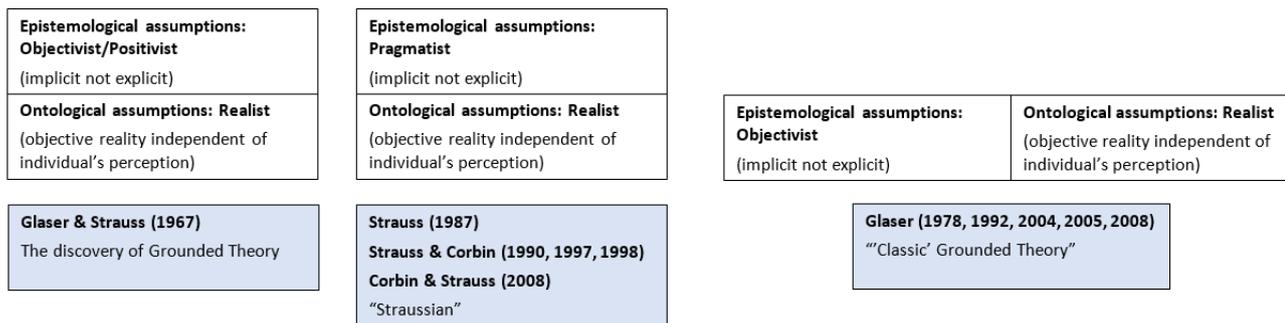# Introduction to Grounded Theory – handout

Note: many studies that claim to use grounded theory do not. I agree with Morse et al. (quoted in Waring, 2012, p. 297) that a researcher who wants to use grounded theory has to be able to locate their research within the complex and contested landscape of grounded theory methodology and methods.
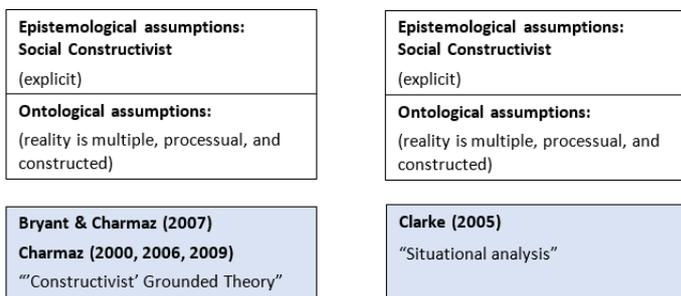
The Origin of Grounded Theory

In 1967 Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: An Approach to Qualitative Research* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Glaser had been trained in quantitative methods and middle range theories, and Strauss had a background in symbolic interactionism, derived from his studies with the Chicago School (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, p.32).

At the time of publication, positivistic paradigms with their quantitative data and associated epistemological assumptions was prevalent, and Grounded Theory aimed to offer a credible alternative. Their goal was to systematise the collection, coding and analysis of qualitative data for the purpose of generating theory (Waring, 2012, p.297). The historical context explains why 'classic' GT methods are prescriptive and lend themselves to rigidity rather than flexibility. Unsurprisingly, the ontological assumptions implicit in 'classic' GT are realist, assuming the existence of an objective reality independent of an individual's perception. Glaser, unlike Strauss who later wrote together with Juliet Corbin, continued to maintain "an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable problems, and objectivist rendering of data" Charmaz, quoted in (Cooney, 2010, p.23). Original GT and Glaser's 'classic' continuation assume a "distanced inquiry by objective experts who assumed their training licensed them to define and represent research participants" (Charmaz, 2008, p.400).

Development of Grounded Theory

Epistemological assumptions: Objectivist/Positivist
(implicit not explicit)

Ontological assumptions: Realist
(objective reality independent of individual's perception)

Glaser & Strauss (1967)
The discovery of Grounded Theory

Epistemological assumptions: Pragmatist
(implicit not explicit)

Ontological assumptions: Realist
(objective reality independent of individual's perception)

Strauss (1987)
Strauss & Corbin (1990, 1997, 1998)
Corbin & Strauss (2008)
"Straussian"

Epistemological assumptions: Objectivist
(implicit not explicit)

Ontological assumptions: Realist
(objective reality independent of individual's perception)

Glaser (1978, 1992, 2004, 2005, 2008)
"'Classic' Grounded Theory"

"Rather than assuming that theory emerges from data, constructionists assume that researchers construct categories of the data." (Charmaz, 2008)

Epistemological assumptions: Social Constructivist
(explicit)

Ontological assumptions:
(reality is multiple, processual, and constructed)

Bryant & Charmaz (2007)
Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2009)
"'Constructivist' Grounded Theory"

Epistemological assumptions: Social Constructivist
(explicit)

Ontological assumptions:
(reality is multiple, processual, and constructed)

Clarke (2005)
"Situational analysis"

What makes Grounded Theory / Key Grounded Theory methods

Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis through sorting, synthesising and organising large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2014).

Coding in Grounded Theory differs from coding usually employed in qualitative research, which looks for topics and themes. Coding for topics is different to grounded theory coding for actions. General qualitative coding identifies topics about which the researcher can write; the researcher may use these topics as areas to sort and synthesize the material. Line-by-line grounded theory coding goes deeper into the studied phenomenon and attempts to explicate it. (Charmaz, 2014)

Categories evolve from focused coding. Charmaz gives the example of one of her codes in a study on chronic illness, which was 'suffering as a moral status'. She elevated the code to a category, which meant that she raised the code to a conceptual level to treat analytically. She began to define the category and its characteristics from responses and from published autobiographical accounts, realising the term 'living one day at a time' condenses a series of implicit meanings and assumptions. Eventually this became the lynchpin of her study (Charmaz, 2014).

Constant comparison is the data-analytic process whereby each interpretation and finding is compared with existing findings as it emerges from the data analysis (Parry, 2004). Constructing core categories through the constant comparison method is fundamental for doing grounded theory, and you will use memo writing for this extensively. (Charmaz, 2014)

Focused coding categorizes coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity (Saldaña, 2013). It searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories and requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding directs our analysis early in the research process and helps us to evaluate the directions we take without embarking on a path of no return. While engaging in focused coding, we typically concentrate on what we define as the most useful initial codes and them we test them against extensive data (Charmaz, 2014).

Initial coding means that when grounded theorists conduct this, they remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities can be discerned in the data. Initial grounded theory coding can prompt you to see areas in which you lack needed data. Realizing that your data have gaps - or holes - is part of the analytic process. It is inevitable when you adopt an emergent method of conducting research. Initial coding should attempt to code with words that reflect action. At first, invoking a language of action rather than of topics and themes may feel strange. Look closely at actions and, to the extent possible, code data as actions. (Charmaz, 2014)

Memo writing is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers. They catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Your standpoints and assumptions become visible. Following up on ideas and questions that came up while you wrote them will push your work forward. Memos provide a record of your research and of your analytic progress. Do keep a memo bank containing each one so that you have the chronological set and can retrieve an earlier idea that you had discarded. (Charmaz, 2014)

Sensitising concepts give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise about their topics. Sensitizing concepts can provide a place to start inquiry, not to end it. Grounded theorists often begin their studies with certain guiding empirical interests to study. Sensitizing concepts (from symbolic interactionism, see Blumer, 1969) can help you start to code your data. These concepts give you starting points for initiating your analysis but do not determine its content (Charmaz, 2014).

Theoretical sampling is aimed toward theory construction not for population representativeness. "Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory. You conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop the properties of your categories until no new properties emerge." (Charmaz 2014, p.193)

Theoretical saturation means the researcher keeps on adding cases to the sample until they have enough data to describe what is going on in the context or situation under study, until 'theoretical saturation' is reached when no new insights, properties, dimensions, relationships, codes or categories are produced even when new data are added (Cohen, 2017, pp.718-720).

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (eds.) (2007) *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Charmaz, K. (2008) 'Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method', *Handbook of constructionist research*. New York: Guildford Press, pp. 397-412.

Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing grounded theory.* 2nd edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Cooney, A. (2010) 'Choosing between Glaser and Strauss: an example', *Nurse researcher,* 17(4), pp. 18.

Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, A. L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitive research.* Chicago: Aldine.

Parry, K. W. 2004. Constant Comparison. *In:* Lewis-Beck, M.S., Bryman, A. & Futing Liao, T. (eds.) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods.* Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.

Saldaña, J. (2013) *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* 2nd edn. Los Angeles: Sage.

Waring, M. (2012) 'Grounded Theory', in Arthur, J., Waring, M. & Coe, R. (eds.) *Research Methods and Methodologies in Education*. London: SAGE, pp. 297-308.