Grounded theory methodology

✓ Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

✓ the aims and objectives of grounded theory methodology

✓ the basic principles that underpin grounded theory methodology

✓ the methodological procedures associated with grounded theory, including techniques for gathering and analysing data and ways of presenting the findings

✓ the different versions of grounded theory that are available and the debates that have given rise to their emergence

✓ grounded theory's limitations

In addition, you will be able to:

✓ locate grounded theory epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

Grounded theory was originally developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. They were unhappy about the way in which existing theories dominated sociological research. They argued that researchers needed a method that would allow them to move from data to theory, so that new theories could emerge. Such theories would be specific to the context in which they had been developed. They would be 'grounded' in the data from which they had emerged rather than rely on analytical constructs, categories or variables from pre-existing theories. Grounded theory, therefore, was designed to open up a space for the development of new, contextualized theories.

Since the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the grounded theory method has undergone a number of revisions. Most significantly, Glaser and Strauss themselves parted company and proposed different ways in which grounded theory ought to be practised (see Snapshot Box 7.1 at the end of this chapter). In this chapter, I introduce the basic principles of grounded theory. This is followed by an illustration of the application of the method to the study of nurse–patient interaction. Having thus outlined the basic process of grounded theory, I identify some of the differences between the various versions of the grounded theory method. I then go on to draw attention to the limitations of grounded theory as a qualitative method for psychological research. The chapter concludes by examining what grounded theory may have to say in response to the three epistemological questions identified at the end of Chapter 1.

Basic principles of grounded theory

Grounded theory involves the progressive identification and integration of *categories of meaning* from data. It is both the process of category identification and integration (as *method*) and its product (as *theory*). Grounded theory *as method* provides us with guidelines on how to identify categories, how to make links between categories and how to establish relationships between them. Grounded theory *as theory* is the end-product of this process; it provides us with an explanatory framework with which to understand the phenomenon under investigation. To identify, refine and integrate categories, and ultimately to develop theory, grounded theory researchers use a number of key strategies, including *constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling* and *theoretical coding*. Let us take a closer look at the major analytical constructs, or *building blocks*, of the grounded theory method.

Categories

These designate the grouping together of instances (events, processes, occurrences) that share central features or characteristics with one another. Categories can be at a low level of abstraction, in which case they function as *descriptive labels* (or *concepts*; see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 61). For example, references to 'anxiety', 'anger' and 'pity' can be grouped together under the category heading of 'emotions'. As grounded theory analysis progresses, the researcher is able to identify categories at a higher level of abstraction. These categories are *analytic* rather than descriptive. They interpret, rather than simply label, instances of phenomena. For example, references to diverse activities such as getting drunk, jogging and writing poetry could be categorized as 'escape' if they appear to share the objective of distracting the individual from thinking about a problem. Both descriptive and analytic categories are based upon the identification of 'relations of similarity and difference' (see Dey 1999: 63); however, they function at different levels of abstraction. Category identification in grounded theory is very different from content analysis, with which it should never be confused. Content analysis makes use of categories that are defined *before* data analysis commences and which are designed to be mutually exclusive. This is to say, the same data cannot be allocated to more than one category. By contrast, categories in grounded theory *emerge from the data*, they are not mutually exclusive and they evolve throughout the research process.

Coding

This is the process by which categories are identified. In the early stages of analysis, coding is largely descriptive. Here, descriptive labels are attached to discrete instances of phenomena. New, low-level categories emerge frequently as a result. As coding progresses, the researcher is able to identify higher-level categories that systematically integrate low-level categories into meaningful units. In other words, analytical categories are introduced. Because grounded theory aims to develop *new*, *context-specific* theories, category labels should not be derived from existing theoretical formulations but should be grounded in the data instead. Ideally, category labels should be *in vivo* – that is, they should utilize words or phrases used by the participants in the study. This helps the researcher to avoid importing existing theory into the analysis. *Theoretical coding* involves the application of a *coding paradigm* to the data. A coding paradigm sensitizes the researcher to particular ways in which categories may be linked with one another. Different versions of grounded theory subscribe to different coding paradigms. These will be discussed in more detail below (see also Snapshot Box 7.1).

Constant comparative analysis

This ensures that the coding process maintains its momentum by moving back and forth between the identification of similarities among and differences between emerging categories. Having identified a common feature that unites instances of a phenomenon, the researcher needs to refocus on differences *within* a category in order to be able to identify any emerging *subcategories*. The earlier example of 'emotion' as a category may be expanded to illustrate this process. I suggested that references to 'anxiety', 'anger' and 'pity' could give rise to the category 'emotion'. Further instances of this category could be 'joy', 'jealousy' and 'hate'. Comparing the various instances of emotion allows us to construct subcategories of emotion, such as emotions that require an object (e.g. hate and jealousy) and those that do not (e.g. joy and anxiety). Constant comparative analysis ensures that the researcher does not merely build up categories but also breaks them down again into smaller units of meaning. In this way, the full complexity and diversity of the data can be recognized, and any homogenizing impulse can be counteracted. The ultimate objective of constant comparative analysis is to link and integrate categories in such a way that all instances of variation are captured by the emerging theory.

Negative case analysis

This ensures that the researcher continues to develop the emerging theory in the light of the evidence. Having identified a category, or a linkage between categories, grounded theory researchers need to look for 'negative cases' – that is, instances that do not fit. The identification of such instances allows the researcher to qualify and elaborate the emerging theory, adding depth and density to it, so that it is able to capture the full complexity of the data on which it is based.

Theoretical sensitivity

This is what moves the researcher from a descriptive to an analytic level. In grounded theory, the researcher *interacts* with the data. That is, (s)he asks questions of the data, which are in turn modified by the emerging answers. Each emerging category, idea, concept or linkage informs a new look at the data to elaborate or modify the original construct. The researcher engages with the data by asking questions, making comparisons and looking for opposites. This may involve going back to source to collect further data. Data collection and coding are both part of the process of grounded theory analysis.

Theoretical sampling

This involves collecting further data in the light of categories that have emerged from earlier stages of data analysis. Theoretical sampling means checking emerging theory against reality by sampling incidents that may challenge or elaborate its developing claims. While the earlier stages of grounded theory require maximum openness and flexibility to identify a wide range of predominantly descriptive categories, theoretical sampling is concerned with the refinement and, ultimately, *saturation* (see below) of existing, and increasingly analytic, categories.

Theoretical saturation

Ideally, the process of data collection and data analysis in grounded theory continues until theoretical saturation has been achieved. In other words, the researcher continues to sample and code data until no new categories can be identified, and until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge. At this point, a set of categories and subcategories captures the bulk of the available data. However, theoretical saturation functions as a goal rather than a reality. This is because even though we may (and ought to) strive for saturation of our categories, modification of categories or changes in perspective are always possible. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 40) draw attention to the way in which grounded theory is always provisional:

> *When generation of theory is the aim, however, one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives, what will change and help develop the theory. These perspectives can easily occur on the final day of study or when the manuscript is reviewed in page proof: so the published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory.*
>
> *(cited in Dey 1999: 117)*

Memo-writing

This is an important part of the grounded theory method. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher maintains a written record of theory development. This means writing definitions of categories and justifying labels chosen for them, tracing their emergent relationships with one another, and keeping a record of the progressive integration of higher- and lower-level categories. Memos will also show up changes of direction in the analytic process and emerging perspectives, as well as provide reflections on the adequacy of the *research question* (see below). As a result, memos provide information about the research process itself as well as about the substantive findings of the study. Memos can be long or short, abstract or concrete, integrative (of earlier memos or ideas) or original, use words or diagrams (e.g. flowcharts). All memos, however, should be dated, contain a heading and state which sections of the data they were inspired by.

Research process

Grounded theory is unlike most other research methods in that it merges the processes of data collection and analysis. The researcher moves back and forth between the two in an attempt to 'ground' the analysis in the data. The aim of this movement is *theoretical saturation* (see above). As a result, grounded theory does not provide the researcher with a series of steps, which, if followed correctly, will take him or her from the formulation of the research question through data collection to analysis and, finally, to the production of a research report. Instead, grounded theory encourages the researcher to continuously review earlier stages of the research and, if necessary, to change direction. Even the research question is no permanent fixture in grounded theory. Simply serving to identify the phenomenon we wish to study at the outset, the research question becomes progressively focused throughout the research process. Alternatively, it can change altogether in the light of emerging categories (see Morse's study of nurse–patient interaction below). Having drawn attention to the integrated and cyclical nature of the grounded theory method, I shall nevertheless attempt to provide an outline of what is involved in a typical grounded theory study. This outline is not meant to serve as a blueprint; however, without any such guidelines, it may be difficult to get started on grounded theory research.

The research question

Grounded theory researchers need an initial research question to focus their attention upon the particular phenomenon they wish to investigate (see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 37–40). The initial research question should serve to identify, but not make assumptions about, the phenomenon of interest. This is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. The process of labelling itself imports assumptions about a phenomenon (see Chapters 10 and 11 for an in-depth discussion of this process); for example, if we ask 'How do women manage a pregnancy complicated by chronic illness?' (see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 38), we assume that women 'manage' their pregnancies (as opposed to being 'subjected' to them, for example) and that chronic illness constitutes a 'complication' in relation to pregnancy. We cannot ask questions without making assumptions. However, we can attempt to remain at a descriptive level and use our question simply to identify the phenomenon (e.g. 'How do women with chronic illness experience pregnancy?') rather than to offer an explanatory account that requires testing against reality (e.g. 'To what extent does social support improve the ability of women with chronic illness to cope with a pregnancy?').

The initial research question in grounded theory should be open-ended and should not be compatible with simple 'yes/no' answers. It should identify the phenomenon of interest without making (too many) assumptions about it. It should never employ constructs derived from existing theories. It is also recommended that the question orientates the researcher towards action and process (e.g. '*How* do people do *x*?') rather than states and conditions (e.g. '*What* do people want?' or '*Why* do people do *x*?') (see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 38). As the research progresses, the researcher is able to focus the research question more narrowly. This process is facilitated by *theoretical sampling* and *theoretical sensitivity* (see above). By the time *theoretical saturation* has been achieved, the initial research question can have changed almost beyond recognition.

Data collection

Grounded theory is compatible with a wide range of data collection techniques. Semi-structured inter-viewing, participant observation, focus groups, even diaries can generate data for grounded theory. In

addition, existing texts and documents can also be subjected to grounded theory analysis. However, it is important to differentiate between the full implementation of the method, which requires the researcher to move back and forth between data collection and analysis, and an abbreviated version that involves the coding of data only.

In the *full version*, the researcher collects some data, explores the data through initial open coding, establishes tentative linkages between categories, and then returns to the field to collect further data. Data collection is progressively focused and informed by the emerging theory (see *Theoretical sampling* above). In this version, the researcher is able to *triangulate*; that is, (s)he can draw on different data sources and use different methods of data collection. For example, in a study of eating habits, initial coding of a transcript of a group discussion among office workers may lead to the identification of the category 'context' with the subcategories 'work' and 'leisure'. This may lead the researcher to carry out a semi-structured interview with a professional cook to further explore the relevance of context to the experience of eating. The full version of grounded theory allows the researcher to push outwards, to seek out manifestations of categories, negative cases and opposites, until category development is dense, detailed and differentiated. This gives the researcher confidence that theoretical saturation is being approached.

The *abbreviated version* of grounded theory, by contrast, works with the original data only. Here, interview transcripts or other documents are analysed following the principles of grounded theory (i.e. the processes of *coding* and *constant comparative analysis*); however, *theoretical sensitivity*, *theoretical saturation* and *negative case analysis* can only be implemented *within* the texts that are being analysed. The researcher does not have the opportunity to leave the confines of the original data set to broaden and refine the analysis. Consequently, the abbreviated version of grounded theory should never be our first choice; it should only be used where time or resource constraints prevent the implementation of the full version of grounded theory (see also Henwood and Pidgeon 1995; Pidgeon and Henwood 2004 for a discussion of smaller-scale grounded theory studies).

Data analysis

Coding constitutes the most basic as well as the most fundamental process in grounded theory. Coding can be carried out line-by-line, sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, page-by-page, section-by-section, and so on. The smaller the unit of analysis (e.g. one line of text), the more numerous the descriptive categories that emerge initially. Later stages of analysis will integrate a lot of these into higher-level analytic categories. Line-by-line analysis ensures that our analysis is truly grounded and that higher-level categories and, later on, theoretical formulations, actually emerge from the data, rather than being imposed upon it. If we code larger chunks of text, such as a whole page, our attention may be captured by one particularly striking occurrence. As a result, less obvious but perhaps equally important instances of categories, whose true significance has yet to emerge, can be missed. If there is sufficient time available, line-by-line coding should always be carried out. This is particularly important when the *abbreviated version* of grounded theory is used; here, the depth of analysis generated by line-by-line coding is needed to compensate for the loss of breadth that accompanies the researcher's dependence on the original data set.

There are differences in the ways in which grounded theory researchers approach the coding process. For most grounded theorists, initial open coding involves the generation of largely descriptive labels for occurrences or phenomena. Such labels give rise to low-level categories. To establish linkages between such categories and to integrate them into higher-order analytic categories, we can use a *coding paradigm*. A coding paradigm sensitizes the researcher to particular ways in which categories may be linked with one another. It helps us to arrange our categories in a meaningful and hierarchical way, with some categories constituting the 'core' and others the 'periphery'. It is here that grounded theory researchers disagree with one another. Some (e.g. Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990) propose the use of a coding paradigm that explicitly focuses upon, and thus alerts the researcher to, manifestations of 'process' and 'change' in the data. This is done by asking certain questions of the data. These include questions about the context within which a category is embedded, the interactional strategies used by participants to manage the category, and the consequences of such interactional strategies. Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to this process as 'axial coding'. Others (e.g. Glaser 1978, 1992) caution against the use of a coding paradigm that presupposes the relevance of particular constructs (such as 'process' or 'change') to the data. Instead, they argue that any kind of coding paradigm should only be used when it is indicated by the data. Glaser (1978) identifies a wide range of *theoretical codes* that could potentially come into play when low-level categories are integrated. However, according to this view, the data themselves are the best source of relevant theoretical codes.

The research report

Qualitative research can be written up in a variety of ways; qualitative researchers are much less constrained by convention than quantitative researchers when it comes to the presentation of their work. A qualitative research report should contain information about the rationale of the study (including references to relevant literature), about how it was carried out (including both data collection and analysis), what was found and what these findings may mean (including their implications for theory and practice). As long as the report contains this information, it does not matter precisely how, and in what format, it is presented. The author of a qualitative research report should strive for clarity first and foremost. For those who are new to qualitative research, however, it may feel safer to stick to the conventional research report format. In the remainder of this section, I present some guidelines for writing up grounded theory research using the standard subheadings of 'Introduction', 'Method', 'Results', 'Discussion' and 'References and appendices'.

Introduction

The introductory chapter (or section) of the report should present a rationale for the study to be reported. Such a rationale can be informed by theoretical or practical concerns. For example, the author may argue that a particular phenomenon has not been explained convincingly in the literature, and that his or her study was designed to fill this gap. Alternatively, the author may identify a recent social phenomenon that has not been investigated. Or there may be a large research literature about the phenomenon but none of the studies reported asked the type of question that the author wants to ask about it. This is often the case when most of the studies reported have used quantitative methods, which meant that certain questions (e.g. about the quality of experience, about the negotiation of meanings) could not be addressed satisfactorily by the research. Since grounded theory research aims to develop new, contextualized theories, a review of existing research has to be undertaken with caution. It is important that the researcher maintains a certain distance from such literature; the grounded theory study reported must not be seen as an extension of, or a test or, an existing theory. Some grounded theorists even recommend that the researcher does not review relevant literature until *after* the research has been completed. However, it could be argued that this is impossible, since most researchers are already working within a discipline (e.g. psychology, nursing studies, social work) and are already familiar with the major theories in the field. A systematic review of the literature is unlikely to 'contaminate' their grounded theory study within such a context. It may, however, help them to formulate a useful research question that has not been asked before in quite the same way.

Method

In this section, the researcher describes exactly what they did and why. This means including information about data collection techniques, choice of contexts and participants, and about how data were coded and how categories were integrated. If the researcher chose the *full version* of the grounded theory method, (s)he needs to provide an account of how the cyclical process of data collection and analysis progressed throughout the research. If the *abbreviated version* was used, the researcher needs to explain why this was done. The method section should also contain ethical considerations and, where appropriate, a discussion of *reflexivity*.

Results

This is likely to be the longest section of the report. Within the context of a thesis, the results of the study can be presented in a number of consecutive chapters. The presentation of the findings of a grounded theory study are best organized around the key categories identified. If there is a core category at the centre of the phenomenon under investigation and with which all other categories have some kind of relationship, this should be discussed first. If there is no one core category, the major categories should be discussed in sequence. It is also a good idea to include a visual representation of the major categories and their relationships with one another. This can take the form of a flowchart or a table (for helpful illustrations of how categories can be presented diagrammatically, see Morse 1992a).

The results section of the report can be divided by subheadings that refer to the major categories identified. Under each heading, the relevant category and its subcategories are introduced and defined. This is where

data can be used to support analytical points made. For example, quotations from participants can illustrate the use of a particular category in a particular context. It is important, however, to use data only to illustrate, but never to substitute for, analysis. Following the introduction and discussion of each category, a further section (or chapter) can be devoted to a detailed examination of the relationships between categories. This is also where emerging theoretical formulations are spelled out and explored. Alternatively, the introduction of categories and a discussion of their relationships with one another can be merged; however, this is a more challenging way to write up grounded theory clearly and systematically.

Discussion

Here, the author addresses the theoretical and practical implications of the study. What has the study contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? What may be the practical applications of our findings? We may also want to reflect upon the focus of our study. Was our initial research question the right question to ask? Why may we have got it wrong? What does this tell us about our assumptions about the phenomenon? At this point, we can raise further issues in relation to both *personal* and *epistemological reflexivity* (see Chapter 1). This section is also the place where we discuss our findings in relation to the existing literature. To what extent does our research challenge or support existing theories? What can our work contribute to theoretical developments in the field? What kind of research ought to be done in the future to build upon our study? And how may our participants benefit from the research to which they have contributed?

References and appendices

All research reports should include a list of references, including all authors referred to in the report. There may also be appendices containing additional data supporting the analysis presented in the report. These should be clearly labelled and identified at relevant points in the report itself. However, there should be nothing in the appendices that is essential to the reader's comprehension of the report. Authors cannot assume that appendices will necessarily be read.

In *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, Charmaz (2006) offers detailed guidance to help researchers navigate the grounded theory research process. The book provides helpful examples of different types of coding and memo-writing, and demonstrates how the key components of the grounded theory process (gathering data, coding, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, saturation, sorting) contribute to the construction of theory. However, as Morse (2009) points out, grounded theory is not something that is 'performed' by different researchers in exactly the same way; every researcher will need to tailor the approach to suit their particular research purpose. This means that every researcher will generate their own version of grounded theory methodology in the process of conducting the research. And this, of course, is entirely in keeping with the spirit of grounded theory!

An example of grounded theory

This section focuses on 'Negotiating commitment and involvement in the nurse–patient relationship', by Janice Morse (1992b). Morse's initial research question was: 'What is the role of gift-giving in the patient–nurse relationship?' Morse had noticed that patients frequently offered nurses gifts in response to the care they had received. She was interested in exploring the role gift-giving played in the development of the relationship between patient and nurse. Morse and her research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews with nurses. During the initial stages of data analysis, it became clear that gift-giving was a way of negotiating a certain type of relationship. It played a symbolic role that could potentially be played by other actions. This led Morse to broaden the focus of the study and to ask: 'How does the nurse–patient/patient–nurse relationship develop?' Theoretical sampling allowed Morse and her research assistants to obtain data that shed light on the development of nurse–patient relationships in more general terms. They conducted further interviews, this time with nurses who had themselves been patients. All interviews were transcribed and coded.

Morse used a version of Strauss and Corbin's *coding paradigm*, which meant that she explored the categories she had identified in terms of 'process' (i.e. experiences of nurses and patients over the course of

the relationship) and 'change' (i.e. factors and circumstances that impact upon the nurse–patient interaction). 'Negotiating the relationship' emerged as the core category. Other categories included 'types of relationship', which were subdivided into 'mutual' and 'unilateral'. 'Mutual relationships' were characterized by mutual interest and investment in the relationship between nurse and patient, whereas 'unilateral relationships' involved a degree of mismatch between the participants' willingness to develop the relationship. 'Mutual relationships' in turn contained four subcategories: 'clinical', 'therapeutic', 'connected' and 'over-involved'. Morse identified six dimensions according to which the four types of 'mutual relationships' could be differentiated. These included time spent together (e.g. long-term vs transitory), the purpose of the interaction (e.g. perfunctory vs supportive), the patient's needs (e.g. minor vs extensive), the patient's trust (e.g. basic vs complete), the patient's role (e.g. patient vs person) and nursing commitment (e.g. professional vs personal). Morse presents the types of relationship and their six dimensions in table format.

Morse's study develops an 'explanatory model for describing the various types of relationship that occur' between nurses and their patients (Morse 1992b: 334). Gift-giving, which had originally been the focus (and the inspiration) of the study, ended up being just one among a number of strategies used by patients for increasing involvement in the nurse–patient relationship. It was part of the process of negotiating a mutual relationship that had moved beyond its clinical remit and into a realm of connectedness between nurse and patient. Grounded theory as a method was able to accommodate a shift in the focus of the study. It allowed Morse to identify different types of nurse–patient relationship, their characteristics, and the strategies participants use to negotiate these relationships.

Versions of grounded theory

When *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was published in 1967 (Glaser and Strauss), it introduced qualitative researchers in the social sciences to a new methodology. Once researchers adopted it for their own purposes and grounded theory studies began to be published, it became clear that the new methodology could be interpreted and applied in a number of different ways. As time went by, even the creators of grounded theory, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, began to disagree about the nature of the method and how it ought to be practised (see Snapshot Box 7.1). As a result, a number of versions of the grounded theory method have emerged. Currently, three main versions dominate the field (McCallin 2004). These include the 'classical' (Glaserian) version, Strauss and Corbin's more structured approach, and Charmaz's (2006) constructivist version. Although all of these are still referred to as 'grounded theory', some (e.g. Glaser 1992) have suggested that this label should be reserved for the original formulation by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and that more recent versions and developments ought to find new, and more appropriate, names for themselves. However, others (e.g. Dey 1999: 44) argue that 'later difficulties and disagreements over grounded theory can be traced to ambiguities in the original presentation'. This suggests that there is, in fact, no *one* original and unambiguous version of the methodology that alone is entitled to the label 'grounded theory'.

There are three major issues around which debates have evolved in grounded theory research, and around which the different approaches to grounded theory methodology have evolved. They concern the *role of induction* in grounded theory, *discovery versus construction*, and a *focus on social processes versus individual experience*.

In the remainder of this section, I aim to identify the major debates in grounded theory research and to differentiate between the various versions of the grounded theory method that have emerged around them.

The role of induction in grounded theory

The grounded theory method was developed to allow new, contextualized theories to emerge directly from data. It was a reaction against the pervasiveness of hypothesis-testing and the application of existing theories to new data. Grounded theory was designed to minimize the imposition of the researcher's own categories of meaning upon the data during the research process. However, with the production of detailed, step-by-step guides to the method (e.g. Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998), grounded theory was becoming more prescriptive. The inclusion of a specific coding paradigm, for instance, ensures that the researcher will be looking for the manifestation of particular patterns in the data. This adds a deductive element to grounded theory; instead of taking the data themselves as our starting point to determine which categories may emerge, a coding paradigm identifies a set of dimensions of interest and explores

the data in the light of these. Here, through the use of the coding paradigm, the researcher is sensitized to those aspects of the data that are considered to be essential to our understanding of social phenomena. For example, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axial coding paradigm is designed to sensitize the researcher to the role of 'process': 'unless the analyst is made keenly aware of the need to identify process, to build it into the analysis, it is often omitted or done in a very narrow or limited fashion' (p. 143). Similarly, Strauss and Corbin recommend the use of a 'conditional matrix' to introduce higher-level constructs such as class, gender, race and power into the analysis.

Those who subscribe to the earlier, less prescriptive version of grounded theory are concerned that such a deductive element undermines the original purpose of grounded theory (i.e. the *emergence* of theory from data) by imposing researcher-defined categories, or 'pet codes' (Glaser 1992). As Melia (1996: 376) puts it: 'I always have a nagging doubt that the procedures are getting in the way; the technical tail is beginning to wag the theoretical dog.' These researchers argue that, to maintain its creative potential, grounded theory must retain the openness of its original formulation. According to this view, the grounded theory method needs to be flexible enough to respond to the data. Highly prescriptive procedures and coding frames encourage analytic rigidity and are not compatible with such flexibility.

Discovery versus construction

In 1967, Glaser and Strauss described grounded theory as involving 'the discovery of theory from data' (p. 1). The use of the term 'discovery' suggests that the researcher uncovers something that is already there. Similarly, the concept of 'emergence' (of categories, of theory) also plays down the creative role of the researcher in the research process. Here, the researcher is like a midwife, who delivers the fully formed baby. It has been argued, however, that such a view of the research process in grounded theory is heavily influenced by a positivist epistemology and not compatible with 'big Q' qualitative methodology (see Chapter 1). This is because the suggestion that categories and theories can simply 'emerge' from data, and that it is possible for a researcher to avoid the imposition of categories of meaning onto the data, reflects the belief that phenomena create their own representations that are directly perceived by observers. Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2002, 2006) introduced a *social constructionist* version of grounded theory that argues that categories and theories do not *emerge* from the data, but are *constructed* by the researcher through an interaction with the data. According to this version, 'The researcher creates an explication, organisation and presentation *of* the data rather than discovering order *within* the data. The discovery process consists of discovering the ideas the *researcher* has about the data after interacting with it' (Charmaz 1990: 1169, original emphasis).

Here, it is acknowledged that the researcher's decisions, the questions that (s)he is asking of the data, the way (s)he is using the method, as well as his or her (personal, philosophical, theoretical, methodological) background shape the research process and, ultimately, the findings. As a result, the theory produced constitutes one particular reading of the data rather than the only truth about the data. Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) substitute the term *theory generation* for *discovery* to capture the constructive element in the process of theory development. See also Clarke (2003, 2005, 2006) for more on constructionism in grounded theory.

A focus on social processes versus individual experience

Originally, grounded theory was developed to allow researchers in the social sciences to study, and theorize, localized social processes, such as chronic illness management, the socialization of nurses or the dying trajectory, within particular settings (e.g. the hospital, the family). The aim of the emerging theories was to clarify and explain such social processes and their consequences. These processes could be social psychological or social structural in nature. In order to identify and explicate relevant processes and their consequences, researchers engaged in the full cyclical interpretative inquiry (i.e. the *full version*). More recently, researchers have used grounded theory as a method of data analysis only (i.e. the *abbreviated version*). Here, interview transcripts have been subjected to grounded theory-inspired coding in order to produce a systematic representation of the participant's experience and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (e.g. chronic pain, relationship break-ups, undergoing gender reassignment) through the identification of categories of meaning and experience.

This use of grounded theory shares some features with phenomenological research (see Chapter 8). Thus, while a focus on social processes takes a more contextualized and dynamic approach, whereby the

researcher attempts to identify and map social processes and relationships and their consequences for participants, a focus on participants' individual experiences is more psychological in that the researcher is concerned with the structure of the internal world of the participant (e.g. their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, memories) rather than its social context, causes or consequences. The former approach takes a view 'from the outside in', whereas the latter proceeds 'from the inside out' (see Charmaz 1995: 30–1). The kind of theory generated on the basis of the abbreviated, 'from the inside out' approach to grounded theory might look a little like a cognitive behavioural formulation whereby an individual's beliefs and assumptions are shown to generate certain emotions which then inform that individual's behavourial choices. It is, of course, possible to combine the two perspectives ('inside out' and 'outside in') by attempting to capture the lived experience of participants *and* to explain its quality in terms of wider social processes and their consequences. It could be argued that this would indeed be required in order to gain a full understanding of social psychological phenomena.

Limitations of grounded theory as a method for psychological research

As is the case with all research methods, grounded theory does have a number of limitations. The most widely raised criticism of the grounded theory method concerns its epistemological roots. It has been argued that grounded theory subscribes to a positivist epistemology and that it sidesteps questions of reflexivity. For researchers in psychology, another shortcoming of grounded theory is its preoccupation with uncovering social processes, which limits its applicability to more phenomenological research questions. These two limitations will be discussed in turn.

The problem of induction, or 'What grounds grounded theory?'

The original purpose of grounded theory was to allow new theories to *emerge* from data. In other words, grounded theory works with *induction*, whereby observations give rise to new ideas. This was meant to liberate the researcher from the straitjacket of *hypothetico-deductive* research. However, one of the problems associated with induction is that it pays insufficient attention to the role of the researcher. It is assumed that the data speaks for itself. However, as critics of *positivism* have argued convincingly, all observations are made from a particular perspective, that is, they are standpoint-specific. Whatever emerges from a field through observation depends on the observer's position within it. In the same way, whatever emerges from the analysis of a set of data is theoretically informed because all analysis is necessarily guided by the questions asked by the researcher. As Dey (1999: 104) puts it:

> *Even if we accept the (doubtful) proposition that categories are discovered, what we discover will depend in some degree on what we are looking for – just as Columbus could hardly have 'discovered' America if he had not been looking for the 'Indies' in the first place.*

Thus, grounded theory has been criticized for not addressing questions of *reflexivity* satisfactorily.

Stanley and Wise (1983: 152) have argued that as long as it does not address the question of 'What grounds grounded theory?', the grounded theory method remains a form of inductivist positivism. *Social constructionist* versions of grounded theory (e.g. Charmaz 1990, 2006) address these concerns and attempt to develop reflexive grounded theory. Here, it is recognized that categories can never 'capture the essence' of a concept in its entirety (see Dey 1999: 66) and that categories do not simply emerge from the data because they do not exist before the process of categorization; rather, they are constructed by the researcher during the research process.

Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) recommend that grounded theory researchers document, carefully and in detail, each phase of the research process. Such documentation increases reflexivity throughout the research process and demonstrates the ways in which the researcher's assumptions, values, sampling decisions, analytic technique, interpretations of context, and so on, have shaped the research. However, social constructionist versions of grounded theory are a recent development. While they acknowledge the epistemological limitations of a purely inductivist version, it is not yet clear whether a social constructionist approach to grounded theory requires more than a recognition of the active role of the researcher in the research process. It could be argued that social constructionist versions of grounded theory research can adopt one of two possible positions. The first one is a moderate social constructionist position which does not abandon grounded theory's aspiration to better understand what is going on (in the world, between

people, and/or inside people's minds) but which acknowledges that a 'bird's-eye' view of social reality does not exist and that, therefore, the researcher's own assumptions and expectations will inevitably shape the theory that they develop on the basis of their research. This position is similar to the epistemological position adopted by hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological research (see Chapter 8). The second position constitutes a more radical perspective whereby the researcher forsakes the search for even an approximation to the 'truth' of what is 'really going on' and instead focuses on the social constructions mobilized by both the research participants and the researcher in their accounts of social processes and experiences. It could be argued that such a social constructionist perspective would have to theorize the role of language in the construction of categories, which in turn would mean engaging with the notion of 'discourse' (see Chapters 10 and 11). Such an engagement, however, may transform the method to such an extent that it ceases to be (a version of) grounded theory.

Suitability for psychological research

Originally, grounded theory was designed to study social processes 'from the bottom up'. That is, the method allowed researchers to trace how actions had consequences and how patterns of social interaction combined to give rise to particular, identifiable social processes. The theories generated by grounded theory research helped to explicate basic social processes (see Dey 1999: 63). It is clear that grounded theory was designed with sociological research questions in mind. Indeed, Glaser and Strauss were themselves socio-logists, and much of their own grounded theory research was concerned with medical sociology.

   In recent years, grounded theory has been adopted as a qualitative research method for psychological research and it now features as a key method in psychology methods textbooks (e.g. Smith et al. 1995; Hayes 1997; Murray and Chamberlain 1999; Howitt 2010; Frost 2011). However, its suitability as a qualitative research method for psychological research may be questioned. It could be argued that, when applied to questions about the nature of experience, as opposed to the unfolding of social processes, the grounded theory method is reduced to a technique for systematic categorization. That is, studies concerned with capturing the meanings that a particular experience holds for an individual tend to use one-off interviews with participants, transcribe them and code the transcript using the principles of the grounded theory method. The result is a systematic map of concepts and categories used by the respondents to make sense of their experience. While such a map may provide us with a better understanding of the structure of our participants' experiences, it does not, in fact, constitute a *theory*. In other words, such mapping of experiences is a *descriptive* rather than an *explanatory* exercise and, as such, is not geared towards the development of theory. It could be argued that research questions about the nature of experience are more suitably addressed using phenomenological research methods (see Chapter 8). Grounded theory techniques (preferably the *full version*) could then be reserved for the study of social psychological processes. (See also Charmaz and Henwood 2008: 251–4 for a critical discussion of descriptive versions of grounded theory methodology.)

Three epistemological questions

To conclude this chapter on grounded theory, let us take a look at what kind of knowledge this methodology aims to produce, the assumptions it makes about the world it studies, and the way in which it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the process of knowledge production.

What kind of knowledge does grounded theory aim to produce?

Grounded theory was designed to identify and explicate contextualized social processes. Its techniques for data-gathering and analysis are designed to allow concepts and categories to *emerge* from the data. The researcher is encouraged to approach the data without preconceptions or pet theories. Imposition of meanings onto the data is to be avoided at all costs. The aim of grounded theory analysis is to produce theories that are truly *grounded* in the data; that is, theories that do not depend on external concepts that are brought to the data by the researcher. As Glaser (1999: 840) puts it, '[G]rounded theory *is what is*, not what should, could or ought to be' (original emphasis). Grounded theory, therefore, has a realist orientation. The kind of knowledge grounded theory aims to produce is knowledge of processes that reside in the data and which can emerge from the data (with a little help from the researcher). Categorization and theorizing are simply ways in which these processes are systematically presented to a readership by the researcher.

The processes identified by the researcher, however, are assumed to take place irrespective of whether or not they are documented by the researcher. In other words, potential knowledge is 'out there' and can be captured by the researcher. In this sense, grounded theory takes a positivist approach to knowledge production. However, as we have seen, grounded theory's positivist tendencies have been challenged by those who are attempting to develop a social constructionist version of the method.

What kinds of assumptions does grounded theory make about the world?

Grounded theorists are interested in the ways in which human actors negotiate and manage social situations, and how their actions contribute to the unfolding of social processes. Grounded theory assumes that social events and processes have an objective reality in the sense that they take place irrespective of the researcher and that they can be observed and documented by the researcher. This suggests a realist ontology. However, grounded theory also assumes that social realities are negotiated by human actors and that participants' interpretations of events shape their consequences. Here, grounded theory subscribes to a symbolic interactionist perspective. This means that 'the world' that is studied by grounded theorists is very much a product of human participation and negotiation. It is a changing world, which means that the methods used for studying it must be sensitive to its dynamic properties. This is what grounded theory attempts to do by focusing on 'process' and 'change'.

How does grounded theory conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

In grounded theory, the researcher acts as a witness. (S)he observes carefully what is going on, takes detailed notes of proceedings, and questions participants in order to better understand what they are doing and why. The researcher takes care not to import his or her own assumptions and expectations into the analysis; the aim is to develop theories that do not move beyond the data. The researcher's role is to use his or her skills to represent, in a systematic and accessible fashion, a clear picture of what is going on in the slice of social reality they have chosen to study. Here, it is the researcher's skills, his or her ability to collect and analyse the data, which is seen to determine the outcome of the research. The researcher's identity and standpoint must remain secondary. Social constructionist versions of grounded theory take a different view of the role of the researcher in the research process. Here, the researcher is more than a witness; (s)he actively constructs a particular understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. From a social constructionist perspective, grounded theory does not capture social reality; instead, it is itself a social construction of reality (see Charmaz 1990: 1165).

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the basic principles of the grounded theory method. Charmaz and Henwood (2008: 241) sum up the defining features of the process of grounded theory as follows:

> *We gather data, compare them, remain open to all possible theoretical understandings of the data, and develop tentative interpretations about these data through our codes and nascent categories. Then we go back to the field and gather more data to check and refine our categories.*

Despite (or perhaps because of) the apparent simplicity of the logic underpinning grounded theory, over the years a number of different versions have emerged. Depending on our research question, our time constraints and resources, we can choose between the *full* and the *abbreviated* versions of grounded theory. We can use grounded theory to *theorize contextualized social processes* or to *map individuals' categories of experience*. Finally, we can take a *realist* or a *social constructionist* approach to grounded theory research. Whichever version we choose to use, it is important that we communicate clearly to our readership the approach we have adopted and why. Grounded theory continues to evolve and it is likely that further varieties of the grounded theory method will emerge. Some of these may be more suitable for psychological research than others. I want to close this chapter by letting Pidgeon and Henwood (1997: 255) remind us that grounded theory, in whatever guise, provides us with a set of procedures, which 'are ways of putting into practice the requirement to actively engage in close and detailed analysis of your research materials, so that they can both stimulate and discipline the theoretical imagination'.

Interactive exercises

1   Work with a newspaper article about an event or situation (e.g. a report of a public disturbance or a criminal act). To begin with, read the article and write a brief summary of what you believe the article has told you. Then follow the guidelines provided in this chapter to code the article, line-by-line. Integrate low-level (descriptive) categories into higher-level (analytical) categories. Having completed the exercise, compare your initial summary of the article with the results of your coding exercise. What does the coding tell us that a simple reading of the article does not? What is its 'added value'?

2   Formulate a research question suitable for grounded theory using the guidelines provided in this chapter. Make sure that the question can be addressed by conducting research within your own environment and that it is not ethically sensitive (e.g. 'How do psychology students choose topics for final year research projects?'). Construct a brief interview agenda that will help you to begin investigating your research question and conduct a semi-structured interview with a friend or colleague. Transcribe and code the interview. On the basis of your initial findings, where would you have to go next in order to pursue your research question? Identify potential data sources and directions of inquiry.

Further reading

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (eds) (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.

Charmaz, C. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

Dey, I. (1999) *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Academic Press.

Dey, I. (2004) Grounded theory, in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.

Henwood, K.L. and Pidgeon, N.F. (2006) Grounded theory, in G. Breakwell, S. Hammond, C. Fife-Shaw and J. Smith (eds) *Research Methods in Psychology*, 3rd edn. London: Sage.

Pidgeon, N. and Henwood, K. (1997) Using grounded theory in psychological research, in N. Hayes (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Analysis in Psychology*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Snapshot Box 7.1

Grounded theory or full conceptual description? The debate between Glaser and Strauss

Having co-authored *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss went on to disagree about the nature of grounded theory. In 1992, Glaser published *Emergence vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. This book was written in response to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Glaser felt that Strauss and Corbin's book presented a version of grounded theory that was too prescriptive. He argued that the method outlined in Strauss and Corbin's book was not, in fact, grounded theory at all. Instead, he proposed that what Strauss and Corbin had described was a different method altogether, a method that did not facilitate the emergence of theory from data but rather a method that produced 'full scale conceptual forced description' (Glaser 1992: 61–2). Glaser's unhappiness with Strauss and Corbin's revision of grounded theory is evident. He described Strauss and Corbin's techniques as 'fractured, detailed, cumbersome and over-self-conscious' (Glaser 1992: 60), and he argued that they interfere with, rather than facilitate, the process of discovery. Glaser disagreed with Strauss and Corbin's (1990: 38) definition of the research

question as 'a statement which identifies the phenomenon to be studied'. Instead, he proposed that the focus of the research emerges in the early stages of the research itself. Glaser also disagreed with Strauss and Corbin's coding paradigm, particularly axial coding. Glaser argued that Strauss and Corbin's approach to coding introduces preconceptions into the analysis that are incompatible with the spirit of grounded theory. As Glaser (1992: 123) put it, 'If you torture the data enough it will give up! The data is not allowed to speak for itself, as in grounded theory, and to be heard from infrequently it has to scream. Forcing by preconception constantly derails it from relevance.'

Furthermore, while Glaser proposed that verification (of relationships between categories, of emerging theories) is not part of the grounded theory method, Strauss and Corbin maintain that verificational work is built into the research process itself. Related to this disagreement is Glaser's purely inductive approach to grounded theory, which contrasts with Strauss and Corbin's incorporation of some deductive analysis and their acknowledgement of the role of existing theories in sensitizing grounded theory researchers. It is clear that there are major differences between the two versions of grounded theory advocated by Glaser and by Strauss and Corbin, respectively. But do they constitute entirely different method(ologie)s, which ought to be referred to by different names, as Glaser would have it, or is Strauss and Corbin's version merely a manifestation of the natural evolution of grounded theory, as Strauss and Corbin suggest? Is grounded theory a research method with clearly defined and agreed upon procedures, or is it rather a set of methods based on an 'approach to inquiry with several key strategies for conducting inquiry' (see Charmaz 2006)? To make up your mind, you may wish to follow up the debate in the following publications:

Charmaz, C. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.
Dey, I. (1999) *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Academic Press.
Glaser, B.G. (1992) *Emergence vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.
Melia, K.M. (1996) Rediscovering Glaser, *Qualitative Health Research* (Special Issue: *Advances in Grounded Theory*), 6(3): 368–78.
Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Online
Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at **www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.