

What is Grounded Theory, Anyway? (Updated from 2011 HSR&D CyberSeminar)

An Overview with Examples from Qualitative Research on Women Veterans

Alison B. Hamilton, Ph.D., M.P.H.

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HEALTHCARE SYSTEM



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Poll Question:

Do you conduct qualitative research, or plan to conduct qualitative research in the future?

Yes, I conduct qualitative research.

I plan to conduct qualitative research in the future.

No, I do not conduct qualitative research.

Poll Question:

Are you familiar with grounded theory?

Yes, very familiar

Yes, somewhat familiar

I have heard of it

No, not familiar

Overview of Presentation

- Brief history of grounded theory (GT)
- Basic premises and key components of GT
- Approaching data analysis with GT
- When GT may and may not be appropriate
- Other approaches besides GT
- Qualitative studies that used GT: focus on women Veterans
- Suggestions for working with qualitative data
- Importance of qualitative research in health services research on women Veterans
- Questions/comments?

First, some history

- GT developed by 2 sociologists, Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss
 - Roots in symbolic interactionism (Herbert Blumer): focus on how meaning is created during social interactions
- Developed the constant comparison method, which became GT, with publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967)
 - Developed at a time when qualitative research was seen as unscientific or non-systematic
- Glaser and Strauss came to disagree about GT
 - Glaser: GT is a general methodology, a conceptual theory

History, continued

- GT has been conceptualized as both a general methodology and an approach/strategy for qualitative methodology
- GT has become the paradigm of choice in qualitative research
 - Why? It offers a solution to what to do with a pile of non-numerical data; provides a set of procedures, and a means of generating theory

History, continued

- MANY others have taken on GT in different ways, e.g.,
 - Clarke: *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn* (2005)
 - Charmaz: *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006, 2nd ed, March 2014)
 - Corbin & Strauss: *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (2007; 4th ed Dec 2014)
 - Morse, Stern, Corbin, Bowers: *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation* (2009)
 - Bryant & Charmaz (Eds): *SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (2010)
 - Clarke & Charmaz (Eds): *Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis* (2013)

Basic premises of GT

- Theory comes from data, i.e., theory is “grounded” in data
- Everything related to the subject of study is data
- Approach data to find theory, rather than approach data with theory
- Allow data to move toward a hypothesis, rather than start with a hypothesis
- Trying to answer the question, “What’s really going on, and how?”
- Start data analysis EARLY, after first data collection episode
 - No break between data collection & analysis

Key components of GT

(per early work of Glaser & Strauss)

- Fit
 - Do the concepts “emerge” from with what’s been described by participants (i.e., incidents)
- Relevance
 - Does the theory address something of core concern that emerges from the data?
- Workability
 - Does the theory explain how a phenomenon is being addressed/solved/managed? Can it predict future behavior?
- Modifiability
 - Can the theory be modified upon introduction of new data? “living quality” of the theory → relevance and value

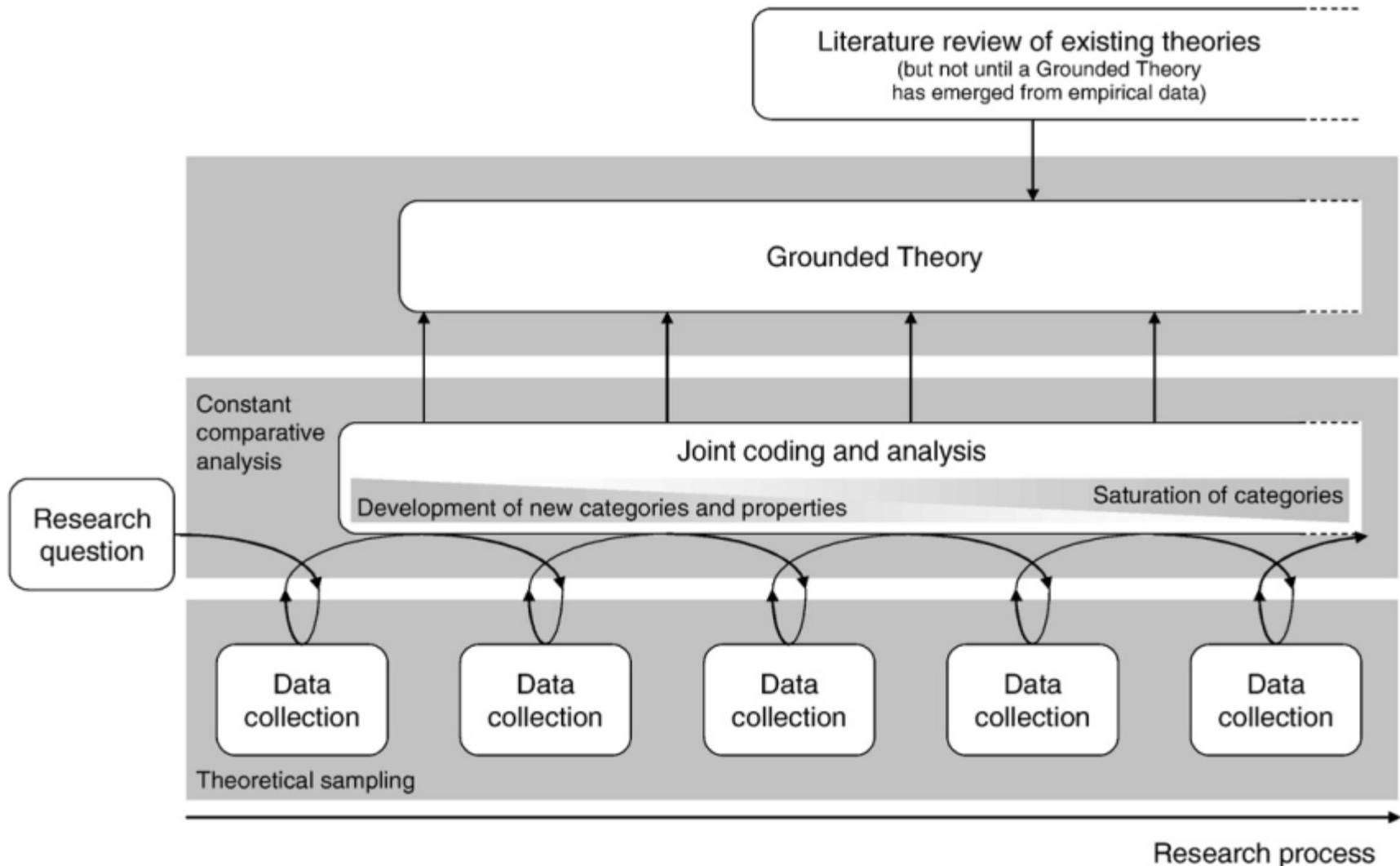
Other components of GT

- “Hard-core” GT (Glaserian GT)
 - No pre-existing knowledge about topic (e.g., through literature review)
 - No taping or transcribing; move from notes to concepts
 - No discussion of emergent theory (limit ideas to data only, not to others’ impressions/ideas)

Approaching analysis with GT

- “Open coding” or “substantive coding”
 - Inductive approach: go with what the data says
 - Identify the “substance”
 - Can be very micro-level (e.g., line-by-line)
- Codes are combined to generate concepts
 - Codes change over time
 - Concepts change over time
 - Constant comparison across data sources is critical

Approaching analysis with GT



from Wagne, Lukassen, Mahlendorf, 2010

Approaching analysis with GT:

“Axial coding” & “selective coding”

- Axial coding proposed by Strauss & Corbin in 1990
 - Putting data back together by making connections across codes, categories, concepts
- Selective coding happens after open coding
 - Focus on particular concept and revisit data
 - May revisit subset of data that pertains to concept (theoretical sampling)

Approaching analysis with GT: Writing memos

- Writing about what's being observed in the data; developing theory via memos
- Keeping track of ideas, relationships between codes, emergent concepts
- There are no rules about how a memo should look; memos should be free-flowing, stream of consciousness, and constant throughout analysis
- Reflecting on one's role in the research

When might GT be appropriate?

- When the goal is to generate concepts that explain a given phenomenon (“why” or “how,” not “what”)
- When research design and data collected lend themselves to the development of theory

When might GT not be appropriate?

- When straight description of a phenomenon is the goal (not “why” but “what”)
- When theory is not the goal of the project
- When the project was not initially set up to explore a given phenomenon (sometimes)

What else is there besides GT?

- Miles & Huberman: *Qualitative Data Analysis* (1984, 1994) → Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2013)
- Creswell: *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (2006) [five approaches: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies]
- Bernard & Ryan: *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches* (2009)
- Saldaña: *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2009, 2nd ed, 2012)
- Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson: *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (2011)
- Flick (Ed): *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Analysis* (2013) [chapters on multiple analytic strategies]

What else is there besides GT?

Choose your Method: A Comparison of Phenomenology, Discourse Analysis, and Grounded Theory (Starks & Trinidad, *QHR*, 2007)

- Phenomenology
 - Study how people make meaning of their lived experience
- Discourse analysis
 - Examine how language is used to accomplish personal, social, and political projects
- Grounded theory
 - Develop explanatory theories of basic social processes studied in context
 - “Grounded theory examines the “six Cs” of social processes (causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions) to understand the patterns and relationships among these elements (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).”

What else is there besides GT?

Starks & Trinidad, cont.

Applied all 3 methods to a single data set

- Interview study with 25 primary care physicians (PCPs) that explored their use of informed decision making (IDM) in the context of prostate cancer screening
- One's analytic approach shapes the research questions, attention to data, and conclusions—and, products

Additional considerations in qualitative data analysis: establishing trustworthiness

Lincoln & Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985)

- Using a constructivist approach to qualitative research [instead of a positivist approach]
 - Credibility [internal validity]
 - Transferability [external validity]
 - Dependability [reliability]
 - Confirmability [objectivity]

Getting in the data: some examples from qualitative research on women Veterans

Hamilton, Poza, Washington

Pathways to homelessness among women Veterans
(*Women's Health Issues*, 2011)

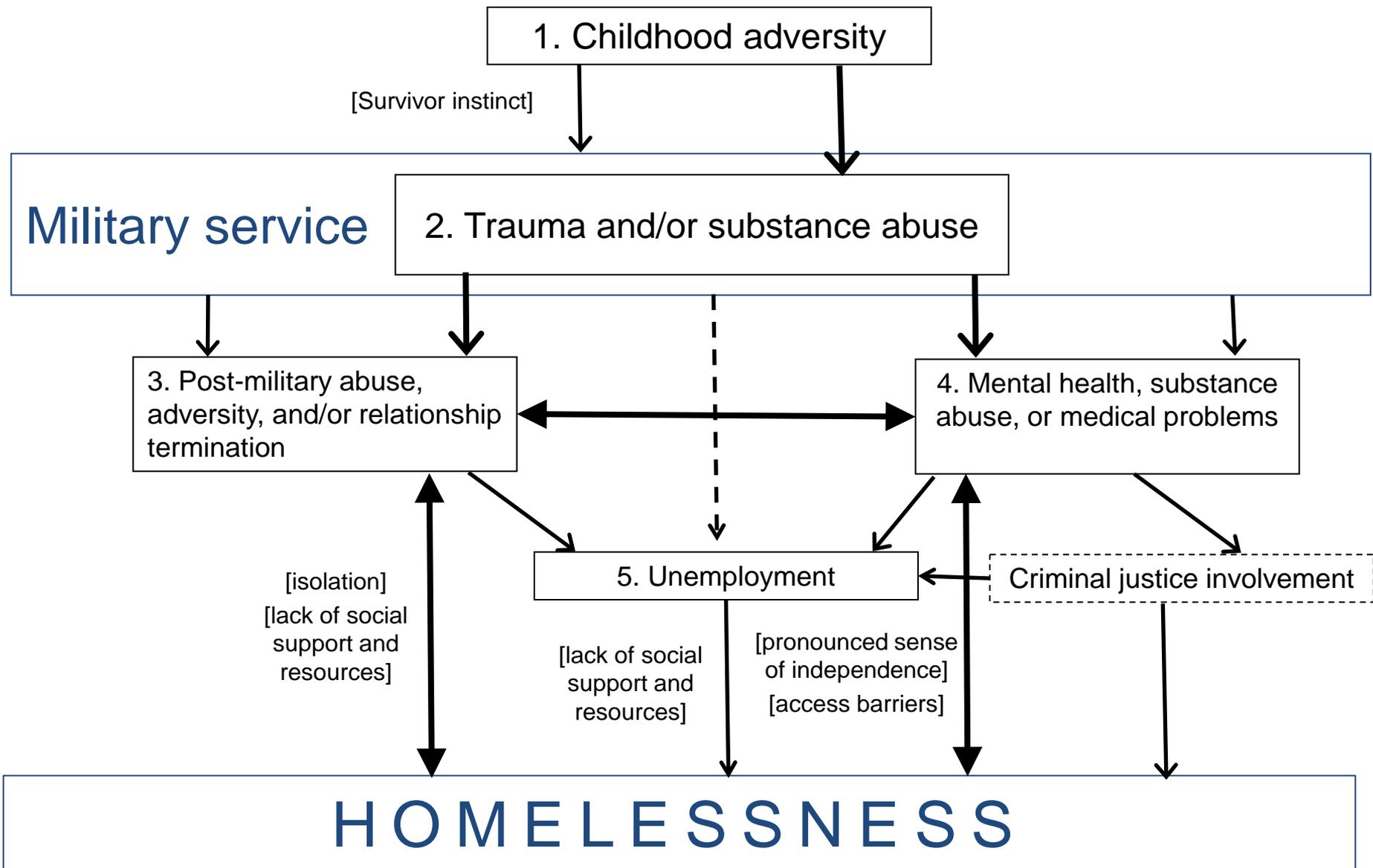
- 3 focus groups conducted to understand how risk factors (identified in survey) “work”
- Semi-structured interview guide
- Used constant comparison approach/GT
 - Why? Interested in developing theory about how women Veterans become homeless, in order to identify critical junctures for intervention/prevention

Getting in the data: some examples from qualitative research on women Veterans

Four iterative stages in constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965):

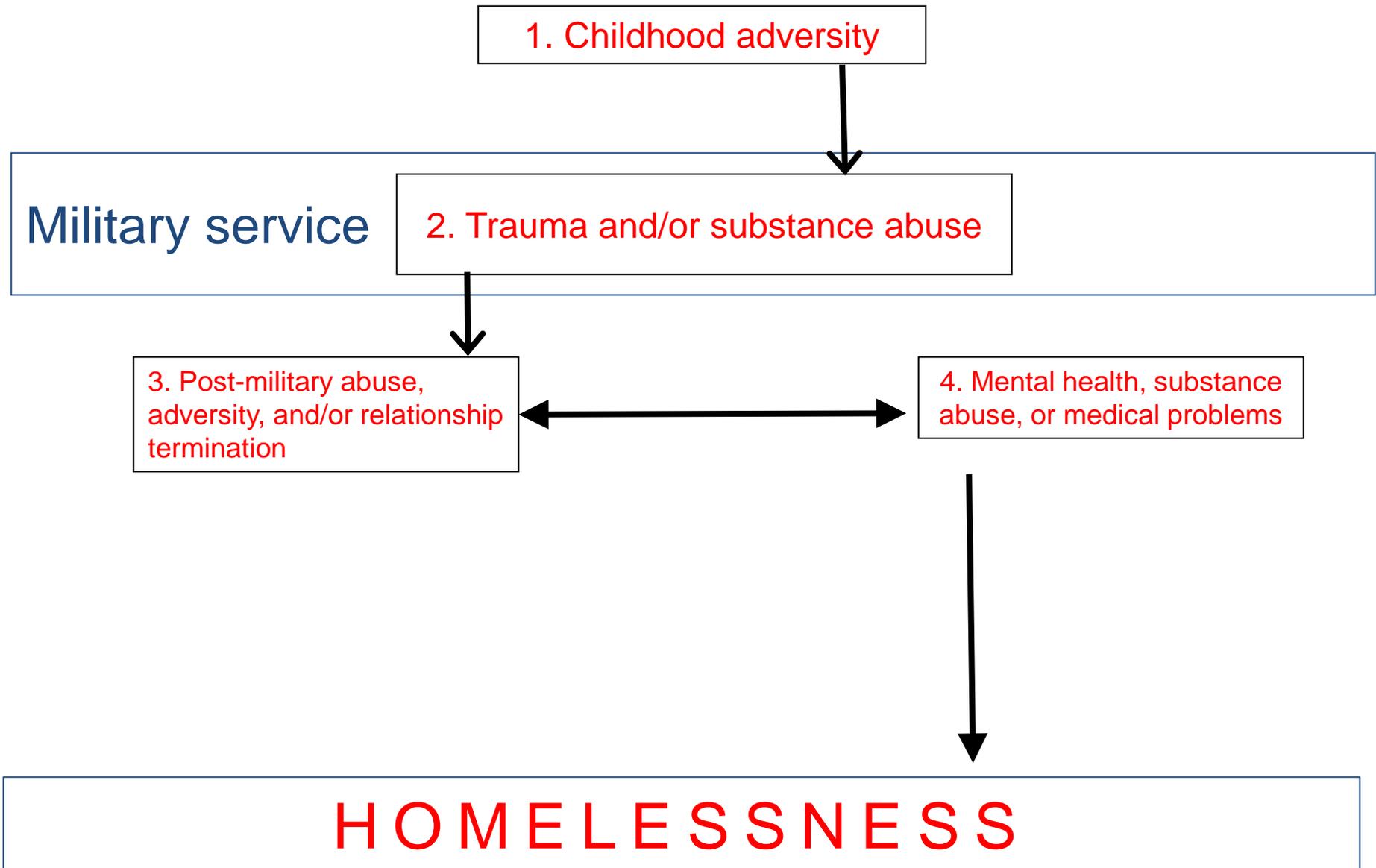
- 1) comparing “incidents” (i.e., discrete narratives of experiences) → generating categories
 - e.g., experience of pre-military homelessness led to category of pre-military adversity
- 2) integrating categories
 - discovery of relationships among categories
- 3) delimiting a theory for how the categories relate to each other
 - e.g., “roots” of homelessness
- 4) writing the theory
 - “web of vulnerability”

Web of homelessness vulnerability



Hamilton, Poza, Washington, Women's Health Issues. 2011 Jul-Aug;21(4 Suppl).

Web of homelessness vulnerability



Getting in the data: some examples from qualitative research on women Veterans

Mattocks et al.

Women Veterans' Reproductive Health Preferences and Experiences: A Focus Group Analysis (*WHI*, 2011)

- Focus group data (5 groups, n=25)
- Semi-structured interview guide
- Used concepts from GT
 - Independent open coding → code definitions
 - Coders compared codes, resolved discrepancies, refined, achieved final coding structure (25 codes)
 - Codes were combined (axial coding) into broader categories, which became themes
 - Reported 5 major themes across groups & participants

Suggestions for working with qualitative data

- Consider which approach best suits the goals of your project, and establish research design accordingly
- If you plan to use GT, specify whose version of GT, read the sources, and make sure they are consistent with what you are proposing
 - If you plan to diverge from or modify GT, be explicit about the changes
- During analysis, check original GT sources to make sure you're still using the version you had selected
- Consider using more than one analytic approach to your data
 - Consider using methods “consistent with,” “adapted from,” “guided by” GT principles

Suggestions for working with qualitative data

- Make sure everyone on the analytic team has a shared understanding of the analytic process
- Document your and your team's analytic process
- In your manuscripts, spell out your process in a way that non-qualitative audiences will understand (strive for transparency)

Importance of qualitative research in health services research on women Veterans

- Bean-Mayberry's systematic review (2010) found that most studies of women Veterans have been observational/descriptive
 - Trend toward more implementation research, which will increasingly involve qualitative methods
- With large-scale VA initiatives such as PACT, a more in-depth understanding of women Veterans' healthcare preferences and experiences is needed
 - Qualitative research can contribute to development of services that are attuned to women's preferences

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THANK YOU to all of my colleagues who have informed this presentation!

For more information:

Alison B. Hamilton, Ph.D., M.P.H.

alison.hamilton@va.gov

alisonh@ucla.edu