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FROM REALITY TO THEORY: GROUNDED THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Grounded Theory is an inductive approach in research. It is process of generating new theory. Usually the researches verify or modify already established theories but Grounded Theory (GT) designs involve systematic qualitative procedure that enable a researcher to generate theory from the qualitative data collected from the field. The present paper discusses basic concepts like coding and its types, categories, memos etc. The characteristics and methodology is discussed in the paper. GT designs although originated in Medicine, Nursing and social sciences, they can be effectively used in Education where we deal with qualitative data.

Key terms: *Grounded theory, Coding, Memos, Categories, theory generation, critiques*

Introduction:

The roots of Grounded Theory are in sociology and in Nursing. The purpose of Grounded Theory (GT) was to advance qualitative research by making it systematic research (Systematically developing theory from data). GT is the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research. The strategy used in this discovery process is the method of constant comparative analysis. The purpose of GT is to explain the data(Glaser and Strauss, 1967). GT is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents: instead of starting out with the theory and proving it. Data analysis and theory are constantly interacting. The purpose of using GT method is to develop theory from the data being examined. GT design is a systematic qualitative procedure and to generate atheory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or interaction about a substantive topic. GT is used when:

1. You want to generate a theory rather than use one 'Off the shelf'.
2. You want to explain a process, action or interaction.
3. You want a step by step, systematic procedure.
4. You have a data that is more observation based and qualitative one.

5. You want to stay close to data and similarities between observations collected from different participants.

In most researches, where deductive approach is used, previously established principles/ theories are tested by collecting data from the population. GT is based on Inductive approach where no theory/ Principle aretested; instead it deals with generating the theory based on observation. It is a qualitative method where numbers and statistical tools play very small role. Instead the researcher works with qualitative observations. The data collection is not based on predetermined and closed data collection tools. The researcher while working in the field conducts several interactions with participants and makes regular notes of all the observations that s/he goes through. Continuous reflections on these observations enable her/him to modify the tools and make further investigations. The key characteristics of GT design are:

a. A process approach.
b. Theoretical Sampling.
c. Constant comparative data analysis.
d. A core category.
e. Memos.
f. Theory generation.

Usually a series of interaction (Usually in the form of interviews) are conducted that helps the researcher to define codes and categories. Coding of terms is done. That helps the researcher to further define categories. Consider the following example to understand the basics of GT.

Aniruddha is interviewed by the researcher working on Learning Difficulties faced by students suffering from Endocrine dysfunction. Aniruddha is suffering from 'Hypothyroidisms'. The researcher has noted down following statements which Aniruddha said during interviews.

"It was really a bad patch of my life when suddenly my weight increased and I showed a very composed, calm and studious behavior. My parents appreciated my good handwriting excellent score and humble behavior. All my relatives patted me for the change that I showed. But when I visited my family doctor for common cold, he noticed some drastic change in me and asked my father to get some blood investigations done from his lab. After the reports arrived, he informed my parents that all the change in me is a Pseudo change. It was due to decreased ability of my thyroid glands to produce thyroxin that is need for proper growth. This he termed as "Hypothyroidism.' The medicines prescribed to me later brought out a drastic change in me. I started feeling restless. I was experiencing increasing difficulty

in writing. Sitting in one place and writing for long time became very boring. It really made me restless. Playing on ground was more fun, my score in school unit tests went down and everyone started scolding me. I started feeling increasing difficulty in concentrating in my homework. I tried working around my problem. But nothing helped me.I felt left out in the class and home too.My parents started scolding me every now and then for my low scores. They didn't like me going for playing. They started telling me about achievements of my fellow mates. My life was in abig mess. Although I tried my level best to accomplish their expectations from me, I couldn't reach half the goal. I needed right feedback so as to find out where I am going wrong."

Now if you have gone through the abstract of the interview, as a beginner researcher, one may identify this case as learning difficulty case. Traditionally one uses a tool like questionnaire or scale to identify the learning difficulties. A survey of participants sharing learning difficulties may be given this tool to find and analyze learning difficulties. But one must understand that the case of Aniruddha is different than others. Very few individuals would be having the problem similar to that of Aniruddha. If we use the pre conceived tools for this research it will be like measuring distance between two cities using a ruler scale. The tools which are designed first and then used in field will not give you information that you are really looking for. Then as a researcher, how can you analyze participants' views and experiences such as Aniruddha describes? How can you give all your data a fair reading? Which methodological guidelines can assist you throughout the research process? GT methods help you to collect and analyze qualitative data. GT is a comparative and Interactive method that provides away to study empirical processes. It consists of flexible methodological strategies for building theories from inductive data. As a comparative method, GT keeps you interacting with data and your emerging ideas about them. You can compare Aniruddha's statements about experiencing restlessnessand change in his behavior with similar statements. From other people who also have gone through the same process. While you examine Aniruddha's statements you label them with codes such as, 'experiencing increasing difficulty', 'feeling leftout', 'working around it' and 'needed feedback'. Subsequently you can compare these codes with codes from other research participant's interviews. As the research proceeds you can compare these data and codes with the tentative categories you develop from codes.

GT demystifies the conduct of qualitative enquiry. Rather than applying preconceived theoretical framework, your ideas about the data guide how you construct the theoretical

analysis.The distinguishing characteristics of GT (Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss1967) include:

- Collecting and analyzing data simultaneously.
- Developing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived hypotheses.
- Constructing middle range theories to understand and explain behavior and processes.
- Memo writing i. e. analytical notes to explicate and fillout categories.
- Making comparisons between dataand data, data and concept, concept and concept.
- Theoreticalsampling i.e. sampling for theory construction to check and refine conceptual categories, not for representativeness of a given population.
- Delaying the literature review until after forming analysis.

The logic of GT influences all phases of the research process although the method focuses on analysis. Qualitative methods foster making unanticipated discoveries that shift earlier research questions and designs.

Formulating a research question and designing a study:

GT is an emergent method(Charmaz, 2008). An emergent method begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold the knowledge accrues. Beyond a few flexible guidelines, GT is indeterminate and open ended. You draw upon and develop specific methodological tools to answer emerging theoretical and empirical questions during the research process. Your research question and study design evolve as you proceed, rather than emanating from deducing a hypothesis from extant theory or following a tightly preconceived plan. GT must keep their research questions and research designs open ended. We aim to study significant issues that we find in our field settings. To obtain rich data for the GT research, following measures are taken by the researcher:

A. Describe participants' views and actions in details.
B. Record observations that reveal participants' unstated intentions.
C. Construct interview questions that allow participants to reflect on the research topic.
D. Look for and explore taken- for- granted meanings and actions.

The systematic design of GT has following three types of coding:

1. **Open coding-** Properties and dimensionalized properties. From the qualitative data that is collected, the researcher has to carefully go through it and find the terms which s/he are useful to the research purpose. These terms show relevance to the research question under consideration or they may come from the actual field experiences. The

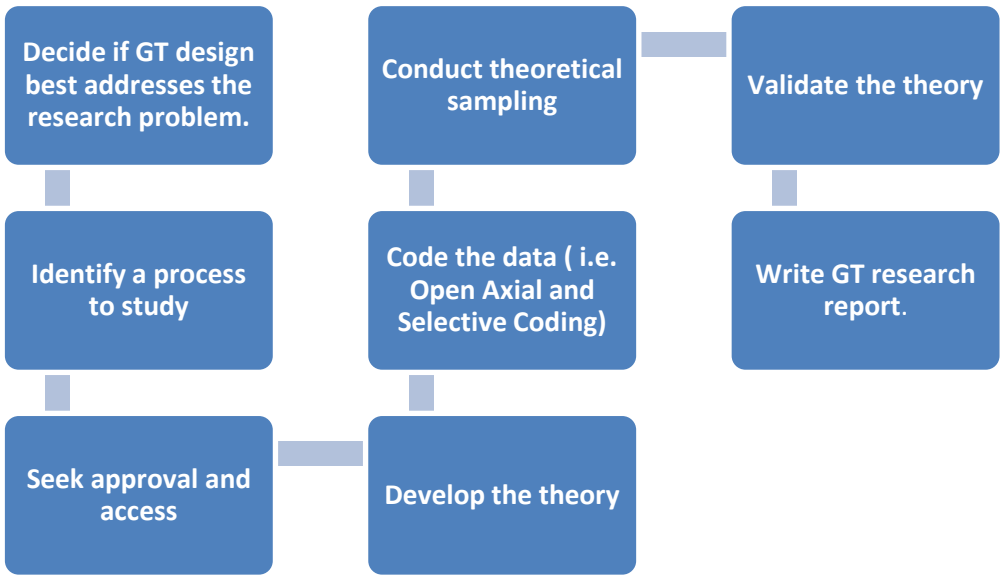
researcher keeps on continuously collecting data and simultaneously carries out open coding.

2. **Axial coding-** Researcher selects one open coding category and places it as the central phenomenon and correlates all other categories to it. S/he considers and reconsiders the codes and groups them around the central concept/ issue/ problem/ question. For the axial coding, the researcher has to continuously pool information from different sources and make regular notes. Writing memos regularly helps researcher a lot to carryout axial coding.
3. **Selective coding-** It is writing the theory based on inter- relationship of the categories from axial coding. This process is crucial step where the researcher actually correlates the data collected in the form of axial codes. Understanding the interrelationships between different categories and having an insight into the theory is an emergent process. The researcher gets this insight when s/he is working continuously in the field and keeps the record of all his observations regularly.

Memos are notes that the researcher writes throughout the research process to elaborate on ideas about the data and the coded categories, memos are regularly written immediately after writing the transcripts/ documents/ field notes. In memos the researcher explores hunches, ideas and thoughts that are relevant to the research question. The researcher takes them and apart and searches for the broader explanation at work in process. Memos must include:

i. Defining each code or category by its analytic properties.
ii. Spelling out and detailing process subsumed by the codes and categories.
iii. Making comparison between data and between codes and categories.
iv. Bringing raw data into the memo.
v. Providing sufficient empirical evidence to support your definitions of the category and analytic claims about it.
vi. Offering conjectures to check through further empirical research.
vii. Identifying gaps in your emerging analysis.

Steps of GT research study



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Critiques of GT:

1) Cannot set aside theory at the start. Neutral observation is difficult.
2) Theoretical sampling takes time.
3) Coding breaks up narrative flow of data.
4) Its origin is in symbolic interactioninsm. i. e. how people construct their reality through interaction. It takes in to account the concept of George Herbert Mead(!934) regarding symbolic interaction theory- How we give meaning to situations, words, objects and symbols. Every individual may have his own interpretation of interaction.
5) Research becomes subjective if the sampling, coding, memo writing etc is not done religiously.

Conclusion

The inductive nature of GT methods assumes an open , flexible approach that moves you back and forth between data collection and analysis. Your methodological strategies take shape during the research process rather than before you begin collection of data. Similarly you shape and alter the data collection to pursue the most interesting and relevant material without overlooking research participants' views and actions by developing and checking your ideas as you proceed. You not only stay close to the empirical world , but also learn whether and to what extent your analytic ideas fit the people you study.

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