# Grounded theory: the missing methodology on the interpretivist agenda

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## Abstract

There has been considerable discussion in recent years over the application of interpretive methodologies such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and semiotics within the field of marketing research, particularly consumer behaviour. However, while these approaches have inspired a wealth of publications, scant attention has been paid to the potential of grounded theory. This is attributed largely to misconceptions regarding both the principles of the method and the two distinct approaches associated with the original authors, Glaser and Strauss (1967). The paper outlines the development of the method and explicates the philosophy underpinning its procedures. Finally, it suggests that grounded theory if applied in its true sense has scope and potential for the study of consumer behaviour and consumption experiences given its emphasis on context, theoretical emergence, and the social construction of realities.

Over the last decade and a half there has been increasing debate in academic marketing circles over the application of qualitative methodologies. While much of this discussion has stemmed from the field of consumer studies (Belk, 1988, 1995; Dittmar, 1992; Elliott, 1994; Elliott *et al.*, 1996; Hirschman, 1986, 1993; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; O'Shaughnessy, 1992; Thompson *et al.*, 1989) to name but a few, it could also be argued that traditional perceptions of marketing research with the emphasis on objectivity, measurement, the survey and the experiment, as the predominant basis for knowledge, are being challenged. Whether or not this amounts to a paradigmatic shift, as described by Kuhn (1970), is open to question; what is apparent, however, is that interpretive and postmodern scholars are championing the use of methodologies that provide insights, reveal meaning and acknowledge the possibility of multiple answers to problems.

Nonetheless, while methodological philosophies such as phenomenology (Thompson, 1993; Thompson *et al.*, 1990), semiotics (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1993), critical relativism (Anderson, 1986), researcher introspection (Gould, 1995; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993), critical theory (Hirschman, 1993; Murray and Ozanne, 1991), hermeneutics (O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook, 1988), discourse analysis (Elliott, 1996) and postmodern perspectives (Brown, 1995b; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), are currently occupying prime position in the conversation, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) has largely been excluded from the discourse on interpretive and postmodern methodologies. This is possibly a consequence of perceptions regarding the method which may stem partly from the language of the paradigm, open coding, axial coding, verification procedures and so forth, which has connotations of positivist practices. Such attempts to structure, order and interpret data are commonly seen to defile the canons of pure qualitative, or more precisely, phenomenological research where the primacy of the subjective experience of the participant takes precedence over the interpretation of the researcher.

While there are a number of similarities between phenomenology and grounded theory there are also some fundamental differences. These centre largely on sources of data and the use of literature to inform and locate

the developed theory. With phenomenological studies, the words of the informants are considered the only valid source of data. Grounded theory, on the other hand, allows for multiple data sources which may include interviews, observation of behaviour, and published reports. With regard to the use of literature, phenomenological findings are generally contextualised within the existential framework of meaning and choice. A useful illustration of this is Thompson *et al.*'s (1990) paper which focuses on the concept of choice in relation to the experiences of contemporary married women. These experiences are analysed from an existential phenomenological position. Conversely, grounded theorists have no such restrictions. The developing theory directs the researcher to the literature which best informs, explains and contextualises the findings. Within the field of consumer behaviour, this may well include existential positions, but the social, psychological, cultural and marketing literature may individually, or collectively provide informative contributions to the interpretation. However, it is important to acknowledge that "to prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the enquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 18).

This paper argues that all too often impressions of the grounded theory method are premissed on a number of misunderstandings regarding the aims of the methodology, its procedures, and the two distinct approaches to practising grounded theory associated with the original authors who over the years have diverged in their opinions. It attempts to explain the development of grounded theory and explicate the intellectual assumptions which underpin both the philosophy and application of the method. Finally, the paper proposes that grounded theory has much to offer the discipline of marketing, particularly the area of consumer behaviour, given that its aim is to develop fresh insights and new theories.

## Grounded theory methodology

Grounded theory, in contrast to theory obtained by logico-deductive methods is theory which has been systematically obtained through "social" research and is grounded in data. The development of grounded theory was an attempt to avoid highly abstract sociology and was part of an important growth in qualitative analysis in the 1960s and 1970. The main thrust of this movement was to bridge the gap between theoretically "uninformed" empirical research and empirically "uninformed" theory, by grounding theory in data (Charmaz, 1983). It was part of a reaction against extreme empiricism, or "Grand theory", a term coined by Mills (1959) to refer pejoratively to sociological theories couched at a very abstract conceptual level. Mills similarly criticised abstracted empiricism or the process of accumulating quantitative data for its own sake. It may be argued, that like many qualitative methodologies, the role of grounded theory was, and is, the careful and systematic study of the relationship of the individual's experience to society and to history.

Grounded theory was first presented by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. The text provided a strong intellectual rationale for using qualitative research to develop theoretical analysis. It was written largely as a protest against what they viewed as a rather passive acceptance that all the "great" theories had been discovered and that the role of research lay in testing these theories through quantitative "scientific" procedures (Charmaz, 1983). Part of the rationale proposed by Glaser and Strauss was that within the field of sociology, there was too great an emphasis on the verification of theory and a resultant:

> de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area one wished to research…in social research generating theory goes hand in hand with verifying it; but many sociologists have diverted from this truism in their zeal to test either existing theories or a theory that they have barely started to generate.

The emphasis behind grounded theory therefore became one of new theory generation. In keeping with its principles, the theory evolves during the research process itself and is a product of continuous interplay between data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Stern, 1994; Strauss, 1991; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994).

Grounded theory is a methodology that has been used to generate theory where little is already known, or to provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge. It is an interpretivist mode

of enquiry which has its roots in symbolic interactionism and as such language, gestures, expressions and actions are all considered primary to the experience. Erving Goffman's 1959 publication, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, still remains a classic example of such behavioural analysis to build innovative theory. Glaser (1978) discusses the role of theory and its importance in sensitising the researcher to the conceptual significance of emerging concepts and categories. Knowledge and theory are used as if they were another informant. This is vital, for without this grounding in extant knowledge, pattern recognition would be limited to the obvious and the superficial, depriving the analyst of the conceptual leverage from which to develop theory (Glaser, 1978). Therefore, contrary to popular belief, grounded theory research is not "atheoretical" but requires an understanding of related theory and empirical work in order to enhance theoretical sensitivity. On this note, it may be useful to clarify what is meant by a theory. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994) a theory is a set of relationships that offer a plausible explanation of the phenomenon under study. Morse (1994, pp. 25-6) extends this interpretation proposing that:

> a theory provides the best comprehensive, coherent and simplest model for linking diverse and unrelated facts in a useful and pragmatic way. It is a way of revealing the obvious, the implicit, the unrecognised and the unknown. Theorising is the process of constructing alternative explanations until a "best fit" that explains the data most simply is obtained. This involves asking questions of the data that will create links to established theory.

One of the key aspects of grounded theory is the generation of good ideas (Glaser, 1978). However, over the years the method has been reinterpreted with the disciplinary diffusion of its application.

## Variations in approach

According to Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996) researchers in the area of nursing where the method is widely used, are now obliged to specify whether the grounded theory approach they employed was the original Glaser and Strauss (1967) version, the Strauss and Corbin (1990) rendition, or the Glaser (1978, 1992) interpretation. A comparison of the original *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) with Glaser's (1978) *Theoretical Sensitivity* and

Strauss's (1990) *The Basics of Qualitative Research* demonstrates the subtle but distinct differences in perceptions of the method between the two authors since its inception. Not only are there differences in style and terminology, but Strauss' (1990) version of the method has been reworked to incorporate a strict and complex process of systematic coding. Glaser's reaction to these developments was vociferously documented in the publication of *The Basics of Qualitative Research* (Glaser, 1992) which is a rather damning critique of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) work. Pages 1-2 detail letters from Glaser to Strauss imploring him to withdraw his text for revision on the basis that what it contained was a methodology, but it was not grounded theory. He stated in fact that it ignored up to 90 per cent of the original ideas and proceeded with the accusation that:

> Strauss's book is without conscience, bordering on immorality…producing simply what qualitative researchers have been doing for 60 years or more: forced, full conceptual description (Glaser, 1992, p. 3).

Other grounded theory researchers have reiterated this, arguing that Strauss has modified his description of grounded theory from its original concept of emergence to a densely codified operation. To Glaser, the Straussarian school represents an erosion of grounded theory (Stern, 1994) and is possibly responsible for the impression that grounded theory uses qualitative research to quantify findings. Nonetheless, this is a misconception. Grounded theory has a built-in mandate to strive towards verification through the process of category "saturation" which is achieved by staying in the field until no further evidence emerges. Verification is done throughout the course of the research project, rather than assuming that this is only possible through follow-up quantitative data. The developed theory should also be true to the data, it should be parsimonious. This is a point of departure between Glaser, who argues that the theory should only explain the phenomenon under study, and Strauss, who insists on excessive use of coding matrixes to conceptualise beyond the immediate field of study.

## Fundamental processes of grounded theory

Given the differences in approaches to the method, most texts and articles on the subject

advocate reading the original *Discovery* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a starting point. It is also important to note that its original intent was a methodology specifically for sociologists. In recent years, the diffusion across a number of disciplines such as social work, health studies, psychology and more recently management, has meant the adaptation of the method in ways that may not be completely congruent with all of the original principles. However, regardless of discipline or persuasion, there remain a set of fundamental processes that need to be followed if the study is to be recognised as a product of the methodology. O'Callaghan (1996) offers a summary of these common procedures.

He describes theories developed using this method as interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted by a researcher who needs to remain open to the essential provisional character of every theory. The qualitative nature of the paradigm focuses on the search for meaning and understanding to build innovative theory and not universal laws. It is a method where close inspection of the data extends theory through "theoretical sampling". This means that rather than predetermining the characteristics and size of the sample, the developing theory directs the researcher to new informants and appropriate locations.

The process involves coding strategies; the process of breaking down the data, most commonly interviews and/or observations, into distinct units of meaning which are labelled to generate concepts. These concepts are initially clustered into descriptive categories. They are then re-evaluated for their interrelationships and through a series of analytical steps are gradually subsumed into higher order categories, or one underlying core category, which indicates an emergent theory. Nevertheless, in keeping with the interpretivist philosophy, it is important to recognise that enquiry is always context bound and facts should be viewed as both theory laden and value laden. The idea that findings are theory laden rests on the basic proposition that researchers approach the research situation with a theoretical perspective developed from their academic background and personal interests. Researchers will also have their own personal paradigm or basic belief system, their values, which will largely dictate ontological and epistemological underpinnings. According to the grounded theory philosophy

knowledge is seen as actively and socially constructed with meanings of existence only relevant to an experiential world. Therefore the focus becomes one of how people behave within an individual and social context. In order to proceed, O'Callaghan (1996) argues that the researcher should have:

- A perspective to build analysis from.
- An awareness of substantive issues guiding the research questions.
- A school of thought to help sensitise the emergent concepts.
- A degree of personal experience, values and priorities.

These help to distinguish between what is known and what can be discovered (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The grounded theory method calls for early data collection, analysis, further theoretical sampling and category saturation:

> Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find it, in order to develop the theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is "controlled" by the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978, p. 36).

Only when the theory has substance, or when no new findings arise from freshly collected data, should the researcher review the work in the field and relate the theory to it through the integration of ideas. Nevertheless, reading is not forsaken during the initial stages, it is vital, but in a substantive field different from the research. This is particularly important during the early stages of data collection. Comparable works are not consulted in order to avoid internalising the perspectives and hypotheses of scholars in the immediate field of study. However, once the theory is developed, such related work is analysed in order to draw comparisons, build on, or offer an alternative perspective. For example, in a grounded theory study of contemporary heritage consumption (Goulding, 1997), the literature on visitor behaviour was only analysed after a conceptual framework which was grounded in data was developed. Prior to this, the early literature review included theories of postmodernism, the sociology of consumption and existential psychology.

There are, however, pitfalls to beware of when using this methodology. There is general acknowledgement of the danger of placing too much emphasis on identifying codes as the exclusive feature of the process without

theoretically coding, or in other words explaining how codes relate to each other (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Stern, 1994; Strauss, 1991). The researcher must also ensure that constant comparison is an ongoing feature of the process. This is where emerging themes are sorted on the basis of similarities and difference. Grounded theory also involves the search for negative cases which may be time-consuming and may involve rethinking tentative conclusions. Nevertheless, the theory should only be presented as developed when all core categories are saturated. A further area of risk is to confuse inductive research with grounded theory. This may not be the case if the inductive research lacks "creativity" and theoretical sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1994) acknowledge the over-emphasis on induction in the original *Discovery* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which played down the role of theoretical sensitivity. Indeed the very nature of induction as a pure process has itself been challenged:

> What field researchers actually do when they use analytical induction would be described more properly by philosophers of science as "retroduction" than as induction. A double fitting or alternative shaping of both observation and explanation, rather than an *ex post facto* discovery of explanatory ideas (Katz , 1983, pp. 133-4).

## Some misconceptions associated with grounded theory

According to Charmaz (1983) both the assumptions and analytical methods of grounded theory have been criticised by some qualitative researchers on a number of accounts. For example, the suggestion that grounded theorists fail to give proper attention to both data collection techniques and to the quality of the gathered material. Such criticisms, she maintains, misinterpret the aims and methods of grounded theory. Katz (1983, p. 133) argues that the case for analytical induction can be made stronger with a number of revisions:

> If we view social life as a continuous symbolic process, we expect our concepts to have vague boundaries. If analytical induction follows the contours of experience, it will have ambiguous conceptual fringes… For the statistical researcher, practical uncertainty is represented by statements of probabilistic relations; for the analyst of social processes, by ambiguities when trying to code border line cases into one or the other of the "explaining" or "explained" cases.

This requires an understanding that codes and concepts do not have to be mutually inclusive or exclusive, but are transcending in the sense that the same code and meaning can legitimately belong to, and cut across numerous cases. This is also a point that reinforces the difference between the Glaserian and Straussarian schools of thought, and the conflict between "forcing" data into categories (Strauss, 1991), and dealing only with categories that emerge from the observed situations to explain those observed behaviours (Glaser, 1992).

In addition to these very fundamental concerns Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996) provide a summary of some of the main misconceptions which have resulted in the "methodological slurring" of grounded theory (Baker *et al.*, 1992; Morse, 1994; Stern, 1994; Wells, 1995). These centre largely on generation erosion, premature closure, and methodological transgressions.

The first of these refers to the divergence in methodological development between the two original authors. Nevertheless, there have been further discrepancies in the development of the method from those other than the two key figures. Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson (1996) refer to the number of academics with no first hand contact of either Glaser or Strauss who have independently invented rigid rules for judging the credibility of grounded theory products. What they refer to as "cooked up" translations are often guilty of breaching the essence of the method and the inherent creativity of the original.

Such later additions include the requirement of a visual diagram with all grounded theories, and a statement that a sample size of 12 be the minimum for any grounded theory study, although it is unclear how this rather arbitrary figure was reached. Riley (1996) states that most studies achieve saturation between eight to 24 interviews depending on the topic focus, although this in itself appears to go against the whole philosophy of theoretical sampling as it dictates and directs the research design right from the start. Accordingly:

> The importation of rigid rules is counterproductive to the spirit of creativity and the generation of grounded theory. Although certain flexible methodological guidelines, such as simultaneous data collection and analysis and purposive and theoretical sampling principles are undisputed, credible grounded theory ultimately stands on its own as diverse,

parsimonious, conceptual and relevant to the data (Skodol-Wison and Ambler-Hutchinson, 1996, p. 123).

The second point they refer to, premature closure is a well debated area although it is often simply taken to mean leaving the field too early. They extend this to include the under-analysis of textual or narrative data. The method requires that the researcher move through a succession of stages starting with *in vivo* codes, or open codes which are codes derived directly from the data, through to more abstract or second-level categorical codes, and finally to the last stage of conceptual and theoretical codes which are the building blocks of theory.

At each of these levels the theory becomes more refined integrating abstract concepts that cover behavioural variation. Therefore, while premature closure is usually associated with leaving the "field" too early, it can also occur in situations where the researcher has collected a wealth of data if the analyst does not move beyond describing what is in the data. As such the grounded theory is based solely on participants' descriptions, and not on developed concepts. It is important therefore that the researcher "lifts" ideas from the data and explains them theoretically in order to give meaning to descriptions of the behaviour.

The last point is that of methodological transgression. Such transgressions refer to "the frank violation of the grounded theory philosophy and methodology" (Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson, 1996, p. 224). This may pertain to methodological muddling, such as phenomenological research being presented as grounded theory (Baker *et al.*, 1992; Wells, 1995) but also applies to cases where the canons of quantitative method are modified and applied to interview or textual data, and where the outcome is a study described in such positivist terms as random sampling, reliability, validity statistics, independent and dependent variables and so on.

While there is nothing that prohibits the combination of quantitative and qualitative forms of data collection when using grounded theory, the purpose of each should be made clear. Grounded theorists do not follow the traditional quantitative canons of verification. They do, however, check the development of ideas with further specific observations, make systematic comparisons and often take the

research beyond the initial confines of one topic or setting (Skodol-Wilson and Ambler-Hutchinson, 1996). It is proposed that it is because they make systematic efforts to check and refine categories that their efforts are sometimes confused with quantitative techniques. Nonetheless, grounded theorists strive to develop fresh theoretical interpretations of the data rather than explicitly aim for any final or complete interpretation of them (Baker *et al.*, 1992). This in itself is possibly the most important part of the process. It is also one which must ultimately be referred back to the method of analysis and interpretation. At the early stages of theory development, the interpretation should be presented to the original informants to ensure that it is an honest representation of participant accounts. According to Riley (1996, pp. 36-7):

> When establishing the credibility of analysis, the tradition of investigator-as-expert is reversed. This process is called "member checking" and is an invited assessment of the investigator's meaning. Informants can be invited to assess whether the early analyses are an accurate reflection of their conversations.

This is done before the interpretation is abstracted on to a conceptual level and therefore becomes less meaningful to the individual. Ultimately, when using the grounded theory method, the researcher has an obligation to "abstract" the data and to think "theoretically" rather than descriptively. Furthermore, theoretical explanations of behaviour must allow for process, and recognise context and change. Consequently consideration needs to be given to the labelling of categories. Glaser (1978, 1992) suggests that categories should indicate "behavioural" type, not people "type". This allows the actors to walk in and out of many behavioural patterns. The emphasis is therefore on behavioural, not personal patterns. It is important to recognise that most individuals engage in a type of behaviour without being "typed" by it; they engage in other behaviours as well.

Finally, the researcher needs to be clear about claims of generalisation. While some grounded theorists take the research into a variety of settings, this is most common in longitudinal and large-scale projects, it is not necessarily a condition for all grounded theory research, the aim of which is parsimony and fidelity to the data. Accordingly:

> Transferability is not considered the responsibility of the investigator because the knowledge elicited is most influenced by each individual's

life context and situation. Indeed the varied social constructions of knowledge are what the investigator is searching for. In its stead the investigator is to accurately describe the contexts and techniques of the study so that subsequent follow-up studies can match them as closely as possible (Riley, 1996, p. 37).

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that there remain a number of misconceptions regarding grounded theory, particularly in relation to positivist practices, a considered analysis of the method and its intellectual assumptions reveals that it owes more to the interpretivist movement with "its emphasis on multiple realities, the researcher and phenomenon as mutually interactive, the belief that causes and effects cannot be separated, that research is value laden and that the outcome of the research is socially constructed" (Brown, 1995a, p. 294). Grounded theory as a methodology was developed for, and is particularly suited to, the study of behaviour. Given this background it has considerable potential within the field of consumer research, particularly if the objective is to understand the nature of consumption experiences which are not easily quantified. However, in order to fully utilise the method, there must be recognition that it is time-consuming, often frustrating, and because of the nature of the method, often takes the research in a number of different directions before a plausible theory starts to emerge. This requires patience, an open mind and flexibility. Furthermore, preferences regarding the version adopted should be stated to avoid confusion over terminology and procedures. Finally, once engaged in the process, rigour and credibility should stem from full and reflexive interrogation of the data in order to allow theory to emerge, rather than succumb to the temptation to prematurely test underdeveloped or descriptive accounts of the phenomena under study.

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