

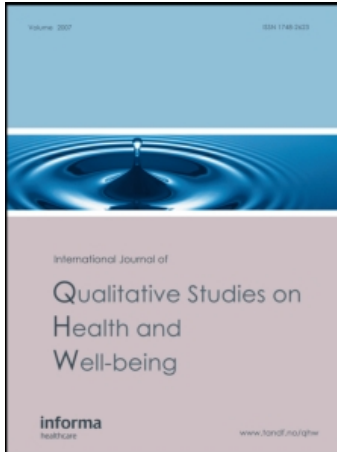
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### The “core category” of grounded theory: Making constant comparisons

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The “core category” of grounded theory: Making constant comparisons

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### Abstract

Approximately 40 years ago, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and their joint research approach, the constant comparative method of grounded theory, were at the forefront of what can be called a qualitative revolution. The publication of their book, *The discovery of grounded theory* (1967), was a breakthrough because of the systematic procedures for qualitative research that were presented. Prior to this publication, qualitative research methodology was traditionally most often taught orally. Through their book, Glaser and Strauss defended the method of qualitative research and countered the prevailing opinion that quantitative research provided the one and only approach to scientific inquiry. They argued that qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right, not merely to be used for pre-studies to “real” statistically based studies. The grounded theory method fits in with lifeworld research, because the emphasis is on individuals as unique living wholes and the researcher focuses on the world as it is experienced by the individual. The researcher does not formulate any hypothesis in advance and tries to approach the research area with as few preconceptions as possible. Preconceptions, taken-for-granted assumptions, and interpretations must be handled by reflexive strategies in line with what Dahlberg (2006) has labelled “bridling”. Grounded theory offers the researcher a set of guidelines for building conceptual frameworks that specify the relationships among categories. The guidelines should be used as flexible tools rather than being seen as rigid rules. Grounded theory is a broad method with distinct procedures that work in practice and that are suitable to pragmatic researchers. The “core category” in grounded theory is, as I see it, the constant comparative method. The grounded theory method has been modified by the era within which it exists and by new ideas encountered in the world of inquiry (Annells, 1997). Varying views of what reality is and how it can be known affect the modes of the grounded theory method.

**Key words:** *Grounded theory, qualitative method, symbolic interactionism, ontology, epistemology*

### Introduction

Qualitative researchers study phenomena and processes in their natural settings and intend to make sense of those matters in terms of the meanings people bring to them. This attempt has been expressed as a naturalistic or an interpretative approach to the world. Generally, the province of qualitative research is the world of individuals' experiences and their socially constructed realities. Through detailed interviewing, participant observations, and rich descriptions of the social world, qualitative researchers hope to come close to the actor's perspective and try to capture his or her point of view or lived experience. Each of several qualitative research traditions has its own specific fundamental procedures, techniques, and approaches for analyzing the data and presenting the findings.

However, there are also many similarities among the different qualitative methods. Qualitative research methods are used in many disciplines, are adopted by different professional groups and obviously, no single methodological practice can be privileged over any other. Generally, the actual research question directs which research method out of more than 30 methods described in the literature is most appropriate in the specific case (Tesch, 1991). This implies, of course, that the actual research question must be formulated before the research method is chosen rather than the opposite (cf., Hallberg, 2002). The use of a qualitative approach can produce meaningful results and deepened understanding, but, unfortunately, that is not always necessarily the case (Polkinghorne, 2006).

Social science disciplines have taken as their research tasks that of understanding “the other” and of comprehending and explaining why actors and social processes are as they are. In sociology, for example, there has been a long tradition of qualitative research with rich ethnographic fieldwork, case studies, and in-depth interviews. However, during the 1960s sophisticated quantitative methods acquired an advantage over qualitative research methods and became dominant with a focus on the logic of verification. Human qualitative experiences were then reduced into delimited and measurable variables and the researchers thus relied on what they assumed to be scientific logic, neutrality, and truth. Researchers who advocated the quantitative approach viewed qualitative methods as useful only in preliminary studies, pilot tests, and case studies, i.e. as pre-studies conducted before the quantitative “real” studies began. Qualitative research was looked upon as being unsystematic, impressionistic, and unreliable, and thereby the qualitative tradition ran the risk of being undermined. However, critical voices questioned the view that researchers were neutral observers of reality. Owing to this critique and the conflicting positions, the time for a “qualitative revolution” drew nearer and nearer. One can read more about this “qualitative revolution” and the first generation of qualitative researchers in the scientific literature, for example, in the second issue of the *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being – QHW* in a thought-provoking paper by Donald E. Polkinghorne (2006).

### Grounded theory

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and their joint research approach, “grounded theory”, served at the forefront of the qualitative revolution mentioned earlier. In fact, the publication of *The discovery of grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was a breakthrough because of the systematic qualitative methodology that was presented in this critical time. Prior to this publication there were very few method books available and, therefore, qualitative research methods were most often taught by pioneers through oral tradition and personal mentoring. Through their book, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, the founders of grounded theory, defended qualitative research and countered the opinion that quantitative research provided the one and only form of usable approach to inquiry (Charmaz, 2000). In addition, they argued that qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right, not merely useful for pre-studies to “real” statistically based methods of inquiry. Glaser and Strauss were American sociologists, representing two dominant traditions in sociol-

ogy at that time. The late Anselm Strauss came from Chicago University and the tradition of the so-called “Chicago School” which started about 1920–1930 and studied human group life through fieldwork and participant observation. They focused on symbolic interactionism, social processes, and pragmatism. The ontological assumptions behind symbolic interactionism include that meaning is constructed and changed via interactions between people and that people act on the basis of the meaning they ascribe a situation. Barney Glaser was educated at Columbia University, which was known for its focus on rigorous positivistic methodological training, but he had also studied in Paris, where text analysis was a topic of interest to him. Glaser and Strauss met when they were hired to help and guide nursing students in their research at the University of California at San Francisco. Their first study together was about awareness contexts in patients dying at hospitals in San Francisco and the study was documented in the two books *Awareness of dying*, (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) and *Time for dying*, (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). Of course, the grounded theory method has been influenced by both of the founders’ research traditions. It is likely that the identification of social processes and the exploration of complexity in social life mainly originates from Strauss and that the strict and close line-by-line reading of the interview text, the rigorous identification of codes, the systematic division into categories, and the determination of properties of categories arise from Glaser to a great extent.

As far as I know, Glaser and Strauss never did explicitly declare their ontological or epistemological standpoints in *Discovery of grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or in other books. However, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that Glaser and Strauss, in their original grounded theory approach, tried to modify the usual canons of good positivist science to fit their own post-positivist conception of rigorous research. Simply, Glaser and Strauss explicitly expressed that their perspective was phenomenological and they presented grounded theory as a method that aimed at generating theory. What then is a theory in this context? Glaser means that a grounded theory can be presented “either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running text of theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 31). The form in which the theory is presented does not make it a theory; rather the fact that it explains or predicts something makes it a theory. Strauss’ definition (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) is similar; namely, that theory concerns carefully developed concepts that are put together by statements about mutual relations forming an integrated conceptual frame-

work that explains or predicts a phenomenon or an event, and thereby provides guides to action. Due to Glaser’s definition, a grounded theory study can result in an empirically grounded hypothesis that can be further tested and verified with new data using quantitative or qualitative methodology. Glaser means that theory is a process but can be presented as a momentary product that is still developing. Strauss, however, argues that an empirically grounded theory is both generated and verified in the data. This includes that the developed theory can be applied and used in practice without further testing. Accordingly, there is a distinction between Glaser and Strauss concerning the meaning of “theory generation”.

As I have understood grounded theory, the systematic abstraction and the conceptualization of empirical data constitute the theory-generating process in a grounded theory study. Both Glaser and Strauss differentiate between substantive and formal theory. Substantive theory concerns, and is applicable to, a delimited and specific area, for example “living with, or caring for, patients with myocardial infarction”, whereas a formal theory concerns a more general process or phenomena with a broader application area; it can for example concern “deviant behaviour” or “stigmatization.” Often grounded theorists address specific substantive areas and, therefore, most grounded theories are substantive theories.

What then are the distinctive marks or characteristics of the grounded theory method? Briefly, one can say that there are two main characteristics of grounded theory, namely the systematics in the methodology and the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method, which can be seen as the “core category” of grounded theory, includes that every part of data, i.e. emerging codes, categories, properties, and dimensions as well as different parts of the data, are constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities and differences in data. The constant comparative method of grounded theory is strict enough to be helpful to the researcher in exploring the content and meaning in the data, but not saddled with so many strict rules to be too rigid for a grounded theory researcher. Both Glaser and Strauss talk about guidelines rather than about fixed and constant rules for doing qualitative research, which indicates that guidelines can be used in a flexible and creative way. However, a number of guidelines have evolved since the publication of *Discovery of grounded theory* and, therefore, the researcher needs to state clearly, *whose* guidelines were used in their studies and *which steps* were followed in the research process (Babchuk, 1996).

As I see it, fundamental characteristics of grounded theory are the following:

- Collection and analysis of data is a simultaneous process starting with open sampling that seeks to maximize variations in experiences and descriptions by using participants from contrasting milieus and backgrounds. Open sampling thereby gives a heterogeneous sample.
- Intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic and goes beneath the surface of ordinary conversation (Charmaz, 2006). The participant is asked to describe and reflect upon his or her experiences in ways that seldom occur in everyday life. A few broad introductory questions can be sufficient for an interview followed by relevant probing and follow-up questions. The participant should be active whereas the interviewer should listen actively and encourage the participant to talk and to clarify details (Charmaz, 2006), for example; “That is interesting, tell me more about it.”
- The open sampling is later, i.e. late in the simultaneous process of collecting and analyzing data, followed by theoretical sampling which means that the emerging results direct in which direction to go and what questions to ask in order to saturate each emerging category/concept. Thereby, the purpose of theoretical sampling is not to increase the number of informants.
- Hierarchical coding processes: initial (open) line-by-line coding, focused (selective and conceptual coding) coding, axial or theoretical coding (specifying relationships between categories).
- Categories/concepts and their qualities/properties are generated from the data rather than being directed by the researcher’s hypotheses and preconceptions. Both categories and properties are concepts indicated by the data although varying in degree of conceptual abstraction. Every category must earn its way into the analysis; i.e. it must be grounded in the data rather than being generated from the researcher’s hypotheses and preconceptions.
- Identification and verification of relations between emerging categories and between categories and their properties in the data ensure that these conceptual relationships are grounded in the data.
- Identification of a core category is central for the integration of other categories into a conceptual framework or theory grounded in the

data. This core category determines and delimits the theoretical framework.

- Detailed memo-writing during the entire analysis process requires writing down ideas, assumed associations, and theoretical reflections related to each of the emerging categories.
- Data collection proceeds until so called theoretical saturation is achieved which means that new data does not add new information. Saturation is a critical concept in grounded theory and is based on a subjective decision: actually, you can never know if further interviewing would give more information. Therefore, it is important not to start theoretical sampling too early in the data collection process. Rather, the researcher should continue open sampling to maximize variations, and theoretical sampling should be used late in the process.

Theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is also an important concept in grounded theory and reflects the researcher's ability to use personal and professional experiences as well as methodological knowledge and thereby see data in new ways and think abstractly about data in the process of developing theory. Theoretical sensitivity can also be seen as the researcher's manipulation in order to explain data in a way that best reflects reality. Therefore, this theoretical sensitivity should be complemented by reflexivity, concerning for example, how the researcher-participant interaction and the researcher's perspective affect the analysis and the results (Hall & Callery, 2001).

According to Glaser (1992), a grounded theory should be evaluated in terms of its fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. This means that emerging categories must fit and explain the collected data rather than preconceived concepts being forced upon the data. Dahlberg (2006) uses the concept of "bridling" as an attitude guiding phenomenological studies. In relation to grounded theory, I understand bridling as a way to "hold back" preconceptions and reflect on the interpretation of the data and try to find alternative interpretations. A bridling approach may also be relevant when categorizing data in a grounded theory study to ensure that each concept really earns it way into the emerging theory. This attitude can also be characterized as "disciplined restraint", or as reflexivity (Hall & Callery, 2001), involving the researcher's reflecting on and questioning interpretations and results. Further, Glaser (1992) says that a grounded theory must work and have relevance, i.e. it must explain the studied phenomenon analytically. Similar to other theories,

a grounded theory has to change when conditions are changing. The quality of the results of grounded theory studies can also be described in terms of trustworthiness, concordance between data and result, and transferability. In addition, respondent validation can be seen as a sort of triangulation, i.e. allowing the informants to judge the reasonableness of the results (Larsson, 1993).

### The separation of Glaser and Strauss

Soon after that *The discovery of grounded theory* was published 1967, cooperation between Glaser and Strauss ended. Glaser published a book, titled *Theoretical sensitivity* (1978), which further described the grounded theory methodology. Somewhat later, Strauss published *Qualitative analysis for social scientists* (1987). Soon after the separation, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, a nurse researcher in the USA, initiated their research cooperation; but why did Glaser and Strauss go different ways? Could it be that the parting of the two sociologists was caused by differing basic underlying assumptions concerning ontological and epistemological standpoints? Alternatively, could it be that such differences, if they ever existed, are overestimated?

Although he has never explicitly expressed this idea, Glaser (2002) seems to assume an objective external "real reality" where the researcher is viewed as a neutral observer who just discovers data in an objective and neutral way. Glaser (2002a; 2002b) writes in his books that data just "emerges" without the researcher is doing anything at all. This idea might indicate that there is an objective "real" reality to be found by the researcher. It also suggests that Glaser may stand closer to the positivistic paradigm than does Strauss, and that the elements of objectivity in grounded theory probably originate from him (Glaser). Among several critics, the sociology professor Kathy Charmaz (2000) from California State University at Sonoma argues that Glaser's grounded theory is based on positivistic ideals about objectivity, neutrality, reproducibility, and an underlying assumption that a true reality exists that can be reproduced without being influenced by the researcher. Distinctly rejected by Glaser (2002b), she in fact argues that both Glaser and Strauss assume an external "real" reality that researchers can discover and record.

### The classic grounded theory

Glaser's version of grounded theory is now labelled "the classic grounded theory." What are the characteristics of the classic mode of grounded theory? Glaser (2002a, 2002b), states that the grounded

theory method is a rigorous methodology woven together by constant comparisons and conceptualizations. Owing to these conceptualizations, Glaser argues that grounded theory transcends all descriptive methods. Further, Glaser argues (e.g. 1978, 1994, 2002a) that grounded theory is, quite simply, the generation of emergent conceptual categories and their properties integrated into hypotheses resulting in a multivariate theory. Glaser writes in the *Discovery of grounded theory* that a grounded theory researcher initially should ignore all existing literature concerning the actual research area and just enter the research field with his or her eyes and ears open and with as few preconceptions as possible. The researcher only has to expose him or herself to the research area, and then the data, as well as the research question, will reveal itself to him or her. Further, Glaser states that “all is data,” which means that what is occurring in the research area is data whether it is assessed by interviews, observations, diaries, or documents in whatever combinations. Early in a grounded theory study, Glaser states, interviewing is mostly a passive listening to people in the research field. This passive listening is later followed by theoretical sampling and more focused questions based on the emergent categories. According to Glaser, data is discovered for conceptualization to be what it is—that is theory—or, according to his definition of a grounded theory and its result, rather hypotheses or sets of conceptual assumptions. Via constant comparisons of different data, categories will emerge without any other efforts on the part of the researcher or in Glaser’s words, the theory “will be a transcending abstraction.” According to Glaser, although each informant has his or her own perspective when telling his or her story, the researcher raises the informant’s perspective to an abstract level of conceptualization and strives to see the underlying or latent pattern in the participants’ collective words in a new perspective.

### The reformulated grounded theory

Strauss and Corbin’s cooperation resulted in the book *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*, which was published 1990. In the book, they describe their view of grounded theory and its procedures, and this view has been labelled “the reformulated grounded theory.” Strauss and Corbin’s description of grounded theory arises, according to them, from their own research experiences. Their view of grounded theory seems to be more pragmatic than Glaser’s, and seems also to include a rejection of a positivist position. Strauss and Corbin explicitly argue that reality cannot be fully known but can always be interpreted. The

relativist ontology is implicit when Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim that “doing analysis is, in fact, making interpretations” (p. 59). Strauss and Corbin approach a more delimited research area than Glaser and they stress the importance of listening to the voice of the informant. The research process is thereby enriched by subjectivity because the generated theory is a created “reality”, constructed through a transactional process involving the researcher and the data. Strauss and Corbin describe, in their book, a hierarchical coding process including three steps, open, axial, and selective coding. Axial coding is not explicitly mentioned in classic grounded theory but, still, coding around each category to find its properties and conceptual relationships to other categories is also included in Glaser’s analyses. Strauss and Corbin also suggest a coding paradigm, which intends to help the researcher to illuminate the conceptual relationships between concepts/categories (a phenomenon, i.e. a problem, an issue, an event, or a happening) and their properties in the theory development. Axial coding is then an act of “relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). The outcome of a grounded theory study, according to Strauss and Corbin, is the development of a theory that can be useful in practice. They argue that the findings of a grounded theory study are verified throughout the course of the research project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### Glaser’s critical comments

Glaser, who was convinced that his version of grounded theory was the “correct one”, did what he could to stop the publication of Strauss and Corbin’s book. He launched official attacks on them, especially towards his former collaborator, Anselm Strauss. His main critique of the book was that he believed that Strauss and Corbin had distorted the description of grounded theory from originally being a “theory generating method” into being an entirely new method of “full conceptual description”. According to Glaser (1992, 2002b), the full conceptual description, presented by Strauss and Corbin (1990), overlaps with conventional descriptive qualitative methods and is, in the eyes of Glaser, something else than theory generation based on empirical data. In addition, Glaser argues that the use of the coding paradigm and its preconceived and directing concepts implies that categories are forced upon data as a preconceived coding screen. The coding paradigm, intending to help the researcher to explore the relationships in the data, includes the following dimensions: causal

conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences. In addition to the critique of “forcing” these concepts on the data, Glaser argued that the use of a preconceived coding paradigm always generates an action-focused potentially problem-solving grounded theory. He also argued that theoretical sensitivity and inductive openness towards the data are totally lost in the procedure described by Strauss and Corbin.

Some years later (1992), Glaser published a book titled *Basics of grounded theory analysis*, in which he expressed his sharp critique of Strauss’ version of grounded theory. He also gave a description of how to conduct grounded theory studies in “the right way”, i.e. in line with his classic grounded theory. Some years later (1998), Strauss and Corbin published a revised edition of their book, entitled *Basics of qualitative research. Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, in which they further clarified their way of doing research and insisted on the reasonableness of their view of the grounded theory method. They also argued that the founders of a method should not have the all-embracing right over their product forever. I think that it is reasonable to agree with that opinion.

### The constructivist grounded theory

Charmaz (1995, 2000, 2006) has presented a constructivist mode of grounded theory, which can be seen as an approach between positivism and post-modernism. Constructivism assumes that there are multiple social realities simultaneously rather than the one and only “real reality”. In a constructivist grounded theory, it is stressed that data is constructed through an on-going interaction between researcher and participant. It is also assumed that action and meaning are dialectical; meaning shapes action and action affects meaning. The researcher takes a reflexive stance and studies how, and sometimes why, participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations (Charmaz, 2006). How the interview questions are asked and how the interviewer looks, acts, and sounds affects how the participant perceives him or her and how the interaction continues. Charmaz states the obvious opinion that multiple visits over time combined with the intimacy of intensive interviewing provide a deeper view of a person’s life than what single structured or informational interviews can offer. She asserts that in qualitative research we have to enter the world we are studying and that we need to learn from the inside (Charmaz, 2004). This requires focused attention and that we, as researchers,

are present during the interviews—and, according to Charmaz, that one single interview is seldom enough. Rather, we should conduct repeated interviews. Then the researcher can discover what is important from the viewpoints of people and what things really mean to them, argues Charmaz. The analysis, which relates to time, culture, and context, reflects both the participant’s and the researcher’s way of thinking. The researcher’s interpretative understanding, rather than the researcher’s explanation, of how the participant creates his or her understanding and meaning of reality is the result of the analysis. This type of theory is in line with symbolic interactionism and both view social life as processual and assume emergent multiple realities (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz argues that grounded theory should focus on meaning, action, and process in the studied social context. The result of a constructivist grounded theory study is more seldom presented as a theory than as a story or a narrative, including categories, told by the researcher with a focus on understanding of social processes. Charmaz states that the researcher’s analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story: it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer. Accordingly, the story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed.

### The debate over grounded theory

Glaser and Strauss continued to practice the grounded theory method in their research projects, although separately. Strauss died a couple of years ago, but Glaser is still actively working. Several researchers have criticized grounded theory from a post-positivistic point of departure during the years and since 1990, there has been a more or less intensive debate about what the grounded theory method is and what it should be. Several researchers (e.g. Annells, 1997) mean that the classic mode of grounded theory rests on a post-positivist ontology of critical realism, meaning that although a real reality exists to be uncovered by inquiry it is never perfectly apprehensible. Epistemologically, the relationship between the researcher and those who are the focus of research in the classic mode of grounded theory is still objectivist although modified. However, Glaser’s emphasis on emergence indicates an objectivist/dualist view; meaning that “the things” emerge objectively without any influence by the researcher. Charmaz differentiates between an objectivist and a constructivist view of grounded theory. She argues that objectivist grounded theory, represented by Glaser’s classic mode of grounded theory, starts out with the conception that data

represent facts about the social reality and that meaning is inherent in data, and that the researcher’s aim is to discover this meaning. This means that the research is characterized by positivistic ideals and that the neutral researcher can generate a true theory that explains this reality. However, other critics stress that Glaser puts emphasis on the importance that the investigator approach the research field with openness and theoretical sensitivity and without preconceptions. In addition, Glaser warns the researcher against exploring the literature before entering the research field. This ignoring of the literature has been highly questioned by critics who propose that the literature and preconceptions instead be “bracketed” and used for comparison with emerging categories.

Some critics argue that Strauss and Corbin’s approach is more open and reflexive than Glaser’s, and emphasizes the importance of listening to the voice of the actor in grounded theory research. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) can thereby be seen as partly alienated from positivistic thinking and therefore they represent a post-positivist position, although not fully free from positivist assumptions. Strauss and Corbin have not explicitly presented the philosophical perspectives of their reformulated mode of grounded theory. However, in their book (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) they address the point that a “reality that cannot actually be known, but is always interpreted” (p. 22). They also state, “doing analysis is in fact making interpretations” which might indicate a relativist ontology. In Strauss and Corbin’s reformulated grounded theory, theory is created or constructed in an interactional process between researcher and data, indicating epistemological subjectivism. However, some critics argue that Strauss and Corbin put the stress on a standardized coding process and advocate for the inclusion of existing theories into the analysis.

Glaser (2002b) has also made critical comments on Charmaz’ description of a constructivist grounded theory and argues that in grounded theory the researcher does not compose the study. Grounded theory is neither a description, referring to Strauss and Corbin’s work, or a story making, alluding to Charmaz’ work. Rather, Glaser says, the result of a grounded theory study is emergent from a careful application of the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling. He calls Charmaz’ constructivist grounded theory a misnomer where the concept “constructionism” is used to legitimize “forcing”. He argues that a more suitable name for her method would be Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA).

## Conclusion

How can this debate on grounded theory be understood? After 1967 when *The discovery of grounded theory* was published, Glaser left the academy, at least for quite a number of years. This “escape” from the academy may mean that he hardly was involved in the academic debate on theory of science that influenced qualitative research at that time. Strauss and Corbin, however, remained in close contact with the academy and the academic debate until Strauss died some years ago. Could it be that the controversies between the two founders of grounded theory were affected by these “cultural” differences and lack of equality?

In my view, the following assumptions are reasonable:

1. It seems as if Glaser’s position in the classic mode of grounded theory remains fairly close to traditional positivism with an interactionist perspective and a foundation of symbolic interactionist theory. This mode of grounded theory was occurring in the 1960s.
2. Strauss’ and Corbin’s reformulated mode of grounded theory has moved more into post-positivism with an intention to also render the voice of the informants into the results and is driven by a constructivist view of science. This mode of grounded theory was occurring in the 1990s.
3. The constructivist mode of grounded theory, represented by Charmaz, is part of the interpretative tradition and an approach between positivism and postmodernism. This mode of grounded theory was occurring in the 2000s.

In the classic mode of grounded theory (see point 1 above), which has a position close to positivism, the researcher attends the data as objective facts and discovers theory from them. The result of the classic mode of grounded theory can be presented as a hypothesis that can be further tested using qualitative or quantitative methods or as a theory explaining or predicting the studied area. In constructivist grounded theory (see point 3 above), which is positioned within the interpretative tradition, data and analysis are seen as social constructions reflecting both the participant and researcher. The result of a constructivist grounded theory can be presented as narratives or as a story specifying categories, conditions, conceptual relationships and consequences. Ontologically, Strauss and Corbin’s reformulated grounded theory (see point 2 above) has some positivist leanings but to some extent, this version also acknowledges the interpretivist view.

Accordingly, grounded theory has developed in a historical context and has been (and continues to be) modified by the era within which it exists. I argue, in line with other researchers (e.g. Annells, 1997), that we, as researchers, are not always consciously aware of how an era is shaping our research practice. This means that ontological and epistemological standpoints, i.e. our assumptions about what reality is and how it can be known, are embedded in the different modes of grounded theory and need our reflected standpoints. In my opinion, grounded theory has renewed itself, which makes it even more qualified as a useful research approach with capacity to manage the complex and continuously changing social world.

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