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

An Overview with Examples from Qualitative Research on Women Veterans

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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)
  • Morse, Stern, Corbin, Bowers: *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation* (2009)
  • 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 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?

- Creswell: *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (2006) [five approaches: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies]
- 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


- 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

1. Childhood adversity
   [Survivor instinct]

2. Trauma and/or substance abuse

3. Post-military abuse, adversity, and/or relationship termination
   [isolation]
   [lack of social support and resources]

4. Mental health, substance abuse, or medical problems
   [pronounced sense of independence]
   [access barriers]

5. Unemployment
   [lack of social support and resources]

Military service

Criminal justice involvement

HOMELESSNESS

Web of homelessness vulnerability

1. Childhood adversity

2. Trauma and/or substance abuse

3. Post-military abuse, adversity, and/or relationship termination

4. Mental health, substance abuse, or medical problems

Military service

HOMELESSNESS
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
References noted


Additional sources of interest:


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

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