

Literature Review and Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology

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Abstract: In grounded theory research it is commonly discouraged to conduct a literature review before data collection and analysis. Engaging with the literature about the researched area in that stage of the research is described as a constraining exercise rather than a guiding one. This can be a puzzling notion for the researcher engaging with grounded theory methodology (GTM), particularly when she/he is expected to produce a literature review in early stages of the research process, e.g., by ethics committees and/or funding bodies. The current article examines this controversial issue by exploring the different stances taken on the subject by the founders of the methodology, as well as the one introduced by constructivist GTM. The different approaches towards the potential impact of a literature review conducted before data collection and analysis are introduced not only as a methodological issue, but also, and more importantly, as an epistemological one. Reflexivity is described as a key element in ensuring the groundedness of a theory in constructivist GTM and various reflexive strategies are presented. It is suggested that the researcher's epistemological framework should be explicitly explored and acknowledged in early stages of the research.

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1. Introduction

In grounded theory research, the existing literature is not used as a theoretical background, but rather as data to be used by the analytic strategies of the research. In most research studies, a literature review precedes data collection and analysis as it helps the researcher to contextualize the research within existing knowledge (CRESWELL, 2012; GIBBS, 2008). However, in a grounded theory research, conducting a literature review prior to data collection and analysis is commonly presented as a constraining exercise rather than as a guiding one (GLASER, 1992; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). But funding bodies usually expect that applicants will demonstrate knowledge in the field of inquiry through a literature review, and Ethics committees also often require a brief review of the topic of interest. This tension between the expectations of a literature review while the same is

discouraged by the research methodology can be particularly challenging for those engaging with GTM (BOWEN, 2006; McCALLIN, 2003). [1]

This article analyzes the impact that conducting a literature review before data collection and analysis can have on the grounded theory research product, a grounded theory. This is examined through the perspectives presented by the three main approaches: traditional or classical GTM, evolved GTM, and constructivist GTM. The implications of doing a literature review in early stages of a grounded theory research are presented as related not only to the methodological approach, but also, and more importantly, to its epistemological framework. [2]

In Section 2, after a brief introduction of the GTM and its three main approaches, the suggestion first made by the creators of the GTM about disregarding the literature on the researched area is presented. Their later disagreement about the potential influence of reviewing this literature is examined in the following Section 3. Section 4 explores the epistemological background of the traditional or classical, evolved, and constructivist GTMs. In this section, the first two are described as positivist/post-positivists and contrasted with the constructivist foundations of the latter. In Section 5, the researcher's commitment to favor the data over any previously acquired knowledge, rather than his/her disregard of the literature, is presented as the key element in ensuring the groundedness of constructivist grounded theory research. Section 6 then examines various reflexive strategies that could support the researcher in the task of prioritizing the data over any other input. Finally, the conclusion is presented in Section 7, where the importance of actively exploring one's epistemological position when doing a grounded theory research is highlighted, as it is through this positioning that the literature review will exert its potential impact and utility on the resulting grounded theory. [3]

2. The First Advice: Ignore the Literature

GTM is a qualitative approach that seeks to develop a theory grounded in systematically collected and analyzed data. The method was first introduced by Barney GLASER and Anselm STRAUSS in 1967. They developed this research approach while studying the interaction with terminally ill patients in a hospital setting (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1965). In this study, they created a method of simultaneous data collection and analysis that enables the construction of a theory grounded in the collected data (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011; BRYANT & CHARMAZ, 2007; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). In other words, they created a method that aims to construct theory rather than to test pre-conceived notions. [4]

Since the inception of GLASER and STRAUSS' method, GTM has been further expanded through three main approaches (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011; MILLS, BONNER & FRANCIS, 2008). Its original creators, GLASER and STRAUSS, developed two of these approaches separately. On the one hand, Barney GLASER (1978, 1992) further elaborated the "traditional" or "classical" GTM, and on the other hand, Anselm STRAUSS (1987), along with Juliet CORBIN (1990)

developed what MILLS, BONNER and FRANCIS (2006) called "evolved" GTM. Finally, Kathy CHARMAZ (2000) introduced the third approach, which she labeled as the "constructivist" GTM. Regardless of the fact that all three GTM approaches share the goal of developing a theory grounded in data rather than testing a hypothesis, they differ in other aspects. The role of a literature review conducted before data collection and analysis is one of them (DUNNE, 2011; GILES, KING & DE LACEY, 2013; McGHEE, MARLAND & ATKINSON, 2007). [5]

When GLASER and STRAUSS first introduced GTM, they explicitly argued against reading about the area under study before the beginning of data collection, and even during later stages of the research. Their advice was "literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated" (1967, p.45). The rationale was that refraining from a literature review would allow the theory to emerge from the data, rather than being imposed to it from the existing literature. GLASER and STRAUSS later diverged on their stances about conducting a literature review before data collection. Despite their divergence on the methodological approach to literature reviews, they remained connected by the shared core notion that in order to produce a grounded theory it was key to allow such theory to emerge or to be discovered by means of avoiding the researcher's "contamination" of the research product. [6]

3. Avoid "Contamination": Diverging on How to Achieve the Goal

The importance of emergence is contained in both GLASER's, and STRAUSS and CORBIN's GTM approaches. However, they differ on how, and how much, a literature review conducted in early stages of the research can contaminate the research product, and thus, hinder the emergence of a grounded theory. Their divergence rose from their different perspectives on how a researcher should discover, or allow to emerge, a theory, without imposing preconceived ideas and assumptions on the research product. [7]

GLASER argued in favor of no reading on the topic of inquiry prior to the research itself, at least not in the field related to the study. To better explain his point, he divided the literature into three categories, the first one being non-professional, popular, and pure ethnographic descriptions (e.g., diaries, records, catalogs, biographies, etc.), the second one professional and unrelated to the substantive area under research, and the third one professional and related to the area under study (GLASER, 1992, p.31). He argued that the literature related to the researched area should only be read in later stages of a study. GLASER (ibid.) claimed that "this dictum is brought about by the concern to not contaminate, be constrained by, inhibit, stifle or otherwise impede the researcher's effort to generate categories, their properties, and theoretical codes from the data." Therefore, if a literature review were conducted before data collection and analysis, existing theories could impose themselves on the analysis and the resulting theory, and thus, prevent it from being truly grounded in, and emerged from, the data (WALLS, PARAHOO & FLEMING, 2010). [8]

On the other hand, STRAUSS and CORBIN (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2015; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990) recognized that a researcher brings to the research not only his/her personal and professional experience, but also knowledge acquired from literature that may include the area of inquiry. On this subject, they stated that literature—which they divided into technical and nontechnical—read before data collection could not necessarily hinder the emergence of the theory. Furthermore, STRAUSS and CORBIN (1990, p.56) did not recommend dissociating from the literature, but rather to engage with it and use it in "all phases of the research". They claimed that beyond interfering with the emergence of the theory, engaging with the existing literature could further foster the process by helping the researcher to identify what is important to the developing theory (HICKEY, 1997). That is, as long as the researcher "maintain[s] an attitude of skepticism" (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990, p.45) and do not allow it to impose itself on the theory. [9]

GLASER framed his divergence with STRAUSS and CORBIN as an emergence versus forcing debate, although not in exclusive relation to the role of literature reviews in early stages of the research (GLASER, 1992; KELLE, 2005). GLASER claimed that his stance allowed theory to be grounded in the data, while STRAUSS and CORBIN's approach forced preconceived ideas into the resulting theory (GLASER, 1992). This difference in opinion between the original creators of GTM stemmed from a divergence on how to approach the shared notion of emergence. However, although GLASER advises to refrain from a literature review before the research and both STRAUSS and CORBIN do not, their arguments revolve around the same rationale: not to interfere with the emergence or the discovery of a theory. The concern of all three authors is to avoid imposing the researcher's preconceptions on the data and its analysis. [10]

4. Emerging, Forcing, or Constructing?

The assumption behind the notion of emergence is the one of an "objective" theory existing within the data. That is, a theory that should be discovered or allowed to emerge without forcing preconceived ideas and assumptions on it, and thus, contaminating it with the researcher's subjectivity. Even though both GLASER and STRAUSS (1967, p.3) agreed that "the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa," this notion of emergence or discovery of a theory implicitly assumes that such theory exists independently from its discovery or perception. It also assumes that the researcher's preconceived ideas and assumptions can be purged by means of an appropriate use of the research methods, or as GLASER (2002, §24) phrases it: "[p]ersonal input by a researcher soon drops out as eccentric and the data become objectivist." These assumptions in both "traditional" or "classical" GTM and "evolved" GTM have been related to a positivist/post-positivist paradigm (ANNELLS, 1996; BRYANT, 2002, 2003; CHARMAZ, 1990, 2003; MILLS et al., 2006, 2008). [11]

The idea that the researcher should remain somehow "removed" from the research process, so that one "objective" theory can be discovered or allowed to emerge is heavily loaded with a positivist/post-positivist epistemology (LINCOLN,

LYNHAM & GUBA, 2011). But the notion that the researcher can be purged from the research product by an appropriate use of the methods has been largely contested, especially in qualitative research (FLICK, 2014). In qualitative research, the researcher's influence on the research product is more easily recognized, as the nature of the epistemological process is more clearly interactional and constructional (BREUER, MRUCK & ROTH, 2002). Challenging the idea of an "objective" knowledge has a long tradition that can be traced back to hermeneutics, where understanding is seeing as interpretation, and interpretation is acknowledged as historically and culturally located (KINSELLA, 2006). Various authors have since argued against the possibility of a subjectivity-free research product. For instance, Alfred SCHÜTZ's notion that "[a]ll facts are from the outset facts selected from context by the activities of our mind" (1962, p.5, cited in FLICK, 2014, p.97), and GOODMAN's (1978) suggestion that there are as many worlds as ways to describe them, are clear examples of a qualitative research methodology that recognizes the need of thinking about the researcher as more than a neutral observer. [12]

Following the positivist/post-positivist paradigms (GERGEN, 1990; LINCOLN et al., 2011), both GLASER's traditional or classical GTM and STRAUSS and CORBIN's evolved GTM assume that objective knowledge can be discovered through a GT research by an appropriate use of the research methods. But by shifting the attention to the researcher and his/her influential role, knowledge is recognized as situated, contingent, and intimately related to the epistemic subject and his/her social and material environment (BREUER & ROTH, 2003). This perspective considers knowledge to be constructed in nature and inextricably linked to the researcher and his/her interactions with others and the environment (LINCOLN et al., 2011). Knowledge here is seeing as "constructed in processes of social interchange" (FLICK, 2014, p.78) and the research process is both contextualized in its social, cultural, and physical context (HANRAHAN, 2003) and made aware of its bias and limitations (GUILLAUME, 2002). Now, even though this constructivist trait has been described in STRAUSS and CORBIN's evolved GTM (ANNELLS, 1996), it is CHARMAZ's approach—constructivist GTM—the one that, unlike the others, explicitly claims to be based on this research paradigm (CHARMAZ, 1990, 2003, 2014; MILLS et al., 2008). [13]

CHARMAZ, STRAUSS, CORBIN, and GLASER agree that a theory developed through GTM should be grounded in the data and not in the existing literature. However, GLASER diverges from STRAUSS and CORBIN in the ways in which a researcher should avoid "contaminating" the data and allow emergence or discovery, and thus, groundedness. But constructivist GTM, following a long tradition within qualitative research methodology, differs by suggesting that to avoid the researcher's influential role in the research process is an unattainable task. The researcher cannot be purged from data collection and analysis as both are "created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (CHARMAZ, 2014, p.239). In a constructivist GTM, the resulting theory "*depends* on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it" (ibid.). Therefore, its groundedness is not the result of a somehow removed researcher, but instead, it "results from these researchers' commitment

to analyze what they actually observe in the field or in their data" (CHARMAZ, 1990, p.1162). The core idea is that a theory cannot be grounded in the data by an active passivity that allows its emergence, but rather by a proactive focus on the data, acknowledging that it is not the research methodology that aims to discover a theory despite the researcher, but it is the researcher who aims to construct a theory through the methodology. [14]

5. Ensuring Groundedness

In constructivist grounded theory research, the researcher's presence in the research product is neither neutral nor undesirable. From the topic selection, to the research preparation, data collection, analysis, and the final rendering of the research result, the author is a key element of the process (MRUCK & BREUER, 2003). The researcher's voice in the resulting theory should not be excluded, avoided, or hidden. On the contrary, it should be explicitly acknowledged as it is this voice that shows and talks about the researched area (CHARMAZ & MITCHELL, 1996; CLARKE, 2005). It was DEVEREUX (1967, p.XIX) who mentioned that it is only by not disregarding the observer that one would have "access to the essence of the observational situation." In a constructivist GTM, reflexivity does not aim to eliminate the researcher's subjectivity from the resulting theory, but to allow the data to be prioritized over the researcher's assumptions and previously acquired knowledge, including any reviewed literature (CHARMAZ, 1990). The idea is not to disregard existing knowledge, but to engage with it critically (THORNBERG, 2012). [15]

The researcher will often review literature—technical, nontechnical, professional, or non-professional—before beginning data collection and analysis, whether this review is guided by the research-to-be or not. Furthermore, it is likely that this previous reading will be the one that guides the choice of the area to be researched and the method to be used in that research. Therefore, and as pointed out by several authors (CHARMAZ, 2006; CUTCLIFFE, 2000; DUNNE, 2011; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990), it is very unlikely that even without conducting a literature review specifically oriented to the researched area, a researcher will arrive at the research project without a previous reading somehow related to, as well as influential in, the research. One advice could be to let this literature review "lie fallow" (CHARMAZ, 2006, p.166) until later stages of the research in order to encourage the researcher to use his/her own ideas. [16]

However, this previously acquired knowledge could be a source of sensitizing concepts that could represent an initial idea from where to engage analytically with the collected data, providing a general sense of direction (BLUMER, 1954; BOWEN, 2006; CHARMAZ, 2001, 2006; THORNBERG, 2012). At the same time, an analytical engagement with this knowledge could also be helpful as a rehearsal for the exercise of establishing a theoretical dialogue with the data (KELLE, 2007). In any case, it is the imperative to favor the data over the literature during the research process that will reveal whether this reviewed literature is going to be helpful in the data analysis and theory construction (DUNNE, 2011). [17]

Although the main focus of this article is on the influence of literature reviews conducted prior to data collection and analysis, it is also relevant to highlight that the researcher's own life experiences have a broad influence in the research process. It is necessary to notice that there is no method that will enable a clear removal of the impact of the researcher's subjectivity on the research product (MEEK, 2003; SULLIVAN, 2002; WEBER, 2003), and that furthermore, paying attention to the researcher could prove to be a key source of important information (DEVEREUX, 1967). The researcher's voice should not only be explicitly recognized, but also analyzed as an influential element in the resulting theory. Acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity, even the unconscious mental processes (MEEK, 2003), and their dialogical interaction with the research participants' subjectivities can highly benefit the research process in its co-construction of knowledge (MARKS & MÖNNICH-MARKS, 2003; RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002). Furthermore, engaging in a self-reflexive exercise that helps to contextualize the research practice in the researcher's cultural background (DRESSEL & LANGREITER, 2003), especially when this implies doing research in a country different than his/her own (ALSOP, 2002; RITTENHOFER, 2002), can further assist to recognize the researcher's voice in the research product. Finally, it is also important to recognize that the research context has a large influence on the research, and thus, a "contextual reflexivity" (NAIDU & SLIEP, 2011) should be considered throughout the research process. [18]

In sum, reflexivity can assist the researcher in positioning himself/herself and gaining a better sense of the choices, and their rationales, made before and during the research (BIRKS, CHAPMAN & FRANCIS, 2008; KAY, CREE, TISDALL & WALLACE, 2003; ST. LOUIS & CALABRESE BARTON, 2002), and therefore, strengthen and support his/her commitment to privilege the data during the research process. [19]

6. Reflexive Strategies

There are various reflexive strategies that can support a researcher in the task of favoring the data over any other input, and thus, ensure groundedness. For example, the constant comparative method of the GTM is an analytic tool that promotes reflective thinking (DUNNE, 2011; GILES et al., 2013). This method is constituted by constantly comparing the data, codes, categories, and memos among themselves (CHARMAZ, 2006; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). At the same time, this is the analytic strategy used in the process of integration—or not—of the literature. In other words, comparing the literature with the data, codes, categories, and memos written during the study validates, or rejects the literature as useful for the research. During this process, the data should be constantly and actively put first over any literature. [20]

Memo writing is also one of the analytic tools of the GT method that fosters reflective thought (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011; BIRKS et al., 2008; CHARMAZ, 2006; GILES et al., 2013; GLASER, 1978; McGHEE et al., 2007; MILLS et al., 2006; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). Memo writing involves writing down thoughts, feelings, or questions that arise from the analytic process. These notes become

further data to be analyzed and they are a key element of the analytic process (CHARMAZ, 2006; GLASER, 1978; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). Memos can aid the researcher to use the literature as a tool towards the engagement of a theoretical dialogue with the data, without allowing such literature to define the research (LEMPERT, 2007). In this regard, it is advisable to start the production of memos early in the research process, even from the moment the study is being conceptualized, in order to help the researcher to keep a trail of the decisions made during that stage, as well as their rationale (BIRKS & MILLS, 2011; BIRKS et al., 2008). [21]

Besides those two analytic tools, interviews, usually perceived only as data collection tools, can also help the researcher to practice reflexivity (MRUCK & MEY, 2007). For example, while interviewing participants, paying attention to the contributions of the interviewer as well as to the accounts of the interviewees can further provide information about the researcher's assumptions and their impact on the research process (JENSEN & WELZER, 2003). At the same time, the analysis of interviews should go beyond explicit verbal content, and include non-verbal interactions and transference (HEIZMANN, 2003). It is also important to be aware that the researcher's subjectivity plays a key role in enabling or disabling the research participants' narratives during their interaction (RILEY, SCHOUTEN & CAHILL, 2003). Lastly, the reflexive use of interviews, or self-interviews, could not only aid the researcher to identify his/her own assumptions brought to the research process but also serve as data to be used in the research (BOLAM, GLEESON & MURPHY, 2003). [22]

Beyond these tools of data collection and data analysis, from the beginning of the research to the writing and publishing, the researcher should be encouraged to reflect on his/her assumptions, emotions, perspectives, and expectations (MRUCK & MEY, 2007). In the particular case of a PhD student—although not exclusive to this scenario—, this requires a supervisor-supervisee relationship framed as a terrain of reflexivity. A peer relationship, which encourages dialogical interaction and acknowledgment of the multiple levels that intercross, could help the researcher to recognize the influence that differences in power and knowledge can play in any relationship (McMORLAND, CARROLL, COPAS & PRINGLE, 2003). In this regard, setting up the relationship as a peer partnership where every encounter starts with a check-in exercise and the relationship itself is continuously mapped and reflected upon, can be highly beneficial for both supervisor and supervisee (ibid.). This relationship could be one of struggle, but nonetheless a transformative one, one that supports the supervisee's process of becoming a researcher and increasing his/her participation in the academic community (LEE & ROTH, 2003). [23]

7. Conclusion

The notion that conducting a literature review prior to data collection hinders a grounded theory research denotes an epistemological stance. The assumption that it is possible for a researcher to serve as a conduit of a theory, between the data and the scientific and general communities, without influencing its development is an epistemological assumption. The idea that the researcher's influence on the research product—including that of the literature he/she has previously read—can be excluded or isolated and removed by a proper use of the methods is also an epistemological assumption. These are the assumptions that appear to frame both the traditional or classical GTM and the evolved GTM. In a constructivist GTM, the researcher's influence—and through him/her that of the reviewed literature—is neither avoidable nor undesirable, but rather recognized and included in the analytic process. In this approach, it is not a "researcher's free" quality that ensures the groundedness of a theory, but rather the researcher's active, ongoing, and deliberate commitment to prioritize the data over any other input. It is essential for the grounded theory researcher to explicitly explore and acknowledge his/her epistemological position in the early stages of the research, as it is this positioning that will ultimately frame the usefulness and potential impact that a literature review conducted before data collection and analysis will have on the resulting grounded theory. [24]

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