Chapter VI

Rigor in Grounded Theory Research: An Interpretive Perspective on Generating Theory from Qualitative Field Studies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a set of principles for the use of Grounded Theory techniques in qualitative field studies. Some issues and controversies relating to rigor in Grounded Theory generation are discussed. These include: inductive theory generation and emergence, how theoretical saturation may be judged, the extent to which coding schemes should be formalized, the objectivist-subjectivist debate, and the assessment of quality and rigor in interpretive research. It is argued that Grounded Theory is often criticized for a lack of rigor because we apply positivist evaluations of rigor to research that derives from an interpretive worldview. Alternative assessments of rigor are suggested, that emphasize reflexivity in the inductive-deductive cycle of substantive theory generation.

INTRODUCTION

Grounded Theory research involves the generation of innovative theory derived from data collected in an investigation of "real-life" situations relevant to the research problem. Although Grounded Theory approaches may use quantitative or qualitative methods (Dey, 1999), the emphasis in this chapter is on qualitative, interpretive approaches to generating Grounded Theory, as it is this area that is most criticized for its lack of rigor. I will discuss some reasons for this and suggest some solutions. The chapter starts with an introduction to the Grounded Theory research approach. Some issues and controversies relating to rigor in Grounded Theory generation are then discussed, including inductive theory generation and emergence, how theoretical saturation may be judged, the extent to which coding schemes should be formalized, the objectivist-subjectivist debate, and the assessment of quality and rigor in qualitative Grounded Theory research.

The chapter concludes with a set of principles for the appropriate use of Grounded Theory techniques in qualitative field studies.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH METHODS

Grounded Theory approaches to research are so called because contributions to knowledge are not generated from existing theory, but are *grounded* in the data collected from one or more empirical studies. In this chapter, I have described Grounded Theory as an approach rather than a method, as there are many alternative methods that may be employed. In Figure 1, a guiding process for Grounded Theory is presented, adapted from Lowe (1995), Pidgeon and Henwood (1996), and Dey (1999). The process model of Grounded Theory given in Figure 1 is presented as a *reflexive* approach because this process is centered around surfacing and making explicit the influences and inductive processes of the researcher.

The Grounded Theory approach (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is designed "to develop and integrate a set of ideas and hypotheses in an integrated theory that accounts for behavior in any substantive area" (Lowe, 1996, p.1). In other words, a Grounded Theory approach involves the generation of *emergent* theory from empirical data. A variety of data collection methods may be employed, such as interviews, participant observation, experimentation, and indirect data collection (for example, from service log reports or help desk e-mails).

The uniqueness of the Grounded Theory approach lies in two elements (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

1.   Theory is based upon patterns found in empirical data, not from inferences, prejudices, or the association of ideas.
2.   There is constant comparison between emergent theory (codes and constructs) and new data. Constant comparison confirms that theoretical constructs are found across and between data samples, driving the collection of additional data until the researcher feels that "theoretical saturation" (the point of diminishing returns from any new analysis) has been reached.

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