REDISCOVERING GROUNDED THEORY

Barry Gibson / Jan Hartman

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Preface

It is hard to remember, let alone describe, the many conversations that have taken place over the last eight years that have led to the writing and subsequent publication of this book. What we can say is that it all began as a chat in a pub, The Sun and Doves, in Denmark Hill in London. We had been introduced to each other by Hans Thulesius; otherwise the meeting would have been pretty improbable. What became apparent after that initial conversation was that not only did we see different things in grounded theory, but we also had a lot that we needed to learn about how each other saw grounded theory. In some respects the more we began to understand each other's background perspectives the more we began to understand grounded theory. Sometimes we agreed easily, other discussions took longer.

As you can tell, given the length of time over which these conversations have taken place, we have both enjoyed the discussions immensely. This is not least because a large proportion of the conversations took place at key locations around where we both lived and worked. They happened in Lund and Malmö in Sweden in Allegro with Giannis, The Bishops Arms, Malmö Brygghus, Nya Tröls, among others. They also took place in Sheffield in the UK after Barry was appointed as a Lecturer in Medical Sociology at the School of Clinical Dentistry. There we spent time debating and discussing grounded theory in The Bath Hotel, The University Arms, The Hallamshire, The Nottingham House, The Gardiners Rest and The Rising Sun. We could name a few others but we think you can get the idea.

Apart from discovering that we both have a passion for Real Ale, several things happened in these conversations. First, we began to understand that an essential component of the legacy of grounded theory as a method *was its sociological origins*. In some respects, we felt, this legacy has been lost or at the very least underplayed. Our dilemma was that on the one hand the originators promoted grounded theory as a general method, one that could transcend disciplines, but on the other hand grounded theory is also *inherently sociological*. We felt there was a real need to revisit this context. Although in this book we seek to highlight the sociological origins of grounded theory, there is of course a risk that we might compromise its openness. As a

consequence, we attempt to make sure we always point to the openness of grounded theory in the book. We would also like to stress that when you learn to see grounded theory as a method that has its roots in sociology, when you fully understand the implications of this, we feel you can do grounded theory better. We hope you can see this as you read the text.

Second, we could see that it can also be situated within the context of philosophy of science in order to clarify its similarities to and differences from other theoretical perspectives. It became very apparent that not only was this view valuable, but it could make grounded theory more accessible and this might definitely enable us to do better grounded theory. Indeed, we believe that if the philosophical assumptions had been clarified from the start, the mess grounded theory now seems to be in could have been avoided. We hope that the philosophical parts of this book will redeem the situation somewhat.

Third, during this time we have both been supervising PhD students attempting to do grounded theory. We have both witnessed just how challenging it can be for some to get to grips with building a theory that goes beyond description. We have both been helping them understand how to conceptualise, how to do constant comparative analysis and also how to engage with theoretical sampling, coding, memoing and, of course, integrating their theory. As our students encountered different problems we would discuss these problems and how to overcome them. We have talked about the parts of our advice that worked and the parts that didn't. From these conversations we began to see what worked in terms of giving advice to students and what didn't. In this respect, a third goal for our book was to enable a way for students to do grounded theory better.

This book would just not have happened if it had not been for the very generous study leave that was granted to both of us from our respective departments, the School of Clinical Dentistry at the University of Sheffield, UK, and the Department of Philosophy at Lund University, Sweden. We are both indebted to these departments for giving us the time to write. We are also indebted to the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield for hosting us in the Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences during our study leave and, in particular, to Allison James for making this happen. Others have taken on teaching and administrative duties on our behalf and this was no small job; indeed we are both very grateful for their support. Erik & Gurli Hultengrens Foundation at Lund University has made it possible for Jan to go to Sheffield regularly, and Jackie Benson deserves thanks for arranging for his stay over the years. Apart

from this, there are a number of individuals who need to be mentioned because they have supported us throughout the development of this book. We are indebted to our families, who have had to tolerate significant absences as the book was being written. Our thanks therefore go to Lucy, Alex, Cornelia, Christel, Jazz, Kelly, Nicolas and of course Ingar, who has been ever present throughout these discussions. We are also grateful to a number of others for their support and friendship throughout this project and so we would like to extend our thanks to Dean, Natalie, Sarah, Peter and Werner.

Finally, a few caveats. In writing this book we in no way claim special insight or that somehow our understanding of grounded theory is more authentic or better than anything else that has been written. It simply is what it is. Neither do we wish to participate in a kind of 'tyranny of grounded theory' that argues that only one way is the right way, whether this might be the classical or constructivist form. All we wish to do is to take you through our intellectual journey as a sociologist and a philosopher both encountering the same phenomena. We hope you can see that we have a lot of admiration for the method, for its originators and for those who have been working on it since it was developed. Our intention, then, is to engage constructively and vigorously with these contributors wherever we can with the aim of providing a meaningful and helpful contribution to the grounded theory literature. We hope that you gain something from undertaking this journey with us.

Barry and Jan

1
Introduction

Aim: To explore the context and reasons for rediscovering grounded theory

Learning outcomes

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- identify and appreciate the need to rediscover grounded theory
- outline and appreciate the sociological context of grounded theory
- have a critical awareness of the need to understand the philosophical context of grounded theory
- develop a clear understanding of the outline and overview of the book

Grounded theory has become one of the most widely applied research methodologies.[1] You will find reference to it in fields as disparate as medicine, education, architecture, marketing, business management, psychology and sociology. This variety of uses is testimony to the success of grounded theory. So what is this widely applied methodology and why should we pay attention to it? Put simply, grounded theory is a method for the generation of theory from data. It is a method that seeks to produce theory that is practical and useful and closely related to the field in which the theory has been developed. It seeks to achieve this by building theory that is 'grounded' in the perspectives of the people who are trying to work in the area being studied as they resolve the problems with which they are confronted.

Grounded theory was developed to try to address what had become an embarrassing 'gap' in sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. This 'gap' was effectively a 'gap' between theory and empirical research. On the one hand, there were sociologists developing 'grand theories' that

sought to explain everything in society, but who conducted very little in the way of empirical research. On the other hand, there was a large literature of empirical studies that did not say very much that was theoretical.

Why is theory so important anyway?

Theory is important for several reasons. First, it reduces the complexity of the world as we study it by selecting the most important and relevant aspects of that world and highlighting those in detailed descriptions. Second, it involves specifying how the relevant aspects of the thing being studied relate to each other. Third, because a theory can enable us to know how things in the world are related, it can enable 'predictions' about the world. How theory achieves this can be highly variable and nuanced, depending on the field in which you are working. So, for example, in some fields relationships are described in mathematical formulas; in others these kinds of descriptions will be rare. Fourth, if theory enables us to predict how things are related in the world, it then allows us to intervene in that world to control or change it in some way.

Some fields, public health, for example, are characterised by a desire to change things for the better. Public health scientists often develop theory that reflects their interest to improve the health of whole populations. This goal means that public health professionals have tended to develop research that tests the predictions that they make concerning why certain groups of people in the population get ill or remain healthy. They often use the predictions derived from their view of the world to pressure governments to make changes to society to promote better health. So, for example, they might predict that high levels of alcohol consumption can predispose groups of people to a range of diseases. A whole series of studies might demonstrate that this prediction appears to be correct. Public health scientists have gone further, however; they have also sought to try to change the situation. Some research has tested the prediction that if we increase the price of alcohol by a certain amount that people will tend to consume less. They have subsequently recommended to governments that there should be a minimum price per unit of alcohol. They have been successful in changing government policies to some extent. This kind of theory, when accompanied with accurate predictions borne out by empirical research, can be used as an important political tool.

The kind of theory that results from grounded theory methodology, as we shall see, is not like the kind of theory which you find in public health. Why is this? First, grounded theory is developed with a different purpose in mind. Grounded theory is developed mostly to explain 'what is going on' in a particular field or area of human endeavour. This is a more general starting point than beginning with the desire to improve population health. The kind of theory that public health leads to tends to be developed from the top down; 'deduced', if you like, from a few general ideas. So, for example, one proposition is that people are directly influenced by their environments. A consequence of this proposition is the deduction that the remedy for problems such as the over-consumption of alcohol might be to change the environment in some way. This has been achieved by increasing the minimum price of a unit of alcohol and therefore attempting to price groups of people 'in society' out of over-consumption. Theory that is developed in this way is often developed from outside the situation to which it is applied. In this case, it is developed by a group of professionals who, for the most part, will not be affected *as much* by the results of their research. As a consequence, public health research *often acts against groups* in society in some way *with the goal of being for them in other ways*. After all, the goal of public health research is to promote health.

Grounded theory is not like this. Grounded theory is a perspective on how to build theory that is grounded in the perspective of those in the field. It is problem-focused because it involves studying how people experience and resolve their everyday problems. The theory that is developed through the method is focused on explaining how those problems are resolved. How grounded theory does this is what this book is about.

Why this book?

In recent years there have been a number of new books on grounded theory. Why, then, yet another book on the subject? More specifically, why a book about *rediscovering* grounded theory? What does that mean? Our reasons are as follows. First, some years ago we looked at the state of the discussion about grounded theory. We saw that over time there had been numerous adjustments and changes to grounded theory methodology, and this had led to increased variability and complexity in what grounded theory is. This increasing complexity has had the effect of threatening key aspects of the methodology. It has

also frequently masked very different understandings about how to do grounded theory. Some have argued that there are probably as many different versions of grounded theory as there are grounded theorists (Dey 1999). You don't need to look too far to see evidence to support this position. Apart from Barney Glaser's version, which is said to cling to the original ideas, we have Strauss and Corbin's (1990) version, and we have a group of versions belonging to what has become known as the 'second-generation grounded theory'. The most important of these is the 'constructivist grounded theory' of Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2008).

This increasing variability in grounded theory has led to a confusing variety of procedures and 'rules' for doing grounded theory. These rules are not always compatible and can conflict with each other. So, for example, Charmaz (2000) argues that we should be studying and conceptualising meaning. In contrast to this, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990) argue that we should be studying social phenomena, while Barney Glaser says that we should look for core categories and social processes. Someone who reads all of these books might be more confused than enlightened.

There is a third argument for this book. The increasing complexity of grounded theory has tended to mask the fact that the method was developed at a time when there was a debate in sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. This debate has had important consequences for why grounded theory was written the way it is. By rediscovering these debates we can have a much more critical awareness concerning why grounded theory is the way it is. This takes us to a stronger point. As the complexity of grounded theory has increased, different approaches have developed that contradict each other. In some cases today, approaches to grounded theory have, in fact, been deliberately constructed *in opposition to each other*. The question then arises to what extent can we talk of grounded theory in a general sense? It is for this reason in particular that we feel it is important to engage in the process of *rediscovery* that is at the heart of this book. The only way to come to terms with the variability of views on grounded theory, we believe, is to go back to the method in the context in which it was developed because there you have something that is stable. We feel that this approach can be used to enable us to embrace the more recent versions of the methodology.

With this in mind, the purpose of this book is to try to cut through the current debates on grounded theory by seeking out grounded theory in the context in which it was produced. In doing so we will be able to focus on defining what grounded theory is. We feel this is

important because it will help to protect a core set of ideas around which variations in approaches to doing grounded theory can be justified. Our position, then, is to encourage methodological pluralism, but at the same time to protect the core identity of a methodology that is clearly valued.

There is more to this book, however. The book has developed out of a long conversation between a philosopher and a sociologist. As you will see, this conversation in itself entails a new kind of *discovery*, a discovery that grounded theory can also be situated within the context of the philosophy of science. This discovery can be conducted in an entirely positive and constructive way, a way that can clarify the similarities and differences between grounded theory and other theoretical perspectives. When these comparisons are made, we begin to see how grounded theory handles important philosophical problems, what is unique about the method and also what remains to be said about it. At all points we have tried to produce an engaging and positive discussion of these issues. It is in no way meant to be comprehensive but, as you will see, there are some very important philosophical discussions that we can have about grounded theory. Our desire is therefore to stimulate further discussion.

Finally, grounded theory is a practical method, a way of generating theory from data. At times this way of doing something is unnecessarily shrouded in mystery. We would like to enable you to discover how to do grounded theory and how to do it well. This is the third aspect of our *rediscovery*. Having gone back through the original texts we wish to take you through what the *rediscovery* of grounded theory means for *doing* grounded theory. Our reasons for thinking that this might be possible are because we feel that a careful analysis of the original texts has produced some surprising findings, all of which we will reveal to you in what follows. As we have indicated above, we have gone beyond this initial analysis and have drawn on the perspective of analytical philosophy to seek out positive statements about what grounded theory is. Part of our *rediscovery*, then, is about bringing you to these statements.

In the next sections we will explore the theoretical contexts of grounded theory. Our goal in this exploration is to highlight that grounded theory developed out of the background of the comparative method as a general method in sociology. In this analysis you will discover the important continuities and discontinuities that exist between grounded theory and comparative sociology. This analysis presents an alternative account of the origins of grounded theory than you will find in the current literature on grounded theory. After doing

this, we will go on to consider what this means for grounded theory. The chapter then introduces the philosophical context and shows the important philosophical issues to which grounded theory relates. After this, we provide an outline of the book.

The sociological context

Grounded theory has its origins in sociology. That grounded theory originated from sociology is well known; what is less well known are the specific influences on the method as it was developing. The original text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967; hereafter called *Discovery*), is radical and, at times, polemical. To students who try to read it today it can be daunting and impenetrable. It has a certain style of argumentation that can be difficult to follow. This is especially the case for those unfamiliar with the context in which the book was being produced. This is unfortunate because it means a lot of the debates and arguments within the book will be lost on today's reader. Indeed, there is a strong possibility that the text will obscure more than it reveals. But there is something exciting about the text. There is a real sense that in *Discovery* the authors had hit on something new. You get a feeling that Glaser and Strauss (1967) were mapping out new directions for sociologists that would free them from the domination of the 'theoretical capitalists' of sociology.[2] Not only would grounded theory free the sociologist, we are told it might even promise a new kind of sociology. What we want to do in this book is take you back through these debates to enable you to grasp something of the 'spirit' of grounded theory. This is one of the elements of *Rediscovering Grounded Theory*.

Origins: *Sociologists at Work* and comparative sociology

As we have already said, the original texts of grounded theory – *Discovery* and, in some respects, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Glaser 1978; hereafter called *Theoretical Sensitivity*) – were written as a new approach to doing research. They were written *against* something and *towards* something new. To be more specific, *Discovery* was very much written *against a particular form of theory generation in favour of another form of theory generation*. In addition, the text was directed at a particular

audience. Understanding this is critical to understanding and discovering what grounded theory is all about.

In our study of the original texts, looking closely at the footnotes and the direction of the writing, we discovered that significant sections of *Discovery* are written both against and beyond various contributions to an edited collection by Philip Hammond, entitled *Sociologists at Work* (Hammond 1964). *Sociologists at Work* is a remarkable text. It was an important landmark in the development of research methods in sociology. This is because it was one of the earliest attempts to describe the processes involved in doing research, with one other text acting as another example (Hanson 1958). Of course, prior to this, sociology did discuss methods. You only need to look at the work of Weber and Durkheim to realise that quite a bit of debate had taken place (Weber 1904/1949a 1904/1949b; Durkheim 1938). The debate to which *Discovery* appears to be directed was a debate happening in North America, supported by Lazarsfeld, Merton, Whyte, Gouldner and Mills (Hammond 1964). Glaser and Strauss (1967) took many of their main points of departure from *Sociologists at Work*. It is important to understand what *Sociologists at Work* was trying to achieve before we can begin to understand grounded theory.

In the introduction to *Sociologists at Work*, Hammond (1964) makes a number of revealing points. We discover that the book was an attempt to explore what was termed the 'logic of discovery' in relation to the 'logic of justification' in social science. We will discuss what this means in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3. The key thing we would like you to realise, then, is that the first book on the grounded theory method, *Discovery*, was not the only book concerned with discovering theory. It was *another* approach that was being suggested at the time. From Hammond's perspective, the process of discovery was 'disorderly', often circumstantial, non-rational *as well as* logical and systematic (Hammond 1964). The nature of this 'disorderly process' meant that often the contributors to the volume were reluctant to specify too much about the process of doing research. Indeed, Hammond stated that it would be 'an error to expect of these essays on the "context of discovery" a set of rules to follow' (Hammond 1964: 13). As you can see, the very idea of *discovering theory* was not new; rather, this idea was part of a broader debate at the time.

Glaser and Strauss's *Discovery* (1967) clearly develops from this general debate. Indeed, the parallels between *Discovery* and *Sociologists at Work* do not stop there. Many of the themes of discussion from *Sociologists at Work* were later developed and extended in grounded theory. For example, in the introduction to the

book it was made clear that each of the researchers writing in the volume was also struggling with the distinction between theory and research. Every research question had some form of structuring idea or preconception, and the distinction between research and theory was problematic. Hammond argued against the view that research involved the classification of facts:

> when, in reality, as science it is concerned with 'evolving conceptual schemes.' Indeed, research by induction is patently not what scientific discovery typically involves but rather what has been called abduction, or 'leading away,' that is 'theorising'. (Hammond 1964: 4)

Many of the problems common to social research to this day form part of the focus of this text. Common problems included the problem of how to deal with huge amounts of data, how to select and integrate data in research and how this process is related to or dominated by pre-existing ideas (Coleman 1964). As you will see, all of these themes became central to grounded theory. Some of the problems were reformulated, others were not. Take the example of Geer, who discovered an 'integrating principle' (Hammond 1964: 5) in her field work. A very similar idea occurs in grounded theory (see Chapter 9). Finally, many of the writers cited in *Sociologists at Work* were grappling with the problem of refining theoretical insights so that they could adequately explain reality (Hammond 1964). The main discussion at the time was that this process was gradual and iterative. There is, of course, a remarkable parallel between this idea and the processes associated with doing grounded theory.

So while many of the problems discussed in *Sociologists at Work* eventually found their way into *Discovery*, a key question is the degree to which *Discovery* either advances or incorporates solutions to these problems. Let us take an example. The concept of 'forcing' can be located in *Sociologists at Work*:

> A common experience, then, of these social researchers is the sense of struggling with data so that conceptual schemes can be imposed. It is this imposition of conceptual order that distinguishes research from cataloguing. And imposing conceptual order is what the thoughtful reader sitting behind a desk is also trying to do. (Hammond 1964: 5–6)

Dalton (1964) went on to discuss this imposition of conceptual schemes at length. He argued that a premature hypothesis can become a real burden by binding 'one's conscience and vanity'. Preconceived ideas about what is happening in the social world can make the researcher selective and blind to what is actually happening. Dalton

went on to state that researchers were 'professionally bound to understatement rather than overstatement' (1964: 54). This problem became a central theme in grounded theory, where it is discussed under the theme of 'forcing'. Forcing, as we shall see, is when the researcher imposes their own ideas on to the social world, forcing it to comply with their conceptual schemes about what is happening in the social world.

Several of the contributions to *Sociologists at Work* have become significant *points of departure* for *Discovery*. Of particular relevance to the development of grounded theory appears to be the work of Coleman (1961, 1964), who articulated how his interest in the macro structures of society and, in particular, pluralism developed (Coleman 1961, 1964). His discussion was focused on how sociology had amounted to nothing more than an aggregate psychology rather than a discipline that studied the social system as a thing in its own right (Coleman 1964). In order to overcome this psychological bias he focused on roles and statuses as his 'units of analysis'. His interest was not on individuals (Coleman 1964: 191) but on truly 'social' phenomena. Coleman felt it was possible to separate and identify parts of American society. Nonetheless, the problem he was interested in at the start of his study did not fit the main problems that he discovered in the data and as a consequence he had to switch the focus of his analysis. This is also something that would later become an important theme in *Discovery* where it is discussed that any theory that we develop must 'fit' the data we are analysing. The similarities do not stop there. Coleman stated:

> Suppose that we first identified the major roles and role relations in the system, sampled these, and then obtained data on the types of response made by a person in a given role when faced with a given situation. This might be done quite precisely or quite loosely, but the important point is that the result would be an inventory of contingent responses for each role. (Coleman 1964: 239)

This process of selectively sampling around the 'contingent responses for each role' is remarkably similar to what would later become 'theoretical sampling' in grounded theory (see Chapter 7, Rediscovering Skills for Theoretical Sampling). It was well known that research interests develop both prior to and during research, so this should be expected. Glaser and Strauss (1967) also sought to develop ways to handle 'preconceptions' productively during data analysis. In fact, time and again, if you explore these texts you will find the same problems and concerns that were later to become central to grounded theory. In some instances it appears that these problems

were lifted directly from the experiences of these researchers; in others, Glaser and Strauss (1967) were clearly trying to go beyond these experiences and provide some solutions.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred directly to Coleman's work when they later discussed the problem of studies that start out with one interest but ended up having to focus on what was in the data. They also relate to Coleman's experience that a preconceived theory can often be irrelevant to the data and changes in one's approach to a study are often necessitated as a consequence. Glaser and Strauss (1967) went on to suggest that their approach, subsequently called the 'constant comparative method', presumably to distinguish it from the 'comparative method', could often be blocked because a researcher got tied to a few pet concepts. Coleman (1964) was, on the one hand, commended for providing a good example of how an interesting and engaging theory can break through 'both preconceived and verificational schemes' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 187). On the other hand, he was also an example of a researcher who was said to have started out on the right path only for the comparative method to be blocked (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The extent of the discussion in *Discovery* with the problems described in *Sociologists at Work* does not stop there (Lipset 1964; Udy 1964). One author, Lipset (1964), is discussed in *Discovery* as an example of a researcher who used different 'slices of data'[3] to reflect on the differences between his findings and other theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 66, footnote 24). Lipset (1964) described how, in 'Union Democracy', he was interested in challenging the 'iron law of oligarchy'. He had carefully selected the International Typographical Union (ITU) as an important negative case in order to challenge the dominant theory. His inside knowledge of the ITU suggested that it was so different that it could act as a source to challenge many of the existing assumptions of theory on trade unionism. His intuition to explore what worked in one place and not in others was later called a 'deviant case analysis' (Lipset 1964: 99). Glaser and Strauss (1967) would describe such negative comparisons as especially useful for discovering theory and incorporated such techniques into the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 172).

So far in this chapter we have established that grounded theory was developed out of a response to existing approaches to conducting comparative research at the time. What we have found is summarised in Box 1-1. From this analysis it should be clear that the influence of *Sociologists at Work,* and *comparative methods*[4] in general, on the

development of grounded theory is considerable. As we shall see, many of these points of connection were subsequently incorporated into grounded theory. There are also some very important differences and it is to these we will now turn.

| Box 1-1 |

The link between the comparative method and grounded theory

1. The idea and logic of discovery was recognised within comparative methods before grounded theory was developed.
2. The process of discovery was frequently non-rational and not to be subject to rules. This became an important feature of the spirit of grounded theory.
3. Controlling ideas frequently hampered the discovery of new ideas and relationships within the data. In particular, the problem of dominating preconceptions in research was recognised. An awareness of these problems became central to grounded theory.
4. Prior interests could inform the development of comparative methods and grounded theory. These were to be distinguished from controlling interests because they often acted as starting points rather than controlling ideas.
5. Theoretical sensitivity was first conceptualised in *Sociologists at Work* and was cited as a solution to the problem of forcing. It is a central theme in grounded theory.
6. Abduction or 'leading away' into theory was frequently recognised as an important dimension of comparative research, the idea of leading away from data is a core approach in grounded theory.
7. The idea that we should focus on units of analysis, specifically social units of analysis,[5] can be found in comparative methods and also became central to grounded theory.
8. The exploration of new lines of enquiry *during the study* was a characteristic of the process of doing comparative analysis. This process also became crucial to the process of constant comparative analysis in grounded theory.
9. Obtaining 'slices of data' was part of the comparative method and was incorporated as a practice within grounded

theory.

10. Negative cases were used in comparative methods to challenge established hypotheses. The use of such negatives was also said to be useful in grounded theory and negative cases were termed 'deviant cases'.

When it comes to the differences between grounded theory and the comparative method, it is apparent that Glaser and Strauss are responsible for several key innovations (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). The principal difference appears to be grounded theory's emphasis on generating theory over verifying hypotheses. From the outset (in the preface in fact), Glaser and Strauss (1967) are very clear that this was to be one of their main points (Glaser and Strauss 1967: viii). Take, for example, the following passage, which follows a critical evaluation of the work of Coleman:

> This standard, required use of comparative analysis is accomplished early in the presentation of a study for the purpose of getting the ensuing story straight. This use is, of course, subsumed under the purpose of generating theory. However, when the analyst's purpose is only the specifying of a unit of analysis, he stifles his chances for generating to a greater degree than with any other use of comparative analysis. The distinctive empirical elements distinguishing the units of comparison are kept in the level of data, to insure clear understanding of differential definitions. As a consequence, the units' general properties in common, which might occur to the analyst as he compares, are carefully unattended. No ambiguity of similarity, such as a general underlying property pervading all of them, is allowed between the competing units. Comparative analysis, then, is carefully put out of the picture, never to 'disrupt' the monologue again. (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 26)

An important feature of comparative methodology is comparisons between large-scale social units, such as nation states or trade unions. These comparisons were usually made between units that were in the main identical in everything but the key aspects that were being explored. So observations between large-scale units were carefully 'controlled' to test the effects of the absence or presence of certain key characteristics of the unit or organisation. As you can see, this method often had the explicit goal of verifying a few general hypotheses rather than developing theory. But if you look carefully, you can see that Glaser and Strauss (1967) were in fact arguing against the carefully controlled technique of the comparative method. Coleman (1964) was being criticised for not using the comparative method to its fullest

extent. In other words, comparisons within the comparative method were neither rigorous nor extensive enough. You can see why Glaser and Strauss then labelled their method 'the *constant* comparative method'. A label designed to emphasise the rigorous application of comparisons throughout the new method of grounded theory.

Another central feature of the break between grounded theory and the earlier form of comparative sociology was the shift in emphasis and direction on how researchers should work on the relationship between ideas and data. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) basic innovation was to relax this relationship. In order to illustrate this point it is worth exploring one of Glaser's examples. In *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Glaser (1978) begins with a comparison between diarrhoea and perfume, which seem at first glance to have nothing in common. But in this comparison he went on to show how both can be related to the more general idea of 'body pollution', one favourable and the other not so favourable, one sought-after the other avoided. For Glaser (1978), the principle of interchangeability brought 'out enriching differences on the same idea'. In this example the comparisons between two highly diverse indicators should not be ignored, 'until thoroughly checked by constant comparative analysis' (Glaser 1978: 33). Comparison in the constant comparative method therefore involved comparisons from different, often diverse examples to new encompassing ideas or categories. In grounded theory, comparisons are not made to test hypothesis; they are exploratory and creative.

In this book you will discover that there are several important consequences of the switch from verification to generation in grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were to argue that rather than forcing a few pet ideas on to their data, researchers should discover order and indeed develop their ideas from the data. As you can see, they knew from the work of Dalton (1964) and others that the data in any particular study was hugely variable and that in some ways this should be used positively. The other discontinuities between grounded theory and comparative methods in sociology are outlined in Box 1-2 below.

| Box 1-2 |

Discontinuities between grounded theory and comparative methods in sociology

1. Grounded theory was developed with a different purpose in

mind – to generate theory as opposed to verifying hypotheses.

2. Grounded theory seeks to explore general underlying properties across social units of analysis as opposed to carefully delineating differences across units without enough comparison.

3. Grounded theory was extended to permeate the whole of the method. Comparisons were to be made not just between units, as in the more general comparative method, but between data slices and categories within the developing theory (see Chapter 9).

4. In grounded theory the relationship between ideas and data is relaxed and the process of verification becomes subject to the process of induction from the particular to the general.

5. In grounded theory we should avoid forcing pet ideas on to the data and exploring relationships that develop from the analysis of the data – in contrast to the way those in *Sociologists at Work* (Hammond 1964) were working.

6. Grounded theory sees negative cases as examples to be integrated into the theory rather than challenging the theory in some fatal way.

What does the constant comparative method of grounded theory involve?

Before you start to do a grounded theory, it might be worthwhile understanding that grounded theory is a 'building process'. This 'building' happens through the rigorous application of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called the constant comparative approach. It involves seeking to establish the general nature of various 'facts' to help generalise the emerging theory and establish its boundaries.[6] This happens through a more radical approach to data comparison than previously existed at the time grounded theory was developed. What kinds of comparisons were outlined in the original version of grounded theory? In what follows we will take you through what the constant comparative method *involves* and to do this from the perspective of the original texts.

As we have said the constant comparative method involves a building process from facts to theory. The emphasis in this process is, however, on being open and flexible. So although Glaser and Strauss

(1967) indicate that one of the purposes of grounded theory is to establish the generality of 'facts' (i.e. 'does the incest taboo exist in all societies?'), the status of a 'fact' as an 'accurate description' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 24) is always open and subject to revision in the light of further evidence. Often what you think is a central 'fact' can later become marginal with further observations. Within grounded theory the relationship between concepts and facts was relaxed, with emphasis being placed on the concept that was in the process of being generated. Throughout the original texts the emphasis is always away from claims of accuracy of data analysis towards exploring the generation of 'conceptual categories' and their properties. We are told, for example, that one case can generate a category, one or two more cases can verify it (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 30). In this sense, the constant comparative analysis was developed with the goal to generate and delimit a theory. More specifically, as part of this overall goal you will find it is the core approach to the generation of categories and their properties in your theory.

The main techniques that you will use when doing grounded theory will be to find similarities in your data and using these to generate statements that can be generalised across different units of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 26 and 230). The constant comparative method of grounded theory also entails finding groups that are more comparable than incomparable. This is because grounded theory emphasises generating theory that is clearly focused on broad comparisons rather than constrained and exclusive verification (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 51). It is through the broad comparison of groups that grounded theory generates clusters of variables that eventually become the building blocks of a specific theory.

As you can see, grounded theory involves comparing broadly similar observations that can be related in some way to the problem you wish to study. You should expect to be building from careful comparison of observation to observation[7] while developing categories related to these observations. Within this process the analyst is urged to compare different 'data slices'.[8] This process involves writing memos about the data and how these relate to ideas that were to be used as the basis for the emerging theory. This focus – on the play of ideas in the research process – is often overlooked. Indeed, some claims have been made that grounded theory comes to the data *tabula rasa*. Such claims are patently untrue.

The philosophical context

So far we have tried to explain some of the roots of grounded theory by putting it in its original sociological context. But, as was mentioned above, another thing that also needs to be done is to study the philosophical context of grounded theory. The first thing to address is the philosophical situation, especially related to science, during the 1960s. It is well known that philosophy of science was dominated in the twentieth century by a philosophy that goes by the name 'logical positivism'. Logical positivism has its origins in the British empiricist philosophy of the 1600s and 1700s, the sociologist Comte in the early 1800s, and the progress made in the philosophy of language and logic of Frege and Russell at the turn of the twentieth century. It was not until the twentieth century that 'logical positivism' was developed. This happened in Vienna, by a group of philosophers and scientists who met regularly to discuss basic questions in science. The group is often referred to as the 'Vienna Circle'. Their views were influenced in large part by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, a strange book written by an enigmatic philosopher (Wittgenstein 2001). The main idea for the members of the Vienna Circle was that there are propositions that lack truth value, that is, they are neither true nor false. Therefore they are, as Wittgenstein puts it, meaningless.

The logical positivists used this idea to find a criterion of demarcation, a criterion that would make it possible to distinguish between science and non-science. The idea is simple. In the sciences, knowledge is constituted by theories which are sets of propositions that are meaningful: they can be true or false. Non-scientific theories, on the other hand, consist of propositions that lack truth value, and therefore are meaningless. That is, they are not false, they are meaningless, which is infinitely worse. What makes propositions meaningful is, according to the logical positivists, their verifiability. This is their principle of verification: a statement is meaningful if, and only if, it can, in principle, be verified by sense experience.[9] From this it follows that much of what was earlier regarded as science really wasn't. Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, astrology and the interpretive sciences, were no longer real sciences but 'pseudo-sciences' because you could not have a sense experience to verify the existence of such a thing as the unconscious. The natural sciences, quantitative social sciences and economics, on the other hand, lands on the 'right' side. Psychology, formerly seen as the study of the mental, had to be converted to the study of behaviour, which is a study of something observable.

The principle of verification indicates that the logical positivists were empiricists – knowledge has its foundation in sense experience. But when it comes to scientific methodology, they were rationalists. They argued that it was possible to develop methods that should be used in all the sciences. If this was done, scientific research would be objective, because the researcher would not influence research and make it subjective and arbitrary. The idea is called 'the methodological unity of science'. Research done with other methods was simply not scientific research. Much of the discussion within the Vienna Circle of course concerned the nature of research and there were different views. But the standard view was something like this: studies must begin with observations. Statements that describe such observations are highly verifiable and almost infallible. From these observation statements would then inductively derive a theory, a theory which would then be verified by further observations. That is, from the premise 'All observed A are B' (which are the observation statements) you infer 'All A are B' (which is a general hypotheses), and you verify the conclusion by making more observations. The idea was that when doing research you should make more and more observations, derive more and more theories, and finally it would generate theories describing everything that exists. There were even those who believed that all theories could be combined into one big theory with the help of so-called 'theory-reductions'. Anyway, one would thus ensure that we get a cumulative growth of knowledge: we constantly learn more and more about reality.

The Vienna Circle dissolved in the 1930s because of the looming war. Most of the members travelled to the USA, where they had a huge influence. One of the universities where the positivist influence was strong was Columbia University in New York, and it was there that Glaser received his education and wrote his thesis. An example of the positivist influence can clearly be seen in the Swedish sociologist Hans Zetterberg's *On Theory and Verification in Sociology* from 1954. Zetterberg also worked at Columbia and the book is referenced in Glaser and Strauss's *Discovery*.

The influence of logical positivism would eventually wane, and this would happen in the 1960s, when Glaser was in California and collaborating with Strauss. There are many explanations for why the logical positivism disappeared, and why it disappeared so rapidly: there are, first of all, internal problems with it, for instance with the formulation of the verification principle; there were problems with the inductive argument; there were problems about how to construct physical reality from sense experience; and so on. Second, it was

disliked by many because it ruled out much of what is traditionally considered to be scientific work, for example in the human sciences. Also, one cannot ignore the fact that the social situation at the universities in the United States played a role, with its increasingly anti-authoritarian attitude towards the end of the 1960s, which led to regular student uprisings.

In the philosophical context, it is clear that there are two works that influenced the view of science more than others. The first work we think of is Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, which was first published in 1934 entitled *Logic der Forschung* but was not translated until 1959 (Popper 1959). Popper (1959) started what was perhaps the most influential department of philosophy of science in Europe, the London School of Economics, and his view is often called critical rationalism. He did not believe in anything the positivists said. He did not believe that induction worked to prove anything important. He did not believe in verification as a demarcation criteria or in verification in general. He did not think science should start by doing observations, and he did not believe there were infallible observation statements. Scientific knowledge does not grow in a cumulative fashion. Instead, he believed that science should grow by scientists making guesses (conjectures, the wilder the better) and then test them by logically deriving test implications. These tests should be efforts to falsify hypotheses, and as long as you do not succeed in doing so, it is corroborated and you should hold it for true. But it should be rejected immediately when a derived test shows that the hypothesis does not hold.

The other work we think of is Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962. Just as Glaser and Strauss, Kuhn was working in California: he had moved to Berkeley University in 1956 and became a full professor there in 1961. His *Structure* is one of the most sold academic books ever, and one that has been cited the most (Kuhn 1962). What Kuhn does is even more radical than what Popper did. Popper believed, after all, in scientific rationality, just as the positivists did: it was just that they had got it wrong. Kuhn believes instead that there can be no ultimate reason for how to work rationally in science. All theories are developed in so-called paradigms and paradigms contain general assumptions about reality and science. The point is that the paradigm provides its own criteria of rationality. One can therefore not use rationality criteria found in one paradigm to criticise another paradigm because they do not accept the criteria. It follows from this, according to Kuhn, that the choice between paradigms cannot be made rationally; it is social, psychological,

economic, and political factors that determine how a scientist thinks and what problems they try to solve. This provides immediate opportunity for a scientific pluralism. It need not be that all researchers must work on the same problems and in the same way. Instead there may be research done with different problems and different methods which are conducted simultaneously. Naturally, this had been a possibility earlier also, but only in a small scale. Now there was suddenly a way to show that it is perfectly acceptable to go one's own way and develop one's own methods. This is what Glaser and Strauss did in the 1960s, and they were not alone: Garfinkel, who also was in California, developed ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and interest in Schütz's lifeworld sociology gained momentum (Schütz 1967). These examples can easily be multiplied. It is difficult to say whether Glaser and Strauss were directly influenced by Kuhn, but they do reference him in *Discovery* (see Glaser and Strauss 1967: 28).

The important thing is that the scientific climate changed in the 1960s. Logical positivism, which said that everyone should work in the same way in all the sciences, was gone. Instead, the possibility to pursue science in many different ways, and in different ways in different disciplines, developed. The strong requirements for verification by observation disappeared, which again allowed for psychological and qualitative studies in sociology. No longer was one, and only one, way to conduct science considered more rational than any other, because each methodology itself contains criteria for rationality. Soon these ideas were radicalised. Anarchist ideas were presented (Feyerabend 1975) and it all led eventually to postmodernism and constructivism. Nonetheless, the perception of science changed in the 1960s and this made the development of grounded theory and other methods possible – although possibly Glaser and Strauss themselves did not study the philosophy of science, they found themselves in a context where these ideas undoubtedly played a role.

What can philosophy do for grounded theory?

The next issue we will discuss is what can philosophy, or rather philosophy of science, do for grounded theory? It is one thing to give an explanation of the conditions that made grounded theory possible, as we did above, but what more can philosophy do? There is something almost paradoxical when it comes to the relation between philosophy and grounded theory. First, the philosophical role in grounded theory has been downgraded, or even eliminated, by the

'classical' grounded theorists,[10] such as Barney Glaser. Classical grounded theorists tend to believe that to start digging in the philosophical assumptions behind grounded theory is a waste of time and effort. You should just get on with your research, and when you do it you will see that the most amazing theories will emerge. If bogged down in philosophical discussions, you will be less productive, less sensitive to what goes on in a social setting, and no theory will emerge. 'Just do it' is the mantra to which the researcher should adhere.

This view has some merit. Thomas Kuhn, in his *Structure* (1962) mentioned above, said very much the same thing. If a researcher pays too much attention to philosophical assumptions lurking in his or her research, he or she will be unproductive. He or she will start to think about philosophical issues and, as is well known, in philosophy there is no certainty, or even consensus, to be found so it will be a long journey. Still, Kuhn accepts that there always are philosophical assumptions behind research – he just does not believe that there is any advantage for the researcher to think about them. He, or she, should just accept them, often tacitly, and go on doing what he or she does best – collecting and analysing data, setting up experiments, and so on. But second, at the same time (and this is what is paradoxical), there are lots of philosophical discussions about grounded theory. In the last couple of years, three books about classical grounded theory have been published and what they say about philosophy is instructive. If we look at the first one, *Glaserian Grounded Theory in Nursing Research* by Artinian, Giske et al. (2009), there is no mention at all of philosophical issues and their possible relevance for grounded theory research. Clearly, they believe that philosophy is not worth knowing about when you do a grounded theory study (Artinian, Giske et al. 2009). No argument for this is provided, however, but the book holds to the Glaserian tradition.

Next, we have Stern and Porr's *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory* (2011). Here, in Chapter 2, philosophy is discussed to a large extent. It starts off with a brief table of 'Philosophical trends in science'. On four pages, it contains short descriptions of such 'trends' as 'Modern science' (Galilei and Descartes); Social science (John Locke); Hypothetico-deduction (Newton); Enlightenment (Voltaire); Positivism (Comte). Now, you can always argue with such a short description as the one which can be found in their book, and unfortunately, in this case, most of what is stated in this table is incorrect. But that is not the issue here. What is of interest is the view that such knowledge is of importance to the grounded theorists. But

why is it? No argument can be found, it is just claimed that:

> ...it's important to be aware of the philosophical disputes predating *Discovery of Grounded Theory* because they persist within the social sciences (Bernard 2006) and within most scientific communities. (Stern and Porr 2011: 25)

So, it is important to know about philosophical disputes because they persist. But the reason why it is important to know about these persisting disputes is never explained. What we would like is a clear statement of what difference it would make for the grounded theorist to have a take on these issues. Anyway, it seems that they believe that it is important to know something about science itself, to know the history of science and also about how science has been viewed in different historical periods.

We believe that this indeed would be a good thing, just as Glaser recommends that researchers read about theories in social science, since it will enhance his or her understanding of theoretical issues. Knowledge about the development of the sciences will enhance their understanding of what it means to be doing science. Birks and Mills' *Grounded Theory: a Practical Guide* (Birks and Mills 2011) also has a chapter on philosophy but here the point is different. They believe that since grounded theory is an interpretative methodology, it is important for the researcher to 'discern a personal position'. Explaining what they mean by 'personal position', they refer to Denzin and Lincoln, who state that 'All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researchers set of beliefs and feelings [sic] about the world and how it should be understood and studied' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 22). So, it is suggested by Birks and Mills (2011) that we take the following four questions and think about them so that we know where we stand:

1. How do we define our self?
2. What is the nature of reality?
3. What can be the relationship between researcher and participant?
4. How do we know the world, or gain knowledge of it?

These questions are, of course, philosophical in nature, and they are not easy to answer or even to have a clear opinion about. Just to understand them is hard. But the problem here is this: if you do grounded theory the way it was originally thought, then you do not have to think about these questions. Grounded theory was developed as a method that will steer the researcher in the correct direction regardless of how he or she defined him or herself or what they

thought about the nature of reality. Questions such as these are important when thinking about differences between different versions of grounded theory, but it is not clear that they will have any relevance once you have decided to use one of those versions. These are complicated questions, and we will have to return to them later in this book.

A fourth suggestion on the relation between philosophy and grounded theory can be found in Alvita Nathaniel's chapter on 'An integrated philosophical framework that fits grounded theory' (Nathaniel 2012). Nathaniel tries to 'propose an extant, integrated, philosophical framework that fits the classic grounded theory method and undergrids its rigorous scientific process' (2012: 187). She then goes on and tries to demonstrate that classic grounded theory is 'highly consistent with' C.S. Peirce's philosophy. Now, we do applaud that Nathaniel stresses the importance of being aware of philosophical frameworks, but, what she does in her paper is clearly dangerous for two reasons. First, there is no mention of Peirce or pragmatism in *Discovery* or *Theoretical Sensitivity* and to infer such a relationship on the fact that in some cases there are similarities is very weak. Indeed, many of the points she makes can be found in many other thinkers' work as well. Related to this is the fact that Nathaniel often says that Glaser and Strauss are influenced by Peirce, but it is very difficult to say anything about Glaser's and Strauss's minds. After all, their text is all you have. Second, a philosophical framework is what lays the foundation for research. You start with a philosophical framework (for instance, views in epistemology and ontology) and then you build your methodology on that. What Nathaniel does is the opposite: she tries to find a philosophy that fits with an already established methodology. But then the philosophy is of no use: it is intended to support the methodology, but it clearly does not if it is chosen just because it fits. We would need independent arguments for the truth of the philosophical framework, and to give that is to enter a highly complicated philosophical discussion. As it is now, the pragmatic framework is pointless.

These are just some of the more recent views about the relationship between philosophy and grounded theory. They are that: (a) there is none; (b) the history of philosophy of science is useful to know about; (c) philosophy can help identify your beliefs and feelings that guide your work; (d) philosophy can be used as a foundation for grounded theory. Regardless of their merit, we have another take on how philosophy can be of service to grounded theory. We think that it has two tasks.

First, many of the issues discussed in *Discovery* and *Theoretical Sensitivity* are philosophical in nature. *They are just not recognised as such.* Not all philosophical discussions are about the immortality of the soul, God's existence, the nature of free will, and how to live a good life. Indeed, those problems cannot be found in those two books. Instead, there are discussions about theory structure, that is, about things such as concepts, categories, properties, hypotheses, about the application of theory, and so on. Questions about the nature of concepts and properties, for example, and their relation to reality are clearly philosophical. They are a priori questions which cannot be solved by doing empirical research and they have been discussed by philosophers since antiquity.

Second, the emergence of different versions of grounded theory mentioned above often has philosophical implications. For instance, the difference between Glaser's 'classic' grounded theory and Charmaz's 'constructivist' grounded theory is foremost philosophical – it concerns the nature and origin of knowledge and the nature of reality and truth. Those differences lead to different methodologies. Therefore, in order to clarify the original version of grounded theory, we must take a closer look at those assumptions and also to some extent see how they differ from all the later versions. The approach we will adopt in this book will be to explore in some detail Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory while seeking to explain why this version has been developed and what is significant about it. This will enable us to demonstrate that methodological pluralism is something we should value in grounded theory, but it also provides us with an important justification for going back and rediscovering grounded theory from within its original context.

Outline of the book

This book is divided into two parts, the first part deals with what grounded theory is and the second part deals with how to do grounded theory. Our reasons for this division are clear. The fact that there are now a wide variety of ways of doing grounded theory means that there is a need to consolidate the core aspects of the method and to clarify these for today's audience. We need to show that this is the case and so we devote time and space in illustrating the variation in approaches to grounded theory in the contemporary literature. Likewise, we devote considerable time to teasing out positive descriptions of the method in the original texts. We then present our analyses of the

original texts and at the same time seek to explore the philosophical issues associated with grounded theory. Our goal in this section is to *clarify* grounded theory. We begin this process in Chapter 2 by describing what kind of theory grounded theory is. This is important because you will need to know in advance what it is you are aiming to produce before you begin to do grounded theory. Having outlined the kind of theory you are looking to produce, we then go on to outline how to do grounded theory. The second section of the book is therefore largely practical in its focus.

Chapter 2 explores what a grounded theory should look like by outlining how it is described in the current literature and then explaining what you should expect to see when you develop grounded theory. Chapter 3 explores some of the central debates at the heart of grounded theory and how these relate to the philosophy of science. In this chapter we take one version of grounded theory, Constructivist Grounded Theory, and subject it to some scrutiny. Our reasons for doing this are to be able to demonstrate the importance of understanding that when grounded theory is combined with other approaches it is important to map out any compromises and changes that may need to be considered. We take existing views of constructivist grounded theory and seek to advance the current version of constructivist grounded theory. Our goal is to demonstrate how grounded theory can be combined with other approaches, but how in doing so it has to be modified. Our position is that if grounded theory is to develop, such methodological pluralism should be encouraged. Nonetheless, we should also seek to preserve grounded theory as it was originally developed. The analysis of Chapter 3 provides an important justification for the rest of the book.

Chapter 4 seeks to disentangle the relationship between conceptualisation and categorisation in grounded theory. It highlights how these two terms are frequently mixed up and confused in the method and explores how the understanding of these terms can be traced back to important continuities and discontinuities with different traditions in sociology. We explore these issues in some depth and seek to clarify the use of the terms within the method. Chapter 5 then picks up the issue of coding in grounded theory. It begins with an exploration of how the term is referred to in the literature and then goes on to explore how coding was developed in *Discovery* and *Theoretical Sensitivity*. In particular, we explore specifically how grounded theory broke with the traditions of Blumer and Lazarsfeld and how specific procedures were developed for doing coding in grounded theory that were based on the techniques that were found

(1964). Here we discovered that ideas such as the logic of discovery, theoretical sensitivity, data slicing, the problems associated with controlling ideas, prior interests and preconceptions pre-existed grounded theory. Important breaks with previous traditions were also explored. So, for example, the way comparisons were made between 'units' of analysis when generating theory was developed quite differently in grounded theory. The chapter then went on to outline the philosophical context of grounded theory. Here we discovered that grounded theory developed when logical positivism had collapsed, and the resulting vacuum enabled methodological pluralism to be developed in the 1960s. Grounded theory was one part of the emergence of this pluralism. While some of the language addresses positivism as its context, we have pointed out that it would be a mistake to say grounded theory was positivist as a consequence. The chapter then discussed what philosophy can do for grounded theory by reviewing the range of arguments for and against having a philosophical view of grounded theory. It then ended with a summary of the book.

Further reading

Chalmers, A.F. (1976) *What is This Thing Called Science?* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.

Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) 'The discovery of grounded theory', Chapter 1 in B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

Hammond, P. (1964) 'Introduction', in P. Hammond (ed.), *Sociologists at Work: The Craft of Social Research*. London and New York: Basic Books.

Okasha, S. (2002) *Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Notes
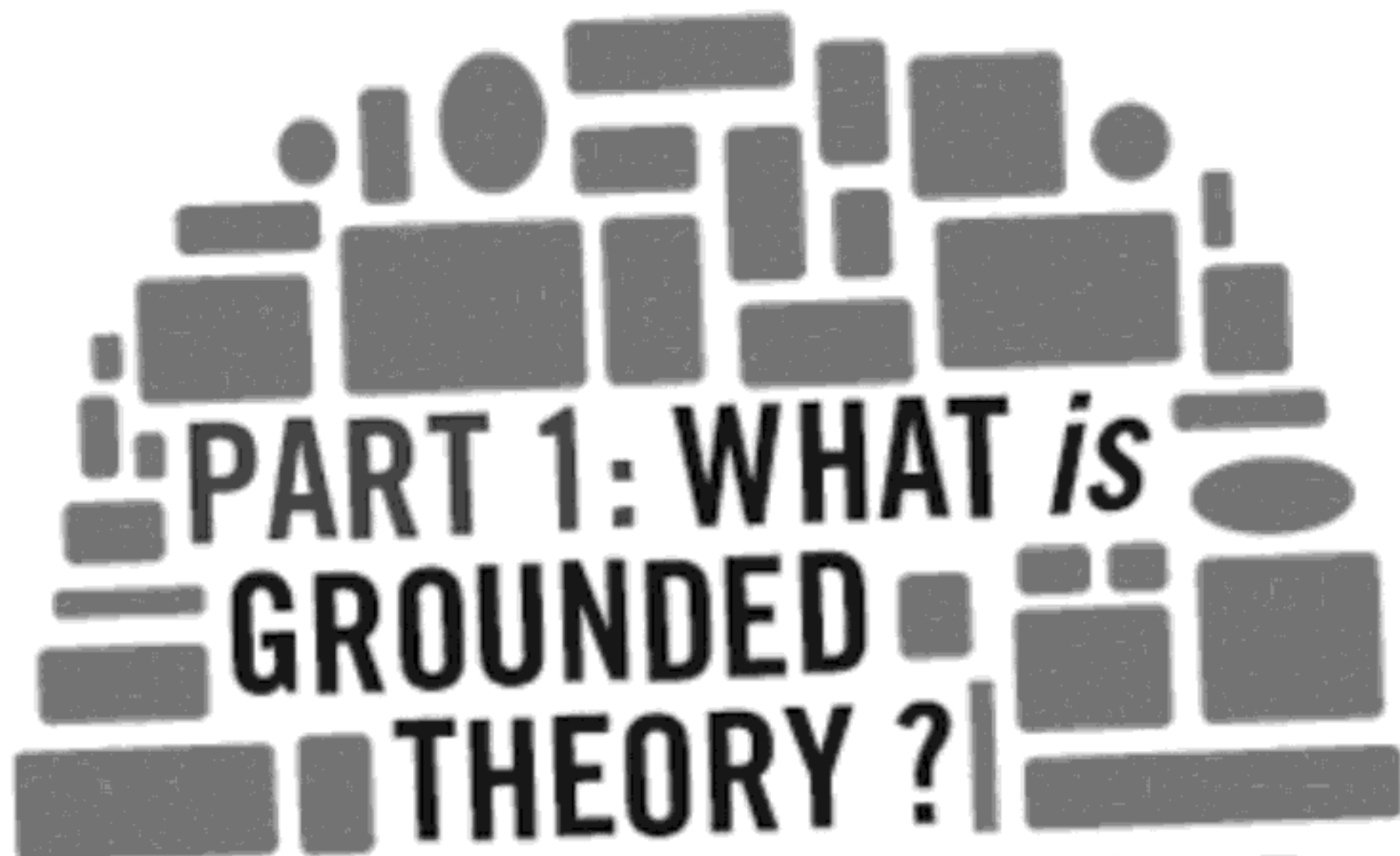
1 It is important to keep in mind the distinction between 'resultant grounded theory', which is the theory you end up with, and 'grounded theory method', which refers to the use of different sets of procedures and techniques to produce a grounded theory, and 'grounded theory methodology', which is used when we refer to the logic for the method. Often the context makes it clear what is meant by just 'grounded theory',

but when there is the possibility of misunderstanding we try to make the intended meaning explicit.

2   Time and again they refer to different individuals but in particular they appear to be reacting against the authority of writers such as Parsons and Merton.

3   We will discuss the role of 'slices of data' in grounded theory later in the book. Please see the heading 'Slices of data: data analysis for the generation of theory' on page 125.

4   Very few authors have pointed out the obvious link between grounded theory and comparative sociology. Indeed, it seems that in some very important ways grounded theory is a break from comparative sociology. This break can be seen as both positive and negative. It can also perhaps explain why Dey (1999), who was reading grounded theory from the perspective of a comparative sociologist, might have been reacting the way he did.

5   A very important legacy of grounded theory is its sociological heritage. Part of this heritage involves an interest in social units. Throughout this book we will return to this idea. For now social units are defined as any unit where groups of people interact for a particular purpose. There are many types of social units; they can be organisational, bureaucratic, subversive, informal, familial and so on. Sampling social units to enable data collection and analysis seems to have been lost as part of the grounded theory process.

6   They state: 'Our goal of generating theory also subsumes this establishing of empirical generalisations, for the generalisations not only help delimit a grounded theory's boundaries of applicability; more important, they help us broaden the theory so that it is more generally applicable and has greater explanatory and predictive power. By comparing where the facts are similar or different, we can generate properties of categories that increase the categories' generality and explanatory power.' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 24)

7   In grounded theory the comparisons are made from 'incident to incident', but we will develop this in more detail later in the book.

8   As we have seen, this sensitivity was related to their reading of Lipset (1964).

9   It is worth noticing that this means that logical positivism is not a realistic position, contrary to what many social scientists believe. The reason is simple: realism says that something exists independently of sense experience, but how can you verify something like that with sense experiences?

10   We use the term to refer to the group of people who believe that we should preserve grounded theory as it was developed in the 1960s.

PART 1: WHAT *is* GROUNDED THEORY ?

2

What Kind of Theory is Grounded Theory?

Aim: To review and analyse what we mean by 'theory' in grounded theory

Learning outcomes

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

• criticise and evaluate current views on what grounded theory is
• be aware of the existing views on what a grounded theory should look like
• detail the core aspects of grounded theory in relation to its openness, explanatory power, the contrast between generation and justification, theory structure and research process

This chapter is about an interesting puzzle. This puzzle is that there is not a lot of information in *Discovery* and *Theoretical Sensitivity* on *what a grounded theory should look like* (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). If we don't know what a grounded theory should look like, how can we discuss *what kind of theory grounded theory is*? There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, as we have seen, Glaser and Strauss (1967) were writing for a particular audience. That audience appeared to be familiar with what theory was and so it might have been possible that, because of the context in which grounded theory was written, there was no need to clarify what a grounded theory should look like. Second, as we have also seen, grounded theory was presented *as a new approach to doing theory*. So, for example, throughout the book Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated that they were writing in opposition to 'verificational studies'. Grounded theory, then, was primarily described *as a process of doing something*.

Less was said about what the outcome of this process should look like. Third, it is quite clear on reading *Discovery* that Glaser and Strauss (1967) were constantly at pains to avoid foreclosing alternative ways of generating grounded theory. Throughout *Discovery* they indicated that the project of grounded theory was just the beginning and that other ways of generating theory may be found and described. This and more can be gleaned from the beginning of *Discovery*.

> ...we offer this book, which we conceive as a beginning venture in the development of improved methods for discovering grounded theory. Because this is only a beginning, we shall often state positions, counter positions and examples, rather than offering clear-cut procedures and definitions, because at many points we believe our slight knowledge makes any formulation premature. A major strategy that we shall emphasize for furthering the discovery of grounded theory is a general method of comparative analysis. This puzzle is not the same as not knowing what your theory will be about. That is a different problem and one that is very well covered in grounded theory. (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 1)

Apart from the cautious humility of this quotation, you can see that grounded theory was meant to be a general method. *Discovery*, as a text, was only meant to describe Glaser and Strauss's starting position, and it was deemed 'premature' to be providing a definitive description of what grounded theory was at that time.[1] Finally, it is very clear that Glaser and Strauss (1967) were seeking to set grounded theory in opposition to other approaches. An important consequence of this is that within *Discovery* there would never be a set of clearly defined 'procedures and definitions'; the book is part argument, part presentation of their approach rather than what they perceive as the outcome of the approach. Understanding this is fundamental to getting to grips with the original texts and what they were saying.

All of this presents those new to grounded theory with a significant set of intriguing problems. Where am I going? What should I be aiming for? What is a grounded theory and if I am to produce a grounded theory what should it look like? Despite these questions much is promised in this approach. You get the freedom and ability to generate your own theory and do not have to remain enthralled to the grand theory of others. For many today, this might seem moot. After all, we have had over four decades of grounded theory and there have been many innovations in the method. Other research areas have moved on as well. The social sciences as a whole have had the crisis of representation, and have witnessed the increasing importance of post-structuralism. Medical science has also had its changes, with the

Knowing what a grounded theory should look like is important because it is central to establishing the degree to which your own work can be called grounded theory. This issue has become central to recent debates within grounded theory. You will often find that a published article will claim that it is a grounded theory when, in fact, it has few of the characteristics that would recommend it as a grounded theory. This is a problem that the main commentators on the method agree with (Dey 1999; Charmaz 2000, 2006; Birks and Mills 2011). Glaser and Holton (2004) called this the 'remodelling' of grounded theory; others have called it 'method slurring' (Baker, Wuest et al. 1992; Glaser and Holton 2004). The problem is, of course, that any method should evolve. After all, the standards and criteria by which we evaluate other scientific methods are constantly changing. Grounded theory is no exception to this process (Yuen and Richards 1994; Annells 1996; Dey 1999; Bryant 2003; Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Denzin 2007; Lempert 2007; Reichertz 2007; Birks and Mills 2011). Adjustments and changes to all research methods are a sign that a particular field is characterised by lively debate and healthy evolution. These debates in grounded theory have certainly been lively. There is the by now infamous 'falling out' between Glaser and Strauss over the publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Others have gone on to develop their own versions of grounded theory, the most famous of which appears to be the 'Constructivist Grounded Theory' of Charmaz (Charmaz and Mitchell 1996; Charmaz 2000, 2006, 2008; Glaser 2002; Bryant and Charmaz 2007). This can make the task of understanding what a grounded theory should look like more complicated. Let us take a few brief examples.

QUESTION

What do you think a grounded theory should look like?

One recent iteration of grounded theory is produced by Melanie Birks and Jane Mills (2011) in their book *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. In this book, Birks and Mills describe theory as 'an explanatory scheme comprising of a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns of connectivity' (Birks and Mills 2011: 113). For them, overarching explanatory schemes are central to what a grounded theory should look like. Indeed, because such schemes lead to a high level of abstraction and integration, this is an important feature of grounded theory. We are also told that the theory must have something

called a 'core category' and its major categories must be 'theoretically saturated'. We will go into more detail on the nature of these later in the book. While Birks and Mills (2011) provide lots of examples of how to go about doing grounded theory, they provide few other guidelines on what the theory should look like other than these positive statements. It is very much left up to the reader to decide what a grounded theory's core features should be. It seems that in the same way that grounded theory was originally produced against a background debate within sociology, others also bring to the method particular readings and interpretations. Such 'readings' often highlight different aspects of grounded theory and this can often be quite confusing.

Another form of revisiting and reinterpretation of grounded theory is to focus on the status of grounded theory as a form of knowledge production. A great example of this is without doubt the work of Charmaz (2000, 2006) and others, who have argued for a 'constructivist' turn in grounded theory (Bryant 2003). In these examples grounded theory is often first *re*constructed as 'objectivist' and then *re*constructed as 'constructivist'. Many of the arguments that are used to sustain this approach are often made without much reference to the original texts. Many of the criticisms of grounded theory are imputed to grounded theory. So, for example, you will discover a new version of grounded theory called 'objectivist' grounded theory. Charmaz (2000, 2006) makes the following claims about this version. She claims that:

- it resides in the positivist tradition and is therefore objectivist (Charmaz 2000: 510; Charmaz 2006: 131)
- it 'erases the social context from which data emerge' (Charmaz 2006: 131)
- it erases 'the influence of the researcher' and
- it often erases 'the interactions between grounded theorists and their research participants' (Charmaz 2006: 131)
- it assumes an external reality waiting to be discovered (Charmaz 2006: 131)

This approach to grounded theory constructs it *as a form of positivism* and has been further reinforced by a historical reconstruction of the development of the method. Bryant and Charmaz (2007), while exploring the background of Glaser and Strauss's work, sought to trace how their respective influences impacted on the grounded theory project. Of particular note was the fact that Glaser and Strauss

apparently gave grounded theory a 'positivist, objectivist direction' (Bryant and Charmaz 2007: 33) and that they did so because they were seeking to establish the credentials of grounded theory in opposition to a largely quantitative tradition at the time (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). They also stated that the 'early position (*of Grounded Theory*) can be interpreted as justification for what they called a naïve, "realist" form of positivism, which holds that the veracity of theory can be determined simply by recourse to "the data"' (Bryant and Charmaz 2007: 33). Their whole argument seems to rest on the fact that Glaser and Strauss (1967) had a relatively unproblematic stance with respect to 'the data'. They do not acknowledge that perhaps the language Glaser and Strauss (1967) used was in fact addressing debates within research at the time and therefore in some respects reflected the views of the audience they were addressing. We shall return to this point time and again throughout this book. Needless to say, if you turn to this account of grounded theory, you will not find a detailed description of *what a grounded theory should look like*.

As you can tell, a central argument of ours is that very few interpretations of grounded theory can be seen as directly embedded in an analysis of the original texts. The only exception we could find was the work of Dey (1999), which presents itself as a sustained and careful critique of the original texts. Although here Dey (1999) was so concerned with building a sustained critique of grounded theory that you will struggle to find a comprehensive definition of *what a grounded theory should look like*. Dey (1999) begins his analysis by asking the expansive question 'what is grounded theory?' He then gives a reiteration of Cresswell's (1998) description of what grounded theory is before moving on to describe what grounded theory is in terms of how to do grounded theory (Creswell 1998; Dey 1999). These are all very engaging debates and discussions but they do not really help us to see *what a grounded theory should look like*.

The core aspects of grounded theory

We would argue that both strong and weak versions of the method can be identified. We take Glaser and Strauss's (1967) view and Glaser's (1978) perspective to represent the strong position. In doing so we will avoid the 'objectivist' label that Charmaz and others have used. We do this not to discount their position but to hold that issue as an open question. We believe that the five points discussed below represent some of the core tenets of grounded theory. We feel that by elucidating

these points we will be better able to see the relation between grounded theory as it was originally intended and constructivist versions of grounded theory. The first point concerns the openness of the grounded theory method, the second, explanatory power, the third, the difference between generation and justification, the fourth, theory structure, and the fifth and last, the research process. These points overlap to some degree but it is still fruitful to look at them separately.

The openness of grounded theory

The grounded theory methodology is characterised by its openness. There are many aspects to this openness, but the main point is that the researcher shall not make use of preconceived concepts or ideas. Indeed, this idea was the major inspiration for Glaser and Strauss (1967): to enable researchers to escape from the ideas developed by grand theorists such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim and, of course, Parsons, whose 'structural functionalism' was predominant at the time. Glaser and Strauss discussed this in the section on 'Verification and Grand Theory' in a passage which discusses the grand forefathers of sociology (Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Marx, Veblen, Cooley, Mead, Park, and so on). They indicate that only a few sociologists have since then managed to generate their own theories (Parsons and Merton). But what they had done had its flaws:

> But even these few have lacked methods for generating theory from data, or at any rate have not written about their methods. They have played 'theoretical capitalist' to the mass of 'proletariat' testers by training young sociologists to test their teachers' work but not to imitate it. (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 11)

As we have seen, grounded theory was in part a reaction against simply applying preconceived theory. If preconceived concepts were used in the method, this would constitute 'forcing', which would have been against the basic idea in grounded theory that concepts and hypotheses should emerge from the observation of 'data'. The formulation of the research question, then, is usually based on a social 'unit' of analysis. So, for example, in *Awareness of Dying* (Glaser and Strauss 1965; hereafter called *Awareness*), hospital wards were analysed as units specifically to see what was happening around people who were dying. That is not to say that individuals cannot be used for a grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss clearly stated in *Discovery* that individuals, as social units, could also be used as the basis for a grounded theory, but more importantly, so could 'social

roles' and indeed school classrooms. It is a sad fact that since then the vast bulk of grounded theory, for example in medical disciplines, has been conducted on individuals as the unit of analysis and that the original inspiration to study 'social units' has gone.

In weaker versions of grounded theory it is not uncommon for research questions to be put like this: 'How does group G experience/perceive/understand S?', where 'S' is a social phenomenon. For instance, Strauss and Corbin stated that the 'research question in a grounded theory study is a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied' (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 31). For example, Charmaz's research question in her book from 1991, sought to explore 'how chronicity affects ill people's self-concepts' (Charmaz 1991a). If the research question is put like this, two things are presupposed: that there is an identifiable group of people to be studied, and that the phenomena the study is to focus on, in this case 'self-concepts', is relevant in some way to that group. We should also note that the idea of drawing on social units *was only a starting point*. The mantra of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was always to be open and flexible in developing the theory. By limiting the unit of analysis to specific phenomena and individuals as social units, the consequence will be to compromise the openness of grounded theory. How the unit to be studied was to be delineated, and what phenomena to study, must emerge during research and must be grounded in the observation of data.

The openness of grounded theory is designed to protect the theory-building process from becoming preconceived and forced. Grounded theory in its basic form just specifies a phenomenon and a location in which it exists and then begins to study that phenomenon. This does not mean that the researcher starts with no preconceptions.

To identify groups and phenomena from the start is of course possible in social research; it is often done, for instance, in phenomenological research. To do so, however, clashes with the original idea in grounded theory that everything from the research question to the concepts to be used in the theory should emerge from observation of data. It is important to be more specific. In *Discovery* it is stated that:

> The initial decisions for theoretical collection of data are based only on a general sociological perspective and on a general subject or problem area (such as how confidence men handle prospective marks ...). The initial decisions are not based on a preconceived theoretical framework. (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45)

using the example of nursing care, which has two categories – 'professional composure' and 'perceptions of social loss' – of a patient who is dying. 'Perceptions of social loss' are said to explain nurses' 'view of what degree of loss his death will be to his family and occupation' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 36). So the category explains their views. However, the situation is more complicated. A property of the category of social loss described above is 'loss rationales' and these are 'the rationales that the nurses use to justify their perceptions of social loss' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 36). So the nurses' concerns are composed of a conglomeration of perceptions (their views), rationales and justifications. The theory of dying is then about how these different perceptions and views interact.

Grounded theory seeks to explain how social phenomena are organised. Its basic tasks are to discover what the relevant social phenomena are within a problem area and then to specify the relationships between the relevant social phenomena. It therefore presupposes two basic things about the social world. That the social world is organised around the problems people experience and that this organisation can be discovered and conceptualised.

A grounded theory is about the multitude of things that interact in a field of enquiry. Of course this means that the grounded theory method differs from phenomenology and hermeneutics. Grounded theory seeks to answer the question 'what is going on in this area?' This brings us to another feature of grounded theory, which involves describing the core category and how it varies. The core category is said to be related to the core concern(s) of those in the area and how these are resolved or organised. It cannot be assumed from the start. If it is taken for granted, we may be mistaken and the theory may not work. We will return to this point below.

Generation versus justification and grounded theory

The grounded theory method is a method that describes the process of systematically generating theories from data, and it must therefore be distinguished from methods used to justify theories. This goes back to the distinction between what Popper refers to as the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of justification' (Popper 1959). The context of discovery concerns how to develop a theory. There are different schools concerned with how to do this. One school, often associated with logical positivism, says that we are to proceed inductively. That is, we shall collect data as neutrally as possible, and

then systematically analyse the data in order to find relationships between types of data. We are then to generalise those relations within a theory. This contrasts with Popper's critical rationalism, where it is claimed that it really does not matter how we come up with a theory. We can either find it by analysing data, or it may just be an ingenious creative idea, or even a bold conjecture. Indeed, the bolder the conjecture, according to Popper, the better.

Justification, on the other hand, concerns our reasons for believing that the theory is true and what we do to provide an argument for it. In this instance, there are different schools of thinking. According to verificationalism, we verify the theory by collecting more data that supports it. The argument will then be inductive and look like this: All known As are Bs: Therefore all As are Bs. In order to strengthen this inductive argument you are to make observations in different circumstances, make many observations, and no negative cases are to be found. According to the hypothetico-deductive method, on the other hand, you shall logically deduce consequences from the theory and see whether they occur. The argument will appear as follows: If theory T is true, observations O should occur in situation S, observations O did occur in situation S, therefore theory T is confirmed. If they had not occurred, the theory is falsified. We can test the theory that 'A causes B' by creating a situation where A is present and see whether B occurs. Indeed, according to strong versions of the hypothetico-deductive method, we are supposed to try to find situations where B does not occur despite the presence of A, that is, we should try to falsify the theory. This is, of course, the cornerstone of Popper's falsificationalism (Popper 1970).

Grounded theory belongs to that part of science that is concerned with discovery of theory. Rather than dreaming up a theory or building a theory out of logical reason, it involves working out a theory that is 'grounded' on the perspective of those in the field. Since social phenomena behave differently from objects in the real world, being much more open and flexible, there is a need for a method that is also open and flexible in order to study them.

QUESTION

Think about the area you are working in. Is there a deficiency of theory? Why might there be a need for a 'grounded theory'?

In the philosophy of science there is a clear distinction between discovery and justification. You first discover a theory either by guessing or, alternatively, by analysing data inductively. Then you justify the theory either by verifying it inductively or confirming it by deducing observable consequences. These methods can both be used in qualitative research. You may, for instance, analyse data to find a theory, and then justify it by finding more data that verifies it. Or, if you use induction (Znaniecki and Thomas 1918/2007), you start by formulating a tentative hypothesis and then you try to find negative cases. If such cases are found, the hypotheses are reformulated, and you start looking for new negative cases. In this way you constantly reformulate your hypothesis until no negative cases are found. The hypothesis thus developed is therefore justified.

As you can see in the grounded theory method, there is no justification at all – there is only discovery. This means that there is no further attempt to test or verify the emerging theory by trying to find data that falsifies it and there is no effort to try to find data that would verify it. All that is done is to inductively and systematically generate ('discover') theories by trying to find data that give you more information, so that the generated theory becomes more comprehensive. But if the theory is generated in the right way, it will be grounded in data, or fit the data. So, it is not just a creative whim à la Popper. And when there is no fit anymore, perhaps because the group studied has changed or you get new data, the theory is not falsified. What you do is that you modify it so that it once again fits the data. So the theory can be constantly revised because of new data.

We have somewhat loosely talked about the kinds of theories grounded theory research results in. But what does such a theory look like? That question leads to another important feature of grounded theory.

Theory structure in grounded theory

Theories generated with the grounded theory method have a specific structure. In this section we will restrict our comments to one type of theory, substantive theory. Substantive theories are theories about a substantial, or empirical, unit (for more on the other kind of grounded theory, see Chapter 14, 'Rediscovering Formal Theory'). As we have seen, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that a theory can be presented 'either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 31). Since it is unclear how to

present a 'theoretical discussion', we will opt here for the propositional version. After all, if you have a 'running theoretical discussion', what are you supposed to discuss if not propositions? This way of presenting a theory is of course not intended to diminish the content of the theory – the primary goal is to make its content clearer and to distinctly separate it from the way it was generated, the illustrations, and how these can be applied.

Somewhat simplified, this means that substantive theories would consist of propositions attributing to a unit a set of variable things usually arranged around a core problem which is labelled the core category. The theory describes the relationships between all categories. First, a resultant theory contains a proposition attributing a core category to a well-defined setting, role or group of people. A category for a setting, role or group is then the concept of a phenomenon shared by that setting, by the role or by the group, usually experiencing the same problem. So, for example, people in the setting may experience 'unemployment', 'marriage', or encounter 'power'.

A category that is core, then, is a category that is important because it can be seen as a central problem in the area being studied. Taking *Awareness* as an example, the central category around which everything – all the behaviours, views, perceptions and interactions – were organised was the awareness of everyone in the ward of whether the patient was dying or not (Glaser and Strauss 1965). This variable was the primary problem. It was the main focus of the book and it was the core problem that appeared to govern the views – behaviours and attitudes of those in hospital wards. The theory contains propositions attributing sub-categories to the setting, role or group of people. Such categories are also concepts of phenomena shared by that setting, role or group of people. The differences between the core category and sub-categories are that the latter are not directly related to the core concern, and they do not have as many properties as the core category. They also help to explain less of the activity in the field under study.

A grounded theory is composed of categories and propositions about those categories. It is also composed of propositions that relate categories to each other to produce an integrated whole. This is achieved by having a core category which acts as the integrating idea for the theory.

The theory will also contain propositions that relate to the core category and to the sub-categories. What such propositions do is to describe the categories and their relationships. For instance, in *Awareness* Glaser and Strauss (1965) discovered that dying in

hospitals was a 'non-scheduled status passage', in other words people who were dying in hospitals were often not told or at least were not aware that they were dying. As a consequence, the interactions between patients, family and health care professionals became concerned with the primary question of establishing if the patient was dying or not. The core category, awareness of dying, had four different sub-categories that described different 'awareness contexts'; these sub-categories were called 'open awareness', 'closed awareness', 'pretence awareness', and 'suspicion awareness' (Glaser and Strauss 1965). The main property of 'open awareness' was that everyone knew the patient was dying. In contrast, during 'suspicion awareness' everyone may have known that the patient was dying except for the patient themselves, who did not know but suspected they may be dying. In this case, the intention wasn't to describe the essence of the phenomena.[3] Instead, the categories were described as richly as possible.

Finally, the theory contains propositions about the relations between the core category and sub-categories, and between sub-categories. Such relations in grounded theory are referred to as 'theoretical codes'. Theoretical codes are ways of demonstrating how the different categories are integrated and organised into explaining how the core concern is resolved. For instance, *Awareness* is a book about a grounded theory that is focused on the problems associated with health professionals' and patients' perceptions of dying in hospital wards in North America. The theory elaborates how the question of 'someone dying or not?' can become a central theme for interactions in hospitals. The problem of dying relates to the diagnosis of the patient and therefore there are two sub-properties of the core category – the certainty of death and the time of death. Certainty of death refers to the degree to which the defining person is certain that the dying person is going to die. The time of death can be measured in hours, days, months. Both of these variables are said to combine in different ways. For example, you can have a '(1) certain death at a known time, (2) certain death at an unknown time, (3) uncertain death but a known time when the question will be resolved, and (4) uncertain death and unknown time when the question will be resolved' (Glaser and Strauss 1965: 18–19). Uncertainty is a theoretical category that belongs to a particular type of category which in turn belongs to what he terms 'the degree family' later described in *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser 1978).

Theories containing propositions such as these constitute the basic and simplest of grounded theory. It is also quite common to generate what are referred to as process-theories. Such theories describe

Summary

In this chapter we have addressed the question about what kind of theory grounded theory is. We achieved this by exploring some of the contemporary views on what grounded theory is. We discussed the fact that because of the success of grounded theory much of what passes as grounded theory in some fields of research actually bears little resemblance to the method. We outlined how some of the contemporary scholars have constructed grounded theory. Of particular note was the fact that there has been a tendency to construct different versions of grounded theory, some of which could not be sustained on more careful analysis. We then proposed what the core aspects of grounded theory are. Here we reviewed grounded theory as an open and flexible method for doing research that seeks to base theory on the analysis of carefully collected data. Likewise, we discussed the explanatory power of grounded theory and the fact that any particular grounded theory should fit and work in relation to the field being studied. Here we discussed the fact that grounded theory must be relevant to people in the setting. Another important aspect of a grounded theory is that it must remain modifiable in the light of new information. We then went on to discuss how grounded theory compares to other approaches in science, specifically those that seek to justify their theory. Here we found that grounded theory was more about the context of discovery than the context of justification. After this, we discussed the key features of a grounded theory by briefly exploring what a grounded theory should look like. Finally, we talked about the distinctive approach that grounded theory adopts to the research process.

Further reading

Birks, M. and Mills, J. (2011) 'Essentials of grounded theory', Chapter 1 in M. Birks and J. Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (2007) 'Grounded theory in historical perspective: an epistemological account', in A. Bryant and K. Charmaz, *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.

Charmaz, K. (2006) 'Reconstructing theory in grounded theory studies', Chapter 6 in K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

'focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers, rather than limits, interpretative understanding' (Charmaz 2000: 513). Working within an individualist methodology, social phenomena can be reduced to intentional states of people. Such intentional states are meaningful in the sense that within them people attribute meaning to behaviour, organisations, and so on. The focus on meaning is part and parcel of a phenomenological agenda. The problem is that grounded theory, when it was originally developed, also thinks of social phenomena as meaningful. To the constructivist, however, this meaning is the focus of research. This contrasts with grounded theory when it was developed. Back then, the focus was much more on providing an explanation for why things mean what they do, including the consequences such meanings have for those acting in the setting. Categories developed in a grounded theory must, as we have seen, be attributed dimensions – to do so is to describe the meaning they have. It follows from this that in grounded theory, when it was originally developed there was no direct focus on meaning. This was a secondary concern. In this respect, we have a fundamental difference between the two versions. In addition to this, Charmaz (2000) states that, in contrast to the objectivist grounded theorist, when the constructivist grounded theorist researches phenomena such as the experience of pain, they 'start by viewing the topic of pain subjectively as a feeling, an experience that may take a variety of forms. … 'What makes pain pain? (that is, what is essential to the phenomenon as defined by those who experience it?' (Charmaz 2000: 526). We will return to this later in our analysis.

Constructivist grounded theory can be distinguished from grounded theory, when it was first developed, because it focuses on meaning and how meaning is constructed. Grounded theory, when it was developed, also thinks of social phenomena as meaningful. However, it tends to focus on explaining why things mean what they do and the consequences these meanings have for those in the setting.

▬▬▬▬ QUESTION ▬▬▬▬

Focusing on meaning and how it is constructed rather than on why things mean what they mean, including explaining the consequences of such meanings, has an effect on how we do grounded theory. Discuss.

> ## The main tenets of constructivist grounded theory
>
> (a) a focus on meaning,
> (b) the mutual creation of knowledge, and
> (c) a legitimisation of using various well-established theoretical perspectives in sociology.

In the next section we will explore the differences between Charmaz (2000) constructivist grounded theory and grounded theory as it was originally presented. We will then look at constructivism in science in order to move beyond Charmaz's (2000) version of constructivist grounded theory. We will seek to formulate a view that we feel could adequately be called 'constructivist grounded theory'. The next section seeks to compare and contrast the original version with constructivist grounded theory.

Grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory

In the following comparison, we are seeking to highlight differences and spell out the consequences of adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach. To make this comparison we will use the five essential tenets of grounded theory presented in Chapter 2 (see page 32).

Openness

As we saw in Chapter 2, openness means that the researcher should not use preconceived notions when he or she formulates the research question, collects data, or analyses data. As we shall see, he or she can have pre-existing motivations and interests and, indeed, he or she may have preconceptions about what is going on in the area of interest. But the idea is that these should not drive the collection and analysis of data. The reason for this is that the theory must emerge from data. In grounded theory this is achieved by using a general and flexible research question, open line-by-line coding, avoiding reading the literature on the area, and trusting the sensitivity of the researcher and

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