Grounded Theory as a "Family of Methods":
A Genealogical Analysis to Guide Research[*]

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This study traces the evolution of grounded theory from a nuclear to an extended family of methods and considers the implications that decision-making based on informed choices throughout all phases of the research process has for realizing the potential of grounded theory for advancing adult education theory and practice.

Keywords: grounded theory methods and research

Introduction

Since its formal introduction by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their landmark text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), the use of GTM (grounded theory methodology)， has continued to gain momentum across a wide range of disciplines and practice settings including education, health care, nursing, sociology, anthropology, management, information systems and psychology. In the years that followed, these researchers took their joint formulation of the original method in vastly different directions, each elaborating on their own unique version of GTM, while others entered into the "methodological fray" (Charmaz, 2006, p. xi) espousing their own interpretations of this approach (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Bowers & Schatzman, 2009). Seemingly, on the brink of "theoretical Armageddon" (Babchuk, 2008, p. 10), a "family of methods" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, p. 12) ultimately emerged which shares certain key characteristics that distinguished all versions from other qualitative designs.

This inquiry begins by situating grounded theory within the qualitative tradition followed by an overview of its history and development (1967-1998), as well as a consideration of more contemporary epistemologically repositioned approaches (1998-2010), that are beginning to dominate this literature. Shared attributes of all versions of GTM will be presented and used to further inform a genealogical analysis of the family of methods that now fall under the rubric of grounded theory methodology. It is suggested that a researcher's choices and implementation of approaches hold profound implications for the research process and its outcomes, and should be predicated on informed decision-making at all phases of the research. Based on knowledge of the development of grounded theory over time and its use across disciplines, coupled with the author's own hands-on experiences with grounded theory in the field, it is argued that GTM is ideally positioned to help advance adult education theory and practice.

Situating Grounded Theory Within the Qualitative Tradition

Although the use of qualitative research has had a rich history in education and the social sciences (Vidich & Lyman, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), there may not be a single publication that has exerted more of an influence on the contemporary qualitative landscape than Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Now, arguably the most utilized qualitative method (Denzin, 1994; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Olesen, 2007), *The Discovery* holds a lofty status within the qualitative tradition as evidenced by accounts of scholars who trace the historical development of the qualitative paradigm. For example, Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) "Second Moment of Qualitative Research" or "Modernist Phase" clearly illustrates the primacy of Strauss and Glaser's contributions to this highly formative era which influenced subsequent moments. The Modernist Phase is considered by them to be "the golden age of rigorous qualitative analysis, bracketed in sociology by *Boys in White* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961) at one end and the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) at the other" (p. 17). Similarly, Charmaz (2000) proclaimed that *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* stands at the front of the "qualitative revolution" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509; Denzin, 1994, p. ix), whereas Merriam (2009) considered it to be one of two seminal publications central to the "development of what we now call qualitative research" (p. 6). Interested in elevating qualitative methods to the same level of respectability as their well-established quantitative counterparts, Glaser and Strauss introduced grounded theory, which, in light of more contemporary theoretical reanalysis, juxtaposed elements of both qualitative and quantitative camps to offer a new approach to social research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b).

The Origin and Historical Development of Grounded Theory

The history of the qualitative tradition begins with the early ethnographic work of field anthropologists and "Chicago School" sociologists who first legitimized new approaches to the understanding of human cultures and their participants (Vidich & Lyman, 2000; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Strauss, whose training was permeated by symbolic interactionism and the ethnographic influences of the Chicago sociologists, and Glaser, steeped with Columbia's unparalleled emphasis on rigorous quantitative methods and the goal of producing explanatory "theories of the middle range", begin their collaborative work at the UCSF (University of California-San Francisco), where they were hired to guide nurses in their research, ultimately forming doctoral programs in both nursing and sociology—which listed as its graduates a virtual *Who's Who* of grounded theory pioneers (Stern, 2009)—Strauss recruited Glaser to aid him in the study of patients dying in hospitals. As the study progressed, these researchers formulated a new approach to scientific inquiry based on systematic qualitative procedures designed to generate theory grounded in data, formally introduced in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Glaser and Strauss ultimately parted ways resulting in a theoretical divorce of a magnitude rarely seen in academe, with Glaser leveling intellectual property, as well as character assaults at Strauss and his new collaborator, Juliet Corbin (a graduate of the UCSF DSN (Doctor of Nursing Science) program). The basis of his attacks centered on their rendition of the GTM which he believed represented "full conceptual description" (Glaser, 1992, p. 3) rather than the GTM he thought they created 25 years earlier. Glaser's critique of Strauss and Corbin's reworked method underscored the methodological fission which over time had yielded two quite different approaches to GTM, each with its own set of epistemological assumptions, methodological

interpretations and modus operandi.

The emergence of the two approaches of the co-founders, labeled "Glaserian" and "Straussian" respectively, represented early interpretations of GTM from 1967-1998 and were the subject of much debate (Babchuk, 2008). Strauss' version extends from *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987) through Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990; 1998) to Corbin and Strauss' (2008) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, the latter a more generic approach to GTM published posthumously 12 years after Strauss' death. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) widely adopted and highly structured version is considered by some more verificational than emergent, and relies upon a rigid coding paradigm which some feel limits the potential of this approach. Glaser's version, which he considers to represent a seamless development from 1967 to the present, has been labeled "traditional" or "classic" grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). His work extends from *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978) to *Emergence vs. Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Research* (1992), to a series of more contemporary works published by his own publishing company, Sociology Press. Glaser's interpretation is not without its potential limitations either, as some see his use of 18 (or more) theoretical coding families, use of jargon, and dense writing style difficult to follow, challenging to implement, and particularly daunting to less experienced researchers (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Kelle, 2007).

From a Nuclear to an Extended Family of Methods: Epistemologically Repositioned GTM

Led by Charmaz's (2000; 2006; 2009) own brand of constructivist methodological revisionism, Bryant's (2002, 2003; Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b) insightful epistemological realignment of GTM, and other interpretations of the method by a new wave of grounded theorists—some trained in the original nursing and sociology programs by Glaser and Strauss at UCSF (Clarke, 2005; Bowers & Schatzman, 2009)—epistemologically or theoretically repositioned versions of GTM have been advanced that are more congruent with epistemological, theoretical and methodological developments over the past 20 years. These approaches sought to liberate grounded theory from its positivist roots and realign it with interpretive/constructivist and postmodern camps (Clarke, 2005; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b).

Charmaz's (2009) constructivist grounded theory:

> Assumes a relativist epistemology, sees knowledge as socially produced, acknowledges multiple standpoints of both the research participants and the grounded theorist, and takes a reflexive stance toward our actions, situations, and participants in the field setting—and our analytic constructions of them. (pp. 129-130)

According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory consists of a relatively flexible set of principles and practices, rather than rigidly prescribed formulaic rules to offer an "interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it" (p. 10). Clarke (2005), who, like Charmaz, earned a doctorate in sociology at UCSF under Glaser and Strauss, attempted to push "grounded theory more fully around the postmodern turn" (p. 2). Her interpretation of GTM, labeled situational analysis, focuses on illuminating the social situation per se rather than on more traditional analyses of social processes. Clarke (2005) accomplished this through cartographic techniques explicated by three kinds of maps which opened up the data and allowed a better understanding of "all of the human and non-human elements in the situation of inquiry broadly conceived" (p. 291). Like Charmaz, her approach to GTM was designed to better facilitate the co-construction of partial knowledge through interaction between socially involved researchers and participants than possible through more traditional approaches to grounded theory (Babchuk, 2008).

Families, Kinship and Descent: Shared Features of Grounded Theory Analyses

The competing interpretations that make up the grounded theory family of methods have been classified into as few as three types by Creswell (2005) labeled emergent (Glaser, 1992), systematic (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and constructivist (Charmaz, 2009) to as many as seven by Denzin (2007) including positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, objectivist, postmodern, situational and computer-assisted. The author advocated four approaches (Babchuk, 2009b) consisting of the two "traditional" versions of Glaser and Strauss (emergent and systematic), versus the theoretically repositioned approaches of Charmaz and Clarke (constructivist and postmodern/situational). A fifth related approach, dimensional analysis (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009) also deserved consideration. While competing interpretations contribute to the historical view of GTM as a "contested method" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 134; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, p. 3), some argued that the diversity inherent in these different approaches "needs to be seen as basis for the discussion and exchange of ideas and not as an excuse to erect barriers between one 'true' version of GTM and all others…" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b, p. 48).

Along these lines, grounded theory shared several characteristics with other qualitative designs (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) as well as unique features that distinguished all versions from other methods (Goulding, 2002; Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2007). Grounded theory refers to both the results of the research process and the research process itself (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). It involves an iterative process of simultaneous data collection and analysis, ongoing theory development, the constant comparative method requiring ongoing comparisons of the data throughout the analysis, constructing codes and categories from data rather than from preconceived hypotheses, the use of theoretical sampling for theory development and not for population representativeness, memoing to refine and elaborate categories and their relationships, delaying the use of the literature until analysis is well under way, and theoretical saturation of categories signaling a stopping point in data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Those who compare GTM to other qualitative methods point to several of these aspects (theoretical sampling, constant comparison of data to theoretical categories and the development of theory via theoretical saturation of categories), that form the backbone of this methodology (Hood, 2007).

Realizing the Potential of GTM for Advancing Adult Education Theory and Practice

Based on a exhaustive review of the grounded theory literature over time and across disciplines, a historical examination of GTM research articles in education including those published in the *Adult Education Quarterly* and the proceedings of the *Adult Education Research Conference*, and hands-on experience with this method, the author argued that GTM is particularly effective for use in adult education and any field that contains a practice component. The author has offered guidelines for conducting GTM in other publications that are consistent with this belief (Babchuk, 1996; 1997; 2008; 2009a) and will touch upon these briefly here.

Potential grounded theorists first need to acquire a general knowledge of qualitative research methods. This requires developing not only an understanding of epistemological frameworks of qualitative designs and differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches, but also the ability to appreciate similarities and differences among various qualitative methods (narrative, phenomenology, case study, ethnography, etc.). In terms of guidelines for implementing GTM, researchers should begin by reading key GTM works to gain familiarity with the different approaches and their potential. They should select one approach, remain consistent in its application to avoid "methodological muddling" (Goulding, 2002, p. 163) and be able to justify the reason

why it was chosen over competing versions. Grounded theorists should also be able to articulate the steps or procedural chain employed in their research and should not underestimate the importance of utilizing key components of the methodology as outlined by scholars of this method. Moreover, analysts should suspend a literature review until research is well under way, consider themselves as active and reflexive participants in the research process, and not be afraid to expand upon all steps of their decision-making when writing up the findings.

In conclusion, there are many aspects of GTM as a qualitative design that underscore its potential for use in adult education. Some of these aspects overlap with those of other qualitative methods, whereas other features are unique and provide an effective means for generating theory from practice. Grounded theory enables educators to illuminate the ongoing dynamic between researchers and participants in the co-construction of knowledge and provides them with a powerful strategy to restructure learning environments to better meet the needs of adult learners.

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