Theory may, and in my opinion should, lead them to explore the more complicated questions this raises.

A Complicated Exposition of Grounded Theory – Defining Its Own Terms

In what has gone before I have spoken of Grounded Theory in terms of it being a process in the context of undertaking research. I have not referred to it as either a method or a methodology and this has been deliberate because I do not feel comfortable using these terms in the context of Grounded Theory without considerable preamble. Further, I am aware that I have deliberately side-stepped the question of where I position myself in relation to the interconnecting debates about a) the three different schools of Grounded Theory and b) their underlying epistemologies. In the rest of this chapter I will seek to explain and explore how my own experience of Grounded Theory has brought me to this position of ambiguity, since it is still a position and one I do not take lightly or unthinkingly.

When I started doing formal research (in the form of doing a Ph.D. on the subject of archival description), I was returning to academia after a break of over ten years, during which time I had worked as an archivist in a number of institutions in the UK. As such, I had developed a degree of suspicion

about the value of such research, beyond it being just an academic exercise, and a lack of consideration of or experience with what were presented to me as research methods and methodology. I started to read around the subject so that I would be able to choose a way to proceed and my suspicions were immediately further raised by the way it seemed that I had to first make another choice, between the research paradigm in which I wished to operate: positivism, post-positivism or interpretivism. Moreover this choice seemed to be about "philosophical positions and theoretical frameworks relating to how knowledge and knowledge systems are defined" – things about which I felt in no position at the time to make a choice.[31] Grounded Theory caught my attention because it seemed to me, at the time, to offer a way to avoid having to make this decision. For example, in the article "Naturalist Inquiry and Grounded Theory", Glaser is not impressed by the axioms ("the set of undemonstrated (and undemonstrable) 'basic beliefs' accepted by convention or established by practice as the building blocks of some conceptual or theoretical structure or system") of Lincoln and Guba's own naturalist paradigm of research, and writes "GT's axiom is simple: let's see what is going on and it's 'whatever emerges'".[32] For the same reason, I instinctively retreated from the debate of second generation proponents which seemed to be forcing me to make a choice against an objectivist and positivist position and for an interpretivist and constructivist one, rather than allowing me to retain an open mind on the more epistemological and philosophical questions until I felt more qualified to make a choice.

Looking back, this decision was naïve and could potentially have led to me failing to ever fully understand the implications of the way in which, simply by undertaking research, I was implicitly making epistemological claims. That it did not have this outcome, I put down to the way in which Grounded Theory's complicated and contested nature forced me to puzzle it, and hence the nature of research more widely, out for myself. Indeed, I also came to see this as a vital part of the open-ness that I had established as a central tenet of Grounded Theory. For could this idea not mean that just as starting out with a hypothesis about what the problem was could limit researchers, so too could framing their work from the outset with a fixed hypothesis about the nature of knowledge and how it was possible

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31   Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemmish, "Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research," *Archival Science* 4 no. 3 (2004): 165.

32   Barney Glaser, "Naturalist Inquiry and Grounded Theory," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 5 no.1 (2004): 7, 36, http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/652/1412.

to research, investigate, and understand our world? I therefore came to feel that in looking for Grounded Theory I should not distinguish it by the distinction between objectivist and constructivist paradigms, since that distinction was not about Grounded Theory per se, but rather about a much wider context of changes in thinking about epistemology and the nature of research. On account of that context, it did eventually become clear to me that I would, at some point, have to justify and explain my research process in epistemological terms in order to gain academic legitimacy, but I still saw no reason why that justification and explanation could not come out of that research, rather than in advance of and apart from it.

Similarly another distinction associated with research in which I could not find Grounded Theory was that between method and methodology. Jin Tan states that one of the problems for new researchers approaching Grounded Theory is to decide "whether GT is a methodology or a method".[33] However, even when Tan addresses the question directly, no answer one way or the other would seem to be forthcoming. Instead Tan states, "The author does not suggest that Strauss offers a more practical method than Glaser's or vice versa, nor does she say that GT can be adopted either as a methodology or a method".[34] Which is it then? Or perhaps, more relevantly to the current discussion, why does it matter?

The distinction between method and methodology often comes down to a method being something one does, e.g., techniques such as interviewing and coding which one applies as part of a research design, and methodology being the study of method, or thinking about what you are doing/your epistemological approach. Methodology can (and often is) therefore, conflated with method (and to an extent also with what is termed here the research paradigm) to mean an explanation of the undertaking of research that explicitly discusses associated ontological, philosophical and epistemological perspectives and how the method being pursued fits with those perspectives. Or, put another way, methodology often acts as an expression of a bridge or connection between theory and practice, in particular the theory and practice of research. In this respect, however, it is not exclusive to research, but is used in other contexts as well. For example, Heather MacNeil has written, in the context of archival science that; "There are many ways of exploring the relationship between theory and practice. The model I have

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33   Jin Tan, "Grounded Theory in Practice: Issues and Discussion for New Qualitative Researchers," *Journal of Documentation* 66 no.1 (2010): 93.

34   Tan, "Grounded Theory in Practice," 100.

chosen to use places theory and practice along a continuum; between the two, and bridging them, is methodology".[35]

Given the above, I came to believe that the distinction between method and methodology tended to come into being only when you were trying to justify and explain your method in epistemological terms, or at least in whatever terms were currently used to assert the legitimacy and validity of what you had done in your research. As we have seen above, I had decided that the process of fixing this frame should run throughout my research process and as such, I made the decision to try not to define Grounded Theory in any of the above terms.

This decision however, left me in a dilemma. If I was not to define Grounded Theory in conventional terms such as in terms of the distinction between objectivist and constructivist paradigms or method and methodology, how was I to define it? One way was to just get on and do it, following the sorts of explanation of the process mentioned earlier, but another way was to look at it in its own terms. In which terms, the critical distinctions seemed to be those between Grounded Theory and conceptual description, and emergence and forcing. It is to these that we now turn.

A Complicated Exposition of Grounded Theory – Defining It in Its Own Terms

As we have seen above, Glaser has used both these distinctions to distinguish his own idea of Grounded Theory from those of others, including his fellow discoverer, Anselm Strauss, but the distinctions are also important to the others from whom he distinguishes himself. For example, with regards to the distinction between Grounded Theory and conceptual description, Strauss and Corbin take time within their work to distinguish between, what they term, "description", "conceptual ordering" and "theory";[36] and Charmaz feels the need to ask the question "If grounded theorists have the methods to construct theory, why do many studies remain descriptive?"[37] Before we deal with this distinction in more detail however, we turn to that between emergence and forcing, because it was my experience of this distinction that first

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35   Heather MacNeil, "Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms," *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 7, http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11982/12941.

36   Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 15-25.

37   Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 137.

allowed me to formulate what Grounded Theory meant to me, and thereby to consciously make the decision that that was what I was doing.

It would be easy to argue that, at least initially, my project was not a Grounded Theory one. For example, despite the emphasis placed on simultaneous data collection and analysis, my first batch of interviewing took place in a concentrated period of just over a month, followed by a further two months of transcription. It was only then that data analysis began and this analysis was initially undertaken using coding software, in this case NVivo, something about which many grounded theorists, including both Glaser and Charmaz, have expressed reservations on the grounds, for example, that "the programs may unintentionally foster an illusion that interpretive work can be reduced to a set of procedures".[38]

Nevertheless, despite these deviations, I still sought to approach my coding in what I thought of as a Grounded Theory way, by starting with open coding. Within NVivo, it is possible to create nodes, which are roughly equivalent to codes. A node is a label to which you can attach all apparently related text. Initially, after my first pass over the interview transcripts, I had created over 100 free nodes, that is over 100 themes or ideas had suggested themselves as a result of reading the transcripts. In NVivo, such free nodes differ from so called tree nodes, in that tree nodes can be hierarchically related to each other in branching trees and free nodes cannot. Faced with this plethora of nodes, the next logical step seemed to be to organise them into structures of tree nodes, but it soon became apparent that this approach was both futile and, more importantly, forcing.

It was futile because, despite spending inordinate amounts of time attempting to fit all the initial codes into a schema, many just would not fit. It was forcing because it became clear to me that such efforts had more to do with my desire to impose order (and control) over the data, rather than with discovering what it signified. I therefore made the decision to break up the trees of nodes and to make no further attempts to impose a structure or structures. Instead I paid greater attention to the relationships between nodes, since NVivo also allows for the creation of so-called relationship nodes. The idea was to find evidence in the data for relationships, such that a structure could emerge, rather than be imposed. It was also from this point onwards that much more use was made of the ability to interrogate the data using NVivo's various query features, such that the voices in the data continued to be in conversation with me.

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38   Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 520–21. Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory*, 185-6.

This strategy did work up to a point, but eventually the use of NVivo was completely abandoned. Not only did I find myself falling into the trap of what Lyn Richards has termed "coding fetishism", whereby "the act of coding becomes an end in itself", I was also seeing my codes as some kind of physical manifestation of my emerging thinking.[39] I was trying to create direct correlation, rather than work in the connection between the two. Once more then, my strategy changed and from this point onwards, I saw coding not as a matter of attaching pieces of text to particular labels (although I did continue this practice up to a point, cutting and pasting phrases into a Word document); rather I saw it in the creation of a number of extended memos, entitled "random thoughts on x", that is in the capture of my attempts to make sense of x. Looking back, I would now characterise this part of the process as my version of selective coding, since I was choosing to concentrate on a specific number of codes (represented by x), which I was starting to see as the core, in the sense of lying at the heart of the matter.

As a result of the above experience I now see emergence versus forcing as an injunction to resist for as long as possible the urge to make things make sense, to make them fit. This is very difficult, because all your instincts tell you that the whole point of your research is to do exactly that. In my opinion however, it is often easy, when moving towards making things fit as your end point, to forget that in so doing, you are also employing a frame (the thing into which they fit). Grounded Theory urges you to keep that frame in flux and in question for as long as possible. Eventually, however, it is necessary (certainly in the context of doing a Ph.D.) to reach an end point and the temporal stage moves from emergence to integration. It is in the phase of integration that the distinction between conceptual description and Grounded Theory starts to become more relevant. It is at this point that the researcher must tackle head on the question of fit, of the mutual dependence or interconnectedness of frame and findings, process and product.

It is now nine years since I started my first foray into Grounded Theory, five since its completion, and so perhaps it is time to be less ambiguous about my own epistemological position. For the avoidance of doubt, my outlook is broadly constructivist and, arguably because of that, I am still quite confused as to how it is that we can know anything at all. In this position, I am influenced by the thinking of the second order cyberneticians Maturana and Varela, who discuss at length how we must "walk on the razor's edge […] to understand the regularity of the world we are experiencing at

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39   Lyn Richards, "Qualitative Computing: A Methods Revolution?" *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 5 no. 3 (2002): 269.

every moment, but without any point of reference independent of ourselves that would give certainty to our descriptions and cognitive assertions".[40] As Bryant and Charmaz point out in the discussion of the rise of social constructionist challenges in sociology, it is all too easy when following this path to end up either at "the extreme of arguing that in fact no external reality" exists or "to end in complete relativism, according equal status to all and any representations of reality".[41] Thus, whereas Thomas and James condemn Grounded Theory for "sleight of hand in reasoning about inquiry", I cannot.[42] They may find themselves annoyed with its "desire to have it both ways", but I can see only a practical compromise.[43]

Thomas and James further problematise this sleight of hand and desire to have it both ways in the following terms:

> They [grounded theorists] want the comfortable feeling that comes from a denial of the arrogance of foundationalism and essentialism […] while clinging on to an epistemological security blanket – one woven from the associated notions that (a) some clearer distillation of truth can be established about the particulars and generalities of social behavior, and (b) that this can be established using the cogs and levers of structured inquiry.[44]

Personally I feel such a statement might apply more generally. Who (grounded theorist or not) really wants to throw away completely the epistemological security blanket that they can, and do, have knowledge of themselves and the 'real' world around them? Inquiry in a constructivist paradigm is underpinned by difficulty and apparent paradox; in many ways that is the point of the paradigm. For me, making a distinction between Grounded Theory and conceptual description helps me to maintain my awareness of this fact. Grounded Theory is not conceptual description because the product of the process does not exist simply as an idea or theory apart from any or all of; the process of its generation, the researcher undertaking it and that which it seeks to describe. Rather it exists as a complex *integration* of sense making and sense made, defined only by that which it defines and grounded in this seemingly paradoxical circularity. Grounded Theory does not play to

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40   Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1998, p.241.

41   Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective", 37.

42   Thomas and James, "Reinventing Grounded Theory," 790.

43   Thomas and James, "Reinventing Grounded Theory," 784.

44   Thomas and James, "Reinventing Grounded Theory," 780.

an easy separation or connection between thinking and being and becomes in itself, its terms and tenets, the realisation of an essential circularity within all attempts at inquiry in a constructivist paradigm.

Again, given the contested nature of Grounded Theory, the above account would almost certainly not meet with universal agreement from all those who consider themselves grounded theorists, but it is a demonstration of the way in which, as Mansourian puts it "GT [Grounded Theory] should not be considered as a step-by-step manual for researchers", and that "researchers should interpret the nature of GT in the way that suits their research context and then clarify the reasons for each step in the research".[45] The same is true whatever form your research takes and I will not enter into any attempt to assert Grounded Theory's innate superiority as an approach to research. For me, as a novice experiencing for the first time what it meant to do 'research', Grounded Theory offered a way to explore that meaning in a very open way for which I will always be grateful. Moreover, and although I did not know it when I started, it did prove a good fit with the subject of my inquiry, leading me to see that subject (nominally archival description) not just as the practice of describing archives, but also as the practice of trying to deal with the epistemological questions inherent in all our descriptions (and attempts to understand the world around us). Would I have reached the same conclusion if I had not taken a Grounded Theory approach? I suspect not, but we can never know.

Grounded Theory in Archival Science

Grounded Theory would appear to have gained some traction within Archival Science, and is reported as having been adopted by a number of studies as follows:

- Research by Paul Conway into the use of digitised photographic archives at the Library of Congress involved "the qualitative analysis of interview transcripts using the *grounded theory* method".[46]

- The InterPARES 1 research project in part "adopted a grounded theory approach in which case studies of electronic systems were

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45   Yazdan Mansourian, "Adoption of Grounded Theory", 397.

46   Paul Conway, "Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User," *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (2010): 436, http://archivists.metapress.com/content/mp275470663n5907/?p=7f2bf0f784714e6fa8e78230187f72ac&pi=1.

examined in order to identify and describe phenomena associated with the records and their contexts".[47]

- Victoria Lemieux's study into the recordkeeping practices of failed Jamaican banks was based on data which was "coded and analysed using an approach informed by the Grounded Theory methodology with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software".[48]

- Karen Gracy's "research on competing definitions of value in the world of film preservation", whilst seeking to make the case for archival ethnography, also discussed grounded theory in sections headed "Analysis", "Coding" and "Memo writing".[49]

Even amongst this brief sample though, individuals appear to have seen Grounded Theory differently; as a method, an approach, a methodology, and a series of specific techniques. This highlights what I mean by the problems caused by seeking to define Grounded Theory in these terms, because it causes a need to engage with the argument of which is correct. I choose not to engage with that argument in these terms, since that would be unhelpful. There is a useful argument to be had (and an ever evolving consensus) about what constitutes good research practice, but it cannot be conducted purely in terms of Grounded Theory.

In attempting to define Grounded Theory in the context of Archival Science then, I would rather point the reader towards discussion within the field about research paradigms, methods and methodologies, and the relationship between theory and practice. This discussion is ongoing and has been articulated over the years by numerous individuals, including; Burke, Roberts, Eastwood, Livelton, Mortensen and Williams.[50] This volume also takes its

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47   Anne Gilliland-Swetland, "Testing Our Truths: Delineating the Parameters of the Authentic Archival Electronic Record," *American Archivist* 65 no. 2 (2002): 202, http://archivists.metapress.com/content/f036wp74710g1483/?p=5eed5ec4cc3946e48407b3539c14868d&pi=3.

48   Victoria Lemieux, "Let the Ghosts Speak: An Empirical Exploration of the "Nature" of the Record," *Archivaria* 51 (2001): 83, http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12795/13995.

49   Karen Gracy, "Documenting Communities of Practice: Making the Case for Archival Ethnography," *Archival Science* 4 nos. 3/4 (2004): 336, 352-55 [reprinted in this monograph].

50   Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 no.1 (1981): 40–46; Terry Eastwood, "What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?" *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 122-30, http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/viewArticle/11991; Trevor Livelton, *Archival Theory, Records, and the Public* (Lanham: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, 1996); Mortensen, "The Place of Theory," 1-26; John Roberts, "Practice Makes Perfect,

part in that discussion, as does earlier work of two of its editors, Gilliland and McKemmish.[51] In this earlier work, Gilliland and McKemmish discuss what a research paradigm for Archival Science might look like and they write that:

> In emergent archival research, liberation may well lie in the challenge of applying the apparent opposites of interpretive and positivist approaches to studying archival phenomena […] In part it may lead to understandings that some phenomena in our world behave in ways which are susceptible to being seen from a positivist perspective, while others are more readily understood from an interpretivist viewpoint. And perhaps the creative tension generated will lead us to yet other ways of seeing.[52]

It is in this creative tension that I see Grounded Theory as operating and it is this operating in creative tension, rather than just acknowledging it, that, for me, distinguishes Grounded Theory. Then again, another place in which I would see Grounded Theory within Archival Science is the attempts to define archival theory and comments such as the following from Terry Eastwood:

> However much an applied discipline might rely on knowledge of other disciplines to build its theoretical picture of the nature of the things on which it acts, it cannot adopt that knowledge directly for its theory, because the *grounds of its theory must suit its perspective and purposes*.[53]

The same is true of Grounded Theory, its grounds (tenets) must fit with its perspectives and purposes and this is why it can only be defined in its own terms. For it is only when viewed in those terms that it becomes a consistent and coherent whole, and it is a sense of that whole that I have sought to communicate here.

Theory Makes Theorists," *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 111-121, http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11990/12953; John Roberts, "Response to Terry Eastwood's Paper," *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 131-133, http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11992/12955; Caroline Williams, "Studying Reality: The Application of Theory in an Aspect of UK Practice," *Archivaria* 62 (2006): 77-101, http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12889/14120.

51   Gilliland and McKemmish, "Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research."

52   Gilliland and McKemmish, "Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research." 170.

53   Eastwood, "What is Archival Theory," 125.

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