

When and How to Use Extant Literature in Classic Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

Glaser and Strauss (1967) sprinkled suggestions about the use of the literature throughout their seminal work as did Glaser in subsequent years. They, however, did not lay out a clear and structured overview of how to use the literature. The aim of this paper is to weave together the recommendations from classic grounded theory originators and to describe how, why, and when to review the literature and which literature to review. The paper includes a section debunking the no literature myth followed by descriptions of the three phases of the classic grounded theory literature review—the introduction phase, the integration phase, and the disposition phase. The three phases work together to substantiate, confirm, and enhance an emerging grounded theory and situate it within the existing body of knowledge.

KEYWORDS: literature review, extant literature, grounded theory, classic grounded theory.

This paper lays out a systematic approach to the literature review that is consistent with the classic grounded theory method as established by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further by Glaser in subsequent publications. Their ideas about the pre-investigation literature review adhere to the foundational assumptions of the classic grounded theory method including discovery, emergence, and a foundation based upon participants' perspectives. Through sentences and short paragraphs, Glaser and Strauss sprinkled suggestions about the use of the literature throughout their seminal work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967), as did Glaser in subsequent years. They, however, did not articulate a complete and structured overview of how to use the literature. Much has been written in intervening years, mostly focusing on misunderstandings. Few have attempted to piece together Glaser and Strauss' advice into a cohesive whole. Even the most adamant proponents of classic grounded theory have struggled to rectify Glaser and Strauss's (1967) suggestions about the literature review with the exigencies of authoritarian social structures that have strict rules for reviewing the literature. This paper explains how a classic grounded theory literature review can be accomplished, even within strict institutional standards. The aim of this paper is to weave together the classic grounded theory originators' advice and describe what, how, why, and when to review the literature. Recommendations in this paper derive from original sources of classic grounded theory and other proponents of the method but also interweave complementary, sometimes surprising, views expressed by authors of remodeled versions of grounded theory and also advice from general research methods literature.

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The grounded theory literature review is defined for this paper as the systematic selection, interpretation, and review of published and unpublished material on a particular topic. The literature may include empirical data, research findings, ideas, theories, recordings, and other collections and may include the work of researchers, scholars, and theorists along with other historic and current grounded sources. A literature review can also include conceptual and opinion pieces that provide insight into others' thinking about a topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As you read further, you will see that the appropriate grounded theory literature review is intended to be focused, deliberate, and useful.

The preliminary grounded theory literature review does not focus on concepts from a fixed research question, as is customary in quantitative research, because grounded theory research questions begin very broad and evolve as data are collected and analyzed. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest, this can be uncomfortable for researchers since it challenges the accepted approaches of some faculty, ethics committees, and funding sources whose background in research is often quantitative and deductive. This paper proposes strategies to avoid these conflicts and demonstrates that an institutionally required pre-investigation literature review is sometimes acceptable, even to classic grounded theory purists, as a strategy to move forward with research. The paper includes a section debunking the "no literature review" myth followed by descriptions of the three phases of the classic grounded theory literature review—the introduction phase, the integration phase, and the disposition phase.

The No Literature Review Myth

What do classic grounded theory sources have to say about the literature review? Contrary to what some critics have put forth, the originators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001; Glaser & Holton, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) call for an extensive review of the literature, both within the area of study and in other fields. Andrews (2006), an experienced classic grounded theorist, agrees that a preliminary review of the literature is "entirely consistent" with the established principles of grounded theory. The issue of *when* to, rather than *whether* to perform the literature review sets classic grounded theory apart from other research methods. Glaser and Strauss established the ideal method of researching the extant literature, while recognizing the practical issues that can arise. They propose arguments in favor of avoiding a pre-investigation literature review but acknowledge that one might be needed.

Since qualitative studies are generally exploratory, with little written about the topic, Creswell and Creswell (2018) agree that researchers must use the literature as a complement to participant-focused inquiry, rather than as a springboard for preconceived questions. In the *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that delaying the empirical and theoretical literature within the area under study is one effective strategy to assure that categories in the evolving theory will not be contaminated by received ideas less suitable to the research focus. Glaser suggested that the researcher should choose areas for the initial literature review that will not pre-conceptually contaminate the emerging theory but will enhance theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1998). Dey (2007), who argues in favor of a pre-investigation literature review, nevertheless recognized that Glaser and Strauss did not advise investigators to completely abstain from reviewing the literature, but rather to engage broadly and with literature from other academic and non-academic fields.

Glaser and Strauss's suggestion to read the literature of different disciplines at the beginning of the research process is consistent with Abraham Kaplan's position. Kaplan, who believed that a discipline can remain autonomous even though sharing and borrowing the science of others, wrote,

For the domain of truth has no fixed boundaries within it. In the one world of ideas there are no barriers to trade or to travel. Each discipline may take from others techniques, concepts, laws, data, models, theories, or explanations—in short, whatever it finds useful in its own inquiries. (Kaplan, 2011/1998, p. 4)

As Glaser and Strauss suggested, then, reading widely from other disciplines broadens the researcher's knowledge and sensitivity to a realm of theoretical codes that might not be present in other disciplines' literature. Dey (2007) and Hallberg (2010) agree that working with a wide range of interdisciplinary ideas, including Glaser's coding families, sharpens theoretical sensitivity, avoiding "the blinkered vision of an established theoretical framework" (Dey, 2007, p. 75). In addition to reading widely from the research of other disciplines, students of Glaser and Strauss were encouraged to read good theoretical studies (Stern & Covan, 2001) in order to become familiar with the structure of the theory.

Glaser (1998) initially reiterated that the researcher should avoid a phenomenon-specific pre-investigation literature review in the substantive area, but should review the literature when the grounded theory is nearly completed. Reacting to practical exigencies, however, Glaser later acknowledged that the investigator must fulfill the basic institutional requirements of the university or funding source because, without it, the research would not be possible. He wrote,

If the regulations state that any Ph.D. research proposal must be accompanied by a literature review, then do a literature [review]. If the regulations state that a literature review must become the first paper of the Ph.D., then again, give them a literature review. (Glaser, 2011, p. 56)

Guthrie and Lowe (2011) agreed with Glaser when they advised that, when faced with institutional requirements the researcher should "fully comply with the university regulations, and write a logically plausible (but quite irrelevant) literature review" (p. 61). Glaser (2011) and Guthrie and Lowe (2011) agree that novice grounded theorists should be assured that they can discover a classic grounded theory even if required to perform extensive pre-investigation literature reviews.

The reasons for avoiding an extensive pre-investigation literature review, however, are integral to the assumptions of the method—that is, a pre-investigation literature review threatens to derail emergence and diminish the focus on the participants' perspectives. Glaser points out that the results of an early literature review are inimical to generating grounded theory. As suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1998), there are a number of interrelated reasons to avoid a pre-investigation literature review.

First, the investigator may become enthralled, or "grabbed," by received concepts that neither fit nor are relevant (Glaser, 1998). Although it is possible that some concepts can be borrowed from extant theory if they fit the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), other concepts in the literature may be fascinating to the investigator but wildly unrelated to the processes occurring in the study participants' lives or simply unimportant to the participants. Dunne (2011) is correct that this is a pragmatic view because it can save time and energy by guiding the researcher away from avenues that may be of little ultimate importance.

Second, the investigator may derail a potential emergent theory through a preconceived academic or discipline-specific problem of no relevance to the substantive area of the research (Glaser, 1998). Dey (2007) labeled that "ploughing ahead along an established theoretical furrow regardless of the diversity and richness of the data" (p. 175). This often happens when the novice

researcher joins a supervisor’s ongoing study. The investigator may find that merely selecting data for a received concept hinders the generation of new categories because the major effort is data selection, rather than discovery or emergence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, for a PhD thesis, Amélia Didier was asked to join an ongoing faculty study about interdisciplinary health care teams. Didier (2019) chose to use classic grounded theory to learn about hospitalized patients’ perspectives on interdisciplinary teams. She quickly learned that patients had no knowledge of nor interest in interdisciplinary teams. The patients were focused on seeking *aufgehobenheit*, a German term which encompasses the concepts of safety, dignity, humanity and respect (Didier, 2019, p. iv). In other words, patients main concern was to feel in safe hands, well cared for. Fortunately, Didier was allowed to proceed with the grounded theory, focus on the patients’ main concern, and develop the rich and useful theory of *aufgehobenheit*.

Although Didier (2019) was successful in re-directing her research focus, Kaplan agreed with Glaser and Strauss’s concern, proposing that

officers of the professional associations, honored elders, editors of journals, reviewers, faculties, committees on grants, fellowship and prizes—all exert a steady pressure of conformity to professional standards. . . . The innate conservatism, or at least inertia, of professional standards has from time to time stood in the way of scientific progress. (Kaplan, 2011/1998, p. 4)

Guthrie and Lowe (2011) go so far as to propose that those who demand to be in control cannot let go of their pre-understanding—they are likely “experts in their fields” who think they know the answers already.

Third, the investigator may become imbued with speculative, non-scientifically related interpretations and theoretical connections, likely through a review of deductive, pre-conceived theories (Glaser, 1998). Every discipline has popular speculative theories, philosophical frameworks, or conceptual models written in the jargon of the profession. Use of these interpretations and theoretical connections can hijack inductive concept emergence if they are not relevant or do not fit the data. Suddaby (2006) suggests that this will force the researcher into testing hypotheses, rather than directly observing. Thornberg and Dunne (2020), on the other hand, warn that when researchers view an extant theory as correct or superior, they will become “data resistant, disregarding or overlooking data that do not support that particular theory, and their theory will act as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 207).

Fourth, the investigator may become awed by famous or celebrated scholars, theorists, or researchers, thus detracting from the investigators’ own self-valuation. Glaser (1978) proposed that being doctrinaire or revering ‘great scholars’ interferes both with sensitivity to the data and with generating ideas that fit and work best since the investigator may configure the data to fit the doctrine. He also wrote that pre-conceived or ungrounded theory “derives from any combination of several sources; whims and wisdoms of usually deceased great men, conjecture and assumptions about the “oughts” of life, and other extant speculative theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 143), and thus is unsuited to use in grounded theories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) agreed with this concern proposing that it is not unusual for students to become enamored with a previous study to the point that they are nearly paralyzed.

Fifth, the investigator may become what Glaser terms “rhetoricalized,” relying on rhetorical jargon that is in vogue at the time, rather than allowing theory to emerge. Rhetoricalized jargon is a discipline’s authoritarian method of control. It does not pass the test of time well and may fail to cross disciplinary boundaries, limiting the scope and power of emerging theories.

Sixth, the investigator can completely miss the focus of a (yet to emerge) theory. Since classic grounded theory relies on emergence, a purely speculative pre-investigation literature review wastes valuable time and energy and can send the researcher off on useless tangents.

The researcher must understand why a preliminary review of the literature is not recommended. Equally important are guidelines on the timing and the phases of the literature review, the types of literature to be reviewed, and the importance of the literature when situating the new theory among extant works. The following discussion focuses on these issues and offers a three-phase literature review process.

Phases of the Classic Grounded Theory Literature Review

The classic grounded theory literature review is neither performed nor presented in the traditional hypothetical-deductive manner. The discursive literature review, which is traditional with other research methods, is structured around specific concepts articulated in the research question, conducted before the investigation is initiated, and presented in writing preceding the research findings. This is an immediate problem for grounded theories in which research questions are broad, and specific concepts are unknown at the beginning of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) acknowledge that the literature review in qualitative studies may be conducted and presented in a manner that is congruent with the assumptions of the method. The qualitative literature review may be conducted in a serial fashion and presented in a separate section, included in the introduction, or woven into the study as is generally the case with classic grounded theory. Creswell and Creswell also acknowledge that the literature is used less often to set the stage for grounded theory studies, though the eventual breadth will be comparable.

The eventual scope of the grounded theory literature review is both broad and specific—at different points in the research process. Most classic grounded theorists perform the literature review in three phases, with one caveat: they read widely in other fields throughout the research process in order to increase theoretical sensitivity. The three phases include the *introduction phase*, which makes the case for the study; the *integration phase*, in which the extant literature is identified, synthesized, and integrated into the theory; and the *disposition phase*, which situates the new theory in relation to the extant theoretical and empirical literature.

Introduction Phase of the Literature Review

The introduction phase prepares the researcher and builds the case for the research study. The multi-faceted literature review during this phase sets the course for the research. For the reader, it makes the case for the study, which is especially important when institutional and funding entities require a pre-investigation literature review for the research to proceed. The introduction phase of the literature review gives a general overview of the substantive area and indicates gaps in the knowledge base if those are known. It demonstrates the investigator's familiarity with the substantive area, describes the method of investigation, describes the study population, and often gives clues as to the investigator's worldview or philosophic stance.

Review of Literature in the Substantive Area.

As noted previously, the ideal review of literature in the substantive area should be delayed until the integration phase, which is not to suggest that the classic grounded theorist enters a study "empty-headed" as some would suggest. McCallin (2006) reminded us that students and others tend to misunderstand that each research study is about *something* in the beginning, even though

the specific problem is unknown in the early stages. Hallberg (2010) is right that any researcher has acquired years of academic and professional knowledge in their disciplines. Although they moved away from many of the original classic grounded theory tenets, Strauss and Corbin (1998) also made the assumption that most professionals are familiar with the literature in their field. Glaser often reminded Ph.D. candidates in his seminars that they (Ph.D. students) are the institutionally and self-selected elite. Investigators generally begin studies with a depth and breadth of knowledge and a sense of curiosity—something they are interested in. Many will have identified a gap in knowledge early in their academic program or professional career. As a supervisor to Ph.D. students, Andrews (2006) discovered that some will enter the field with a clear question in mind. Since the classic grounded theory is an inductive method of discovery, investigators will begin by asking themselves. “What is going on” with *this* group of people in *this* situation?

Ideally, then, the classic grounded theorist who already has a depth of knowledge would not need to perform an extensive pre-investigation literature review in the substantive area. However, as most classic grounded theorists acknowledge, a literature review in the substantive area may be necessary to verify the investigator’s questions, withstand public scrutiny, establish a defensible rationale for a given project, and fulfill institutional requirements (Andrews, 2006; Ekstrom, 2006; Glaser, 2011; Martin, 2006; McCallin, 2006; Nathaniel, 2006b; Thornberg & Dunne, 2020; Thulesius, 2006). McCallin (2006) wrote,

While the beginner researcher receives that [no literature review] interpretation happily, supervisors and institutional review committees are rather more nervous of such a simplistic approach. Those responsible for student researchers seek some reassurance that the student knows what they are doing, has a general focus, and is at least safe to enter the field. (p. 12).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) admitted that satisfying the reader is more important than the length of the literature review. The researcher must convince the reader that the study was or will be possible in a practical sense, necessary, and potentially significant.

Holton and Walsh (2017) and McCallin (2006) agree that a common strategy to fulfill institutional requirements and satisfy readers is for the investigator to perform a pre-investigation review of the literature that is broad in scope in the substantive area, setting the stage for an exploratory study, while avoiding specific concepts or phenomena. McCallin suggests that the “mental wrestle” for investigators is for the literature review to remain general, avoiding the main interest as much as possible, yet focused enough to meet institutional requirements.

What facets of the literature are reviewed in the introduction phase? In addition to reviewing the general literature around the substantive area, the investigator will review the literature for descriptions of the population of interest, the research method, and often the researcher’s worldview. The researcher may also need to become familiar with population-specific terminology that may be encountered during data gathering.

Review of the Literature Describing the Population.

Descriptions of the population of interest should include enough information to give readers a glimpse of the context and to grab their interest. The investigator will review the literature for demographics of the study population and other statistics, which may also include a historical review (Rhoades, 2011) of the population. For example, to study the homeless female population in Denver, Colorado, the researcher would review the literature from established sources for the

statistics and demographics of the national, state, and city homeless population. Information on weather trends that affect the homeless, crimes committed by or against homeless people, the progression of homelessness, causes of homelessness, special concerns of homeless women, and available resources might also be helpful. If the researcher wants to further limit the study to those who are addicted to methamphetamine, another search of the literature would add information about the prevalence of methamphetamine addiction in the general population versus the homeless population, the risk factors associated with addiction, and the life expectancy of this population. For an exploratory study asking, “what is going on with this population,” this type of literature review may satisfy an institution’s literature review requirement.

Review of the Grounded Theory Methodology/Method Literature

In addition to general literature surrounding the substantive area and the population of interest, the investigator should review the literature about the classic grounded theory method. Although Glaser stipulated that grounded theory is a general method that can be used with both qualitative and quantitative data, it is found to be the most frequently used qualitative method. Yet, paradoxically, many researchers, thesis/dissertation supervisors, ethics committees, and readers are poorly versed in the classic grounded theory methodology, therefore misinterpretations abound. Thulesius (2006) advised the researcher to begin a classic grounded theory study to educate readers on the method’s background, language, procedures, and the rationale for choosing grounded theory. Further, Thulesius proposes that reading the appropriate grounded theory method books repeatedly throughout the research process is the most important facet of reading the literature. The most often cited primary sources of information on the method are *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by Glaser and Strauss (1967), *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1978), and *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussion* (Glaser, 1998). All of Glaser’s subsequent publications are also excellent primary sources for classic grounded theory as well as *Grounded Theory: The Philosophy, Method, and Work of Barney Glaser* (Martin & Gynnild, 2012), *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data* (Holton & Walsh, 2017), and *Experiencing Grounded Theory: A Comprehensive Guide to Learning, Doing, Mentoring, Teaching, and Applying Grounded Theory* (Simmons, 2022) Since all peer reviewers are experienced classic grounded theorists, methodological papers published in the *Grounded Theory Review* are also good sources for classic grounded theory methodology and original theories published there can serve as exemplars for novice researchers.

Because classic grounded theory is vastly different from other methods, a review of the methodological literature should be comprehensive, descriptive, and explanatory. A meticulous review of the method literature can forestall questions and objections from Ph.D. supervisors, ethics committees, and funding sources. The researcher should review the literature on the use of grounded theory’s inductive approach as contrasted with the hypothetical-deductive approach used in many other methods. The review of methods literature should also include the method’s dependence upon participants’ perceptions, conceptualization, category development, and theoretical relationships. Procedures, processes, and language of classic grounded theory that should be covered in the literature review include sampling; data sources; data collection methods; data recording methods (generally field notes); emergence; constant comparison; open, selective, and theoretical coding; memoing; memo sorting; identification of the core category; unique criteria for rigor in grounded theory; and standard ways of writing and presenting grounded theories. A description of the method’s procedures also serves as a primer for grounded theory language. It is always helpful when research supervisors unfamiliar with grounded theory also read the method

literature.

Although Glaser and Strauss wrote the seminal work from which all grounded theory has developed, Strauss and others went on to modify the method and write about grounded theory's perspectives and procedures in significantly remodeled ways—adding procedures, philosophic foundations, new language, and adapted understandings. So, subsequent publications by Strauss and Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1997, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Charmaz (Bryant & Charmaz, 2016; Charmaz, 2000, 2006), Clarke (Clarke, 2005; Clarke et al., 2016, 2018), Birks and Mills (Burks & Mills, 2015), and others, although easy to find in the literature, cannot be used to describe the classic grounded theory.

Review of Extant Theory Literature in the Introduction Phase

Except when modifying an existing grounded theory or developing a formal grounded theory, a review of extant theories should not be performed in the introduction phase of the grounded theory literature review. The goal of classic grounded theory is to use inductive reasoning with a particular type of data from which concepts, categories, and theoretical relationships emerge. As noted previously, reviewing extant theories before gathering data puts the investigator at risk of consciously or unconsciously adopting speculative pre-conceived concepts and finding ways to configure data to conform to them. There are two main exceptions to this tenet. First, extant grounded theories *must* be reviewed during the introduction phase if the purpose of the research is to modify the existing theory. For example, data from front-line nurses' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic might easily modify Nathaniel's (2006a) theory of *Moral Reckoning in Nursing* or Andrews' (2003) theory of *Making Credible: A Grounded Theory of How Nurses Detect and Report Physiological Deterioration in Acutely Ill Patients*, both of which were developed in the early 21st century prior to the pandemic. The extremely difficult context of health care during height of the pandemic vastly affected patients,' physicians,' and nurses' relationships; the structure of health care delivery; and previously rigid ethical parameters, which shifted with each new crippling wave of the pandemic. New, more current studies could modify these two theories to fit real-world circumstances and therefore become more explanatory, predictive, and useful for nurses who might face similar situations during future pandemics or other catastrophic events.

Second, grounded theory researchers must review the theory literature when developing formal grounded theory. Up to this point, the discussion has focused solely on substantive theory, or theory of the middle range that focuses on real-life issues in specific contexts. Formal theory, on the other hand, raises the level of abstraction and expands the context. Glaser defined formal grounded theory as an overarching theory of a "substantive grounded theory core category's general implications [broader than the initial context] generated from, as wide as possible, other data and studies in the same substantive and in other substantive areas" (Glaser, 2007b, p. 4). Thus, the investigator preparing to develop a formal grounded theory must review theoretical literature in the introduction phase. The literature review, in this case, is restricted to empirical research and theories, often from disparate disciplines, that apply directly to the core category and concepts of the original substantive theory. But, to reiterate, unless the investigator intends to modify an existing theory or develop a formal grounded theory, extant theories should not be reviewed during the introduction phase.

Philosophical Foundations Literature

Many universities require Ph.D. students to review the literature surrounding the philosophical foundations of the research method used in a study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) agree with Annells (1996) that the researcher should include philosophical assumptions or worldviews of qualitative research in the literature review. However, the philosophical foundations of classic grounded theory are as controversial as the literature review itself since Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not articulate a philosophical foundation for the method. In fact, Glaser stated emphatically that grounded theory is not based upon a particular philosophy (personal communication). So, what philosophical literature does the investigator review when the method has no established philosophical foundation?

If a review of the philosophical foundations of the grounded theory method is institutionally required, there are three options, each of which includes an acknowledgment that the method has no philosophical foundation. The first option is to present the researcher's own worldview as the foundation of the research study. For example, Holton and Walsh (2017) acknowledge that they hold the critical realist perspective. Thus, their research investigations and analyses are conducted through the critical realist lens. A literature review of critical realism with its implications for the research processes would be appropriate for the introduction phase of the literature review. A second option is to adopt a formal theory of science that includes inductive logic, such as that of Charles Sanders Peirce (1901/1992), as a philosophical foundation for the method. If the investigator chooses to use a philosophy of science as the philosophical foundation, the literature review should include primary source ontology and epistemology elements that logically fit with the classic grounded theory method. The third option is to select symbolic interactionism as the philosophical foundation of the method. Even though Glaser denied a specific foundation of the method, he recognized that symbolic interactionism could serve as a sensitizing agent for grounded theory research (personal communication). That is, symbolic interactionism is not the foundation of the method but can be used as a lens through which to conduct and analyze grounded data. If a researcher chooses to propose symbolic interactionism as the foundation of a research study, the literature review should use primary sources to describe the elements that affect the research process.

Population-Specific Terminology

Sometimes, researchers seeking to closely follow the procedures of classic grounded theory worry that *any* review of any literature, including sources that will help them to understand the study population, will violate the method's precepts. For example, a researcher studying problems encountered by those interested in cryptocurrency found that new terms and unfamiliar language surrounding virtual currency had developed. For example, terms such as *ashraked*, *atomic swap*, and *blockchain*, are not part of common language. Understanding the language or terminology is critical in collecting and analyzing data. The researchers could not pierce the language barrier without familiarizing themselves with these and other critical terms. For that reason, familiarizing oneself with population-specific language is preparatory to a study and is not considered part of the review of literature.

Integration Phase of the Literature Review

The integration phase of the literature review occurs during the data collection and analysis stages of the research process. Finally! A focused literature review of the substantive area is an essential element at this point in grounded theory development. Classic grounded theorists use extant literature in a systematic, yet entirely different manner from quantitative and most qualitative methods. The purpose and process of the literature review in classic grounded theory is unique and the type of literature to be reviewed can be vast—unrestricted by conventional rules. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) theorizing begs for comparative analysis, creating what Creswell and Creswell (2018) labeled, a reciprocal relationship between theory and data. Once the analysis is well underway, the grounded theorist compares the literature to the emerging theory and uses the literature to support, corroborate, and illustrate the emerging theory. Glaser (1978) believed that well done grounded theories can transcend previous works while integrating them into the new theory, thus providing a theory of greater scope. Martin (2006) contends that grounded theory can help researchers to cross disciplinary boundaries and use existing literature to develop more potent theories. Strübing (2007) points out that the secret lies in how to properly use previous knowledge. Following is a discussion of the process of the literature review in the integration phase and the types of literature to be considered.

Process of Literature Integration

Since grounded theory is an inductive method and the problem is not known beforehand, the focused literature review cannot occur until data collection is underway and analysis has begun. Glaser (1998) proposed that the literature review in the substantive area should be done when the theory is nearly completed, during the sorting and writing the theory. Specifically, Holton and Walsh (2017) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that similarities and convergences with the literature can begin to be reviewed once the analytic core of categories emerges. At that time the literature can be used as additional data to be constantly compared with the emergent concepts, elaborating emerging concepts and directing further theoretical sampling (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Grounded theory analysis occurs quickly and each new hypothesis directs the researcher to new sources of library material and exceptionally revealing comparison groups (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To be clear, as concepts emerge from the data, literature searches are conducted for those specific concepts or others that are closely related. For example, Ekstrom (2006) was led to papers about how women experienced menopause and papers about status passages, since these were the concepts emerging from her data. Stern turned to the literature on fathering and family dynamics (Stern & Covan, 2001). Once the concepts and categories emerge from the data and it is time for a literature search, the researcher must carefully choose sources of data and search terms.

Library databases serve as invaluable tools for locating existing literature in the electronic age. However, Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2010) warn that databases are limited in their coverage since single databases only cover a subset of academic journals. Further, some databases do not include all papers included in each journal. For that reason, Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic propose that researchers conduct searches of multiple databases. But what are the best search terms? Glaser and Strauss (1967) instructed their students to cultivate several functional synonyms in order to fully explore relevant literature. For example, when searching the literature for moral reckoning, literature on moral distress, moral outrage, moral agony, moral uncertainty, and other possible synonyms was searched. Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic recognize that specific topics can be described using an almost indefinite number of words. One strategy to overcome this problem is to scour books such as a thesaurus or Rodale's (1978) *Synonym Finder* using a snowball

technique by moving from one term to another in an attempt to gather many possible common language search terms. Glaser and Strauss focused on library literature and methods to search a brick-and-mortar library, but in the electronic age researchers have almost unlimited access to many types of literature.

Types of Literature to Integrate

In grounded theory, there is no clear distinction between data and literature since existing theoretical and empirical literature can be integrated into an emerging theory. Simmons (2022) states that one unique feature of classic grounded theory is that literature is often treated as if it were data. In fact, Glaser (2007a) proposed that “all is data,” blurring the line between data and empiric literature. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stressed that the decision about what sources of data to use is crucial to the outcome of the study. So, what types of literature-cum-data will the researcher use?

Many sources of library material are available for comparison and integration. In fact, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed that a researcher should use *any* relevant material bearing on the substantive area. One of the best sources of literature is existing behavioral research, which offers data, categories, theoretical relationships, and illustrations. Most types of qualitative research are grounded in the data but should be carefully evaluated before being integrated into or compared with the emerging theory. Once the emerging theory has shape, extant themes, ideas, hypotheses, and concepts can be analyzed, compared, and integrated if they are found to be relevant and if they fit and work. The researcher must be careful, though, because words used in existing literature may not have the same meaning or relevance as the emerging theory. Other sources of library data include letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, government documents, speeches, sermons, annual reports, and company files (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For example, Glaser and Strauss found a collection of interviews with very poor New Yorkers in the early 20th century, which offered a vivid picture of poverty during that era (1967). These types of documents tend to be used almost exclusively for verification of the emerging theory or for illustration. In today’s age of information technology, there are many sources of data. Blogs, for instance, can offer rich information that can be useful in grounded theory studies.

Formal grounded theory, especially, makes use of empiric literature and existing theories. Glaser (2011) suggested that a major source of data for generating a formal grounded theory includes a secondary analysis of data collected for other reasons. Caches of secondary analysis include those of interviews, speeches, collections of letters, journals, and so forth. Glaser wrote, “But it amazes me how many data sources just bursting for use in a formal grounded theory such as readers, journals, documents, researched newspaper articles, or areas of much literature coverage with arrays of articles” (Glaser, 2011, p. 262). When the analysis is complete, the literature review has been fully integrated, and the theory has been written the researcher is ready to present a disposition of the newly emerged theory.

Disposition Phase

The disposition phase occurs after the theory is written. During this phase, the researcher prepares the discussion section of the research study, often chapter five of a traditional thesis or dissertation. Creswell and Creswell (2018) agree that this is appropriate for a grounded theory study. The ongoing development of knowledge is the incessant interaction between induction and deduction between empirical and theoretical realms (de Groot, 1969) in which hypotheses link the two worlds together (van de Wijngaert et al., 2014). Therefore, the literature reviewed at this point

should not be an exhaustive (and exhausting) review of all literature, but rather a carefully analytic meaningful review of related extant empiric and theory literature. Stern and Covan (2001) wrote,

Without reverence to existing knowledge, even grounded theories remain sterile: a researcher is unable to add to the body of knowledge expected in a research enterprise. In other words, without this step of comparing and coordinating the work of other scholars, a researcher may not develop his or her theory completely and others may not be able to develop a theory further in the future. (p. 25)

In this section of the written research study, the researcher provides a scholarly discussion about the position and contribution of the new theory in relation to extant literature. During the disposition phase, the order and relative position of the new theory is established in terms of the discipline's knowledge base, placing the theory among other researchers' work on the same ideas. The discussion in this phase of the literature review can add a new dimension to existing work (Stern & Covan, 2001) or extend the theory of others. The new theory will usually, if not invariably, "transcend diverse previous works while integrating them into a new theory of greater scope than extant ones" (Glaser, 1978, p. 10). The fully emerged theory becomes a powerful instrument that can clarify, synthesize, and organize prior grounded theories and refute flawed theories, thus contributing to the knowledge base of a discipline. Thus, each work adds to or corrects those before it, moving closer to knowledge that is true and correct—what Peirce called moving humankind toward the *final opinion* (Houser & Kloesel, 1992).

The approach to the literature review during the disposition phase is important. Glaser advised his students to measure extant literature against the newly emerged theory, rather than the other way around. He warned researchers to avoid an attitude of reverence for extant works or to search for their own best ideas in previous works in order to legitimate the new theories—"as if they could not be allowed to generate on their own" (Glaser, 1978, p. 137). Nor should there be an implication that the current theory was derived from a previous work merely to legitimize the new theory. Idolization, Glaser proposed, should be replaced with the thought that "he *too* was working on these ideas" (p. 138). In other words, the researcher should not give older works precedence over the newly generated theory. However, Glaser (1978) also advised that the researcher should not attempt to debunk old theories since a vigorous justification of the new theory, beyond its normal justification, would not be useful, and the good aspects of the extant theory could be lost in the bargain. The secret is to compare and contrast the new theory with existing works while maintaining the power of the new theory and respecting the old.

Conclusion

The literature review of a classic grounded theory study is an integral piece of a newly emerged theory, which enhances both the new and old, adds to the knowledge base, and positions the new theory in relation to extant works. Consistent with the classic grounded theory method, this paper lays out a rigorous and systematic three-phase approach to the literature review. It also refutes common misunderstandings of critics that claim the timing and procedures of the grounded theory literature review are inadequate. The paper offers strategies to avoid conflicts and demonstrates that an institutionally required pre-investigation literature review is sometimes accepted as a strategy to move forward with research, even to classic theory purists. The paper gathers together Glaser and Strauss's recommendations and establishes a clear roadmap for conducting a literature review for a classic grounded theory study.

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