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Abstract

Graduate students who employ CGT for their theses or dissertations predominantly learn the methodology on their own. As a distinct methodology, CGT is challenging to employ. This challenge increases further when graduate students encounter poor advice from dissertation supervisors who are unfamiliar with the methodology, or attempt to incorporate elements from the many alternative and modified versions of grounded theory presented in the literature. This article provides an account of one student's experience learning CGT to complete her doctoral dissertation. It is hoped that this article will assist other new researchers to anticipate some of the confusion, challenges, and insights, and growth that they may encounter in their first CGT study. The article concludes with advice for new researchers including: seek expertise, engage in community, just do it, know self, and balance challenge and support.

Introduction

Classic grounded theory [CGT] is a fundamentally distinct methodology. It does not fit within the established qualitative or quantitative paradigms. Instead, it stands on its own and can use all as data (Holton, 2007). While there is a growing body of literature focusing on the experiences of learning to do qualitative research (Drago-Severson, Asghar, Gaylor, 2003; Gale, 1990; Hein, 2004, Hughes, & Berry, 2000), little has been written about the experience of learning classic grounded theory from the novice's perspective.

Graduate students who aspire to employ CGT for their theses or dissertations predominantly learn the methodology on their own as 'minus mentorees' (Glaser, 1998). Few individuals have access to relevant graduate level courses or a dissertation supervisor experienced in CGT. In fact, because of the many ways CGT has been altered and modified since **Discovery of**

Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was first published, many individuals who supervise CGT dissertations may have misunderstandings of the methodology.

This article provides an account of my experience learning CGT to complete my doctoral dissertation. I hope that my account will assist other researchers, new to classic grounded theory, to anticipate some of the confusion, challenges, insights and growth that they may encounter in their first CGT study. I hope that elements of my journey resonate with other researchers, and provide them with company in what can be a long and lonely dissertation journey. In the process of completing my dissertation, I learned many valuable lessons. These lessons serve as advice that should interest doctoral students engaged in CGT and may help them to avoid pitfalls along the dissertation path. This article also provides insight into the process of learning CGT that can inform the design and teaching of CGT in various contexts, and the mentoring of students employing the methodology.

Account of the Journey

My journey began with an initial resistance to all things grounded theory, followed by gradually understanding the methodology and some of the ways it has been modified, to actually conducting and completing my dissertation. This journey explicates some of the challenges and highlights that I encountered as I tried it out, made mistakes, got stuck, read, felt frustrated, had 'Aha!' moments, revised previous work, and took incremental steps forward before getting stuck again.

Getting Acquainted with Grounded Theory

I was first introduced to grounded theory as one of a smorgasbord of methodologies in a graduate level introductory qualitative research course. At the time grounded theory was a mystery to me. I was initially turned away from grounded theory by what seemed to be inflexible and rigid procedures and confusing terminology. Two years into my doctoral studies, however, I began exploring using grounded theory methodology for my dissertation. I read the seminal text **Discovery of Grounded Theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and quickly saw the potential offered by CGT to produce a dissertation that would be practical and significant. CGT is a rigorous methodology, containing directions for each aspect of the research process while

also allowing for creativity and intuition (Glaser, 1998).

As part of my doctoral studies, I had to successfully complete three comprehensive examinations. These examinations took the form of essays and presentations, and included one examination focused on methodology. While completing my examination on grounded theory, I wrestled with the various forms of the method, examined its evolution, and its congruence with philosophical paradigms. I came to understand that my initial resistance reflects extensive diversity within what researchers call grounded theory. The many ways researchers have altered and changed the methodology since **Discovery of Grounded Theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was published has led to various reformulations, contradictions, and modifications and caused considerable confusion. This exploration solidified my interest in pursuing classic grounded theory, the methodology as it was originally conceived.

Given that I began my dissertation trained in qualitative methods, my first attempts at CGT somewhat distorted the methodology. I started well intentioned but inexperienced. As I progressed, I engaged in "a set of double-back steps" (Glaser 1978, p. 16) to revise my previous work in concert with my developing understanding. I trust that I am not the only individual who has experienced this: "beginning researchers, as much as they want to do GT, come to research with many positivistic rules and method procedures that inhibit their openness to not knowing and that keep them preconceiving" (Glaser, 2001, p. 82). I cycled through the various procedures "learning from each attempt and developing clarity and confidence in their application" (Holton, 2007, p. 266).

The substantive area for my dissertation was the senior year of undergraduate study. I framed my research question as 'What is the key concern of senior undergraduate students and how do they attempt to resolve this concern?' I began by interviewing students as they approached graduation at a single university and then extended my sampling to other universities. The thirty formal interviews that I conducted included students enrolled in a variety of academic programs, both women and men aged 20-25 from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and levels of parental education. I developed and employed a demographic questionnaire, and tape-recorded and transcribed each of these interviews despite Glaser's (1998) advice against it. After each

interview, I created field notes, listened to the recording, and performed an initial coding and analysis. Mirroring my growing confidence and ability, I would now choose to rely on extensive field notes rather than tapes.

After three interviews, I thought that students' main concern was *figuring out what to do after graduation*. I restructured my interview guide accordingly but soon realized that this was not students' main concern. I was confused and frustrated: "Why wasn't the methodology working?" I was overwhelmed with data, and had no idea how to do constant comparison. My highly descriptive codes did not reveal much about what was going in the substantive area. I decided that I should try to more closely adhere to the guidelines of classic grounded theory. Patiently, with several repeated attempts to code, compare, and memo, I began to see reoccurring incidents of *resisting planning life after graduation*, *seeking assistance to plan life after graduation*, and *avoiding assistance to plan life after graduation*.

One day I arrived at an interview and realized that I did not have my interview guide and demographic questionnaire. After a moment of panic, I asked the student simply to tell me about being a graduating student. The interview flowed well and I learned more in this interview than I had in others because I was listening differently. At this point, I ceased using my interview guide: "Many still try to use standard data collection techniques until they shed them, especially set units, interview guides and taping. They shed them as they see that they interfere with generating theory as GT purposes" (Glaser, 2001, p. 46). The result was freeing, and communicated clearly to participants that I was not looking for 'right' answers to my questions. I also knew better what questions to ask having become increasingly sensitive through analysis, coding, memo-making, and interviewing. I ceased my directed questioning and shifted towards emergence.

Until then, my theoretical sampling consisted of obtaining more male participants, to balance my sample, that included more females than males, and seeking students from a diversity of programs and universities as revealed through my demographic questionnaire. Upon reflection, I can see how much of this sampling was not theoretical but based on my presumption of the relevance of gender, program of study, and other

demographic information. I did not understand the full meaning of 'do not assume the relevance of any face sheet variable including age, sex, social class, race, skin color, academic discipline, etc. unless it emerges as relevant' (Glaser, 1978, 2002). In the end, much of the information that I collected using this questionnaire was of little relevance.

Through my best first attempts, the graduating student experience seemed to be about exploring identity, values, career goals, and planning life after graduation. I had two key concerns: *responding to the pressure of figuring out life after graduation* and *facing adulthood*.

Trusting CGT

While ordering books from the Sociology Press website, I stumbled upon advertisements for the Grounded Theory Institute seminars. I applied and was accepted to a seminar, in Mill Valley, California that would be facilitated by Dr. Barney Glaser, co-originator of the methodology: I was thrilled and terrified. At the time, I did not know how valuable these seminars would be for my learning and how well they would complement the mentoring of my supervisory committee. The seminar required that I share my research. Although I was told that this sharing would be informal, I had no idea what was actually expected. I was I worried that I was off track. I knew that I was not supposed to tape record, transcribe, or employ a demographic questionnaire. Motivated largely by fear of critique, I decided that if I was going to attend the seminar, I had better employ the full methodology. I turned all of my transcribed interviews into field notes and put the demographic questionnaire permanently aside. Cycling back to the beginning once again, I coded the field notes rather than interview transcripts. This eased data management and helped to realign my work with the methodology.

Sharing of my research was scheduled for the second day of the seminar. I was prepared with typed and photocopied handouts. When I arrived for the opening social I found myself excitedly talking grounded theory with new found colleagues and friends. It was welcoming and friendly. I did not need to be afraid. Many seminar attendees were also in the midst using grounded theory for their doctoral dissertations, and others, more experienced in the methodology, were there to observe and to assist. During an intense two and a half days we talked,

breathed, and lived grounded theory. It was a complete immersion. I learned so much that by the time it was my turn to present, I had completely reworked my handouts to reflect my seminar learning.

When I presented, I began by explaining the methodology I had used to date, including how I had begun preconceived and off track. I then shared the rationale for the study and bits of field notes and concepts that had emerged. I was asked to share more about certain aspects of my research. I discussed the potential core category: *securing a good future*, "if you want to secure a good spot, you try to increase your grade point average or get involved in particular extra curricular activities, you do whatever you can to get yourself to where you want to be". This concept has since evolved into *opportunizing* (Christiansen, 2006). I explained that some students whom I interviewed talked not about work as what they are going to do, but as who they are, as if it was their identity.

Many seminar participants seemed to be able to relate to the incidents that I shared and contributed their own. One experienced participant suggested that my study was likely a typology. While this was indeed the case, I did not have the main concern isolated. I learned that I had likely collected enough data for several studies and had been going for full coverage with my analysis. I had to delimit my research to a single concern even though it seemed students had many. I was also cautioned that what I thought was the main concern might really be a professional concern and not that of participants. I was told to go back to the data and let the data tell me where to go.

Although some of the feedback I received was difficult to accept, I was very grateful for the insights. The seminar was energizing and furthered my learning immensely. The notion of conceptualizing gradually gained more meaning for me, although my skills needed further development. I was not alone: "many novice, and sometimes experienced, grounded theorists encounter difficulty raising the level of theoretical abstraction form description to theory" (Schreiber, 2001, p. 77).

Gaining Confidence

After the seminar, I reviewed, recoded, and recompared incidents in my field notes, memoing about the relationships between these incidents. I tried sorting my memos, doubting

whether I would ever be able to bring the theory together. I tried, but struggled, to relate conceptual categories and properties to each other to stay on a conceptual level rather than a descriptive level. I uncovered a new central concern: the *pressure to commodify self,* defined as the pressure to transform oneself into a marketable product for the workforce. I also uncovered what I thought was a set of strategies that students use to resolve this pressure.

I attended a second Grounded Theory Institute seminar in Halifax, Nova Scotia facilitated by Dr. Holton. This seminar increased my confidence, added depth to my understanding, and immersed me once again in a community of like-minded researchers. During the seminar I realized how learning CGT requires being open, and being able to respond to feedback and suggestions constructively. What individuals leave the seminars with is not necessarily what they expected, but rather what they actually need help with. The seminar increased my ability to conceptualize and I began identifying when I was conceptualizing and when I was slipping into description; this is an ability that I am still continuing to develop.

I shared a draft of my theory with my supervisory committee who provided useful feedback and affirmed my work. They were so impressed that any concerns they initially had with the methodology were forgotten. I attended a third grounded theory seminar in which I presented students' responses to the *pressure to commodify self*. Using theoretical coding, I identified what I thought were three strategies: *complying with commodfication* (employed to achieve economic prosperity and social status)*, resisting commodification* (employed to seek happiness and self fulfillment no matter the economic cost and often without considering the economic consequences), and *humanizing commodification* (employed to maintain a sense of authentic self while attaining a certain level of financial prosperity), and seven factors that influence the use of these strategies. I was provided with suggestions for illustration dosage, literature to review, writing, as well as when to let go of incidents that do not fit.

In addition to the 30 taped and transcribed interviews, my data collection also involved less formal interviews with additional students, parents of senior students, faculty, and student affairs and services providers. For example, I presented the theory at an international conference in my field. The theory

was well received, and those who came to my presentation contributed further examples of students' experiences that I later incorporated into the theory using constant comparison. The various presentations I attended also provided further data, and allowed me to see that the *pressure to commodify self* likely extends beyond the substantive area into other years of undergraduate study. Other interviews typically resulted from being asked about my research; as soon as I shared what I was studying, people wanted to talk. Incidents from these interviews were written up in field notes.

Later, in conversation with a colleague, friend, and fellow grounded theorist, I realized that the appropriate theoretical coding family for my research was the typology family, and not the strategy family. The strategy family is applied when there is a conscious effort to maneuver others (Glaser, 1978). In this case, students were not deliberately maneuvering anyone but rather attempting to find a place for themselves in the workforce. I continued to edit, refine, and rework the theory.

When the theory was sufficiently integrated, I reviewed relevant literature for integration. So much seemed relevant, making it difficult for me limit the breadth of my reading. I struggled with how to present the theory. I looked for models and found examples of classic grounded theory studies that wove the relevant literature directly into the theory and concluded with a final chapter explaining the limitations, implications, and calls for future research. This worked well for me and is in line with the guidelines for writing within classic grounded theory (Glaser 1978, 1998). To curb potential resistance from my supervisory committee, I expressed gratitude to them for allowing me to proceed with the full methodological package although it deviated from a traditional qualitative layout.

I continued editing my dissertation, strengthening weak points and restructuring where needed. I continued reading CGT studies for form and style and my struggle to integrate the literature gradually dissipated. With a complete draft of my dissertation submitted, I knew that it would take time for my supervisory committee to assess it, however, the waiting period seemed to take forever. I continued to edit and refine. Each revised draft challenged and extended my thinking and my writing. Even now that I have successfully defended my dissertation, I continue to identify areas to edit and revise. This

was my first experience with CGT and no doubt my learning journey will continue as I engage in future studies.

Advice to Novices

From my experience learning and applying CGT in my dissertation, I have distilled five pieces of advice that may be of use to researchers embarking on their first CGT study, including: 1.) seek expertise, 2.) engage in community, 3.) 'just do it', 4.) know self, and 5.) balance challenge and support

Seek expertise

As a novice GT researcher, I employed not only the expertise of my supervisory committee, but made efforts to connect with students in my program who were further along in the research process. I also sought top expertise in CGT that was unavailable at my university. These experts, particularly fellow grounded theorists, served as mentors, offered me support and advice, and challenged me to learn. There are many ways to access grounded theorists and CGT expertise. I recommend reading the Sociology Press books and the Grounded Theory Review, and contacting authors whose work you admire. Locate and review completed CGT dissertations, analyze these documents in terms of their structure, degree of conceptualization, and their strengths and weaknesses (Glaser, 1998). You can also connect with CGT experts through the Grounded Theory Institute Forum and seminars (http://www.groundedtheory.com/). Most importantly, find a mentor for your work. Seek constructive feedback and take this feedback seriously.

I would concur with Bowen's (2005) advice on getting familiar with the work of expert methodologists within your research tradition and accessing the expertise of your dissertation committee, "they were my consultants and advisors, and I was quite fortunate that they also played the role of mentors, providing counsel and guidance along the way" (p.212).

Engage in community

Research about the learning of qualitative research details the value of engaging in community and in collaborative and peer learning (Boardman, Detweiler, Emmerling, Lucas & Schmidt, 2002). Some instructors deliberately encourage their students to form communities within and outside of a course context (for example, Davie, 1996; Drago-Severson, Asghar, Gaylor, 2003;

Strauss, 1988). Learning about the research experiences of others, as Shaffir & Stebbins (1991) note "enables them [students] to anticipate more accurately the trials and rewards of their own research efforts (p. xi).

While completing my dissertation I organized a group of graduate students who met weekly for coffee. We would discuss our progress, support each other through challenges, and celebrate our accomplishments. Through the grounded theory seminars I met many individuals who I could contact when I ran into trouble. Engaging in community reinforced my learning, and provided opportunities for intensive and regular feedback. I recommend finding others who are doing CGT for the first time, read grounded theory texts together, and discuss what you are learning and your progress. This can be done either in person, on the phone, or online.

Just do it

Although my graduate qualitative research courses involved considerable experiential learning, more of my learning came from facing real challenges in my dissertation: facing data overwhelm, struggling with constant comparison, stressing about how to move from description to conceptualization, and attempting to integrate the literature. These are likely common challenges that researchers new to CGT encounter.

My advice aligns with Boardman et al. (2002) who indicate with respect to qualitative studies, to learn how to research one has to do it. Relevant literature describes how in course experiential activities help students learn and to see the research process (Hein, 2004). Actually participating in research, however, goes beyond coursework learning, it engages learners, scaffolds their learning, helps them to build connections with other scholars, and provides them with experience to mitigate research anxiety (Lee & Roth, 2003).

Know self

As a graduate student, I felt real pressure to situate my research within a defined worldview, including an epistemology and ontology, as is typical within qualitative research. Research concerning the learning of qualitative research stresses the importance of exposing students to the philosophy of science in research methodology courses (Efinger, Maldonado, & McArdle,

2004) and that students determine their methodological preferences after thorough grounding in the philosophical assumptions behind the various methodologies (Paul and Marfo, 2001). All that is needed to do classic grounded theory, however, is an awareness of how you see the world and the willingness to challenge it as you compare your beliefs with incoming data. During the proposal phase of my research, I defined my worldview as largely post-positivist but with elements of contructivism (Crotty, 2003). Although my worldview did not shift dramatically while conducting my dissertation, I am now more sensitive to critical perspectives and am more aware of the power of societal structures to influence individual experiences. Worldviews are personal and inform how we see the world. Know yourself: if you are not open to challenging your worldview, CGT may not be for you. Instead you may wish to consider a qualitative or quantitative design nested within an appropriate paradigm.

Balance challenge and support

When I began my dissertation, I anticipated that I would encounter some challenges including: tolerating isolation and periods of confusion and ambiguity, and not forcing the data, remaining open to the emergent, and trusting to preconscious processing (Glaser & Holton, 2004). There really were times that I felt "stupid, young, out of control and like one doesn't know anything" (Glaser, 1998, p. 50). Knowing this in advance helped me accept and surmount these challenges. Throughout my dissertation process, I continuously challenged myself and sought support in meeting those challenges. I stretched my comfort zone first by even attempting CGT, then by attending a grounded theory seminar, and later by trusting the full CGT methodology. I sought support when I ran into difficulty analyzing and presenting my research. I obtained support and was challenged by my supervisory committee, peers, and the GT community.

To foster learning, student development literature recommends providing the right mix of challenge and support (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Studies focused on learning qualitative research indicate that students may experience considerable anxiety in this process, especially when introduced to qualitative research and philosophical underpinnings (Clark & Lang, 2002; Huehls, 2005; Poulin, 2007), during analysis (Davie, 1996; Hein, 2004; Tantano Beck, 2003), and when trying to

present their results (Davie, 1996). Hein (2004) recommends that students seek out and be provided with step-by-step guidance, in-class practice, and reassurance to relieve their anxiety.

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