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Grounded Theory: Its Three Schools, with a Worked Example

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Abstract

Grounded theory is a qualitative research design whose purpose is to construct a theory from data, rather than to test a theory chosen in advance. It is widely cited in methodology chapters, but the label is often applied to studies that collect all their data at once and report a set of themes, which is closer to thematic analysis. This article explains what grounded theory commits a study to: collecting and analyzing data together, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, memo-writing and theoretical saturation. It then describes the three main schools (the classic version associated with Glaser, the version developed by Strauss and Corbin, and Charmaz's constructivist version) and compares their views of theory, their coding stages and their use of the literature. It sets out how grounded theory differs from thematic analysis and follows one code in a published doctoral study, from participants' words to a core category. It closes with practical matters for theses and funded projects: ethics review of an evolving design, the timing of the literature review, rounds of data collection and reporting. The article is intended for students and early-career researchers considering grounded theory, and for the educators who teach qualitative research methods.

Keywords: grounded theory; constructivist grounded theory; classic grounded theory; Straussian grounded theory; grounded theory coding; grounded theory vs thematic analysis; grounded theory example; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

Grounded theory is often presented as the open-minded choice among qualitative designs: no framework to apply and no hypotheses to test, only data from which a theory is allowed to develop. That description is accurate but incomplete. It explains why the method is so often named in methodology chapters, but it leaves out the procedures that make a study grounded theory rather than a loosely inductive analysis. When those procedures are missing, a study may describe its approach as grounded theory and then report findings that contain no theory at all.

A second difficulty is that grounded theory is not one method. Its originators, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, later disagreed about how it should be done, and a third, constructivist version was developed by Kathy Charmaz. The versions differ in their coding procedures, their philosophical positions and their use of the literature, to the extent that they are not interchangeable (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). A study that names grounded theory without saying which version it follows leaves a reviewer or examiner to guess which procedures it claims.

This article is written for students and researchers considering grounded theory and for those who teach qualitative methods. Section 2 defines grounded theory and the practices it requires. Section 3 describes the three main schools and compares them. Section 4 distinguishes grounded theory from thematic analysis. Section 5 follows one code through a published doctoral study, and Section 6 discusses practical matters for theses and funded projects. Section 7 notes when another design is likely to fit better.

2. What Grounded Theory Is

Glaser and Strauss set out grounded theory in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, published in 1967, drawing on the methods they had used in their studies of death and dying in hospitals (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 306). Their book argued that theory could be generated inductively from data, against the prevailing practice of testing or refining existing theory deductively (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) give a current definition:

> Grounded theory is a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analyzing them. The defining purpose of this method is to construct a theory that offers an abstract understanding of one or more core concerns in the studied world.
>
> Charmaz and Thornberg (2021, p. 305)

Two parts of that definition matter in practice. First, **the method shapes how data are collected**, not only how they are analyzed, so grounded theory is a research design rather than an analysis technique that can be applied to any dataset. Second, its product is **a theory**: an abstract account of a process or concern, not a description of what participants said. In Glaser's classic formulation, a grounded theory is "a set of integrated conceptual hypotheses systematically generated to produce an inductive theory about a substantive area" (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 7). A substantive area is the specific field that a study investigates, such as parental coping with an early diagnosis of a child's hearing loss (Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1272).

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2.1 The practices that define the method

Five practices are central to grounded theory, and they work together. A study that leaves them out is unlikely to produce a grounded theory, whatever its methodology chapter calls it. The practices refer to codes, concepts and categories. A code is a key word or short label that sums up a segment of data; codes are compared and grouped into higher-level concepts and categories, and usually one category emerges as the core category, which relates to most of the others (Kenny & Fourie, 2015, pp. 1271–1273).

1. **Simultaneous data collection and analysis.** Glaser and Strauss introduced the strategy of analyzing data while they are still being gathered, so that early ideas can inform later data collection; it became a hallmark of grounded theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, pp. 306–307).
2. **Constant comparison.** Incidents in the data are compared with other incidents, then emerging concepts with further incidents, and finally concepts with concepts. Through these comparisons, categories and their properties (their characteristics; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 309) develop and are integrated into hypotheses (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 53).
3. **Theoretical sampling.** The researcher decides what data to collect next according to what the developing analysis needs. Glaser and Holton (2004) define it as "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop the theory as it emerges" (para. 51). Beyond the first round, data collection "cannot be planned in advance of the emerging theory" (para. 51). Theoretical sampling "has nothing to do with representative sampling" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 309); it seeks data that will develop a category.
4. **Memo-writing.** Memos are the researcher's analytic notes on codes, categories and the relationships between them. Glaser and Holton (2004) call the writing of theoretical memos "the core stage in the process of generating theory" (para. 61), and Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) describe memo-writing as "the intermediate step between coding and writing the first draft of the paper" (p. 307).
5. **Theoretical saturation.** Sampling continues until further data no longer develop the categories. In Charmaz and Thornberg's (2021) words, grounded theorists "achieve theoretical saturation, when they seek more data while theoretical sampling, but find no new properties or characteristics of their categories" (p. 309).

All five practices depend on the first. For example, a researcher cannot decide what to collect next once everything has been collected, and saturation cannot be judged without the option of collecting more. Figure 1 shows how the practices fit together. Three of them (constant comparison, memo-writing and theoretical sampling) form a loop with data collection, and saturation is the way out of the loop.

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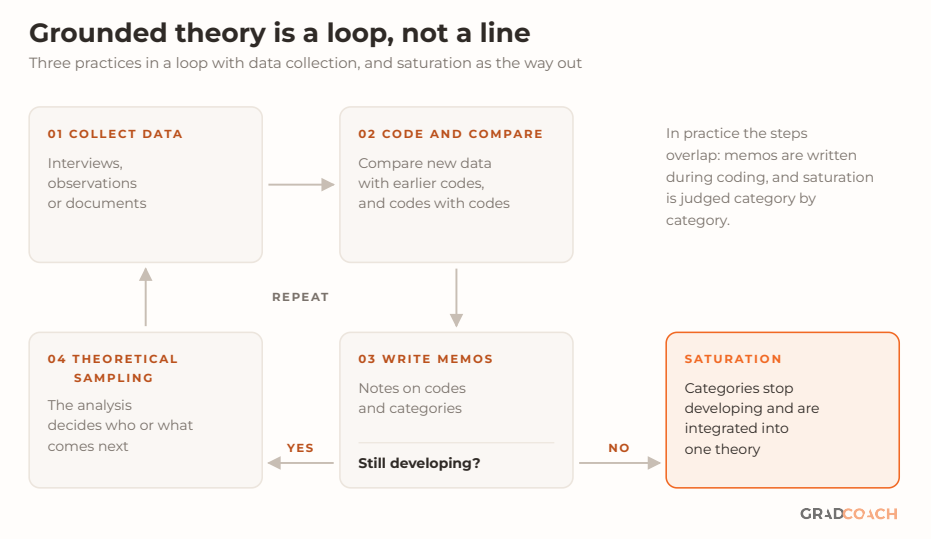


Figure 1. The grounded theory loop: data collection, coding, memos and theoretical sampling.

Saturation is widely misunderstood. In many qualitative studies it is taken to mean that participants are no longer saying anything new (Sbaraini et al., 2011). Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) call that data saturation and note that it "occurs with relatively few interviews but seldom contributes to the analytic power of the study" (p. 309). **Theoretical saturation is judged category by category**, and a study that claims it should be able to show, for each major category, that further sampling stopped adding properties.

3. The Three Schools of Grounded Theory

After *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss wrote separately and developed different views of how the method should be applied (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Strauss published *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* in 1987 and, with Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* in 1990. In 1992 Glaser published a book attacking their version. His central charge, as Kelle (2005) summarizes it, was that by using concepts such as "axial coding" and "coding paradigms" (procedures described in Section 3.2), researchers would "force" categories on the data instead of allowing them to "emerge" (para. 19). Charmaz, a student of Strauss (Sbaraini et al., 2011), later developed a constructivist version that questions whether categories are discovered in data at all. Other variants exist, including Clarke's situational analysis (Sbaraini et al., 2011), but these three are the ones most often named in methodology chapters, and Kenny and Fourie (2015) treat them as the three prevailing traditions. Table 1 compares them; the terms in it are explained in Sections 3.1 to 3.3.

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Table 1. The three main schools of grounded theory compared.

	Classic (Glaser)	Straussian (Strauss and Corbin)	Constructivist (Charmaz)
The theory	Emerges from the data	Developed from the data through explicit procedures	Constructed by the researcher through interaction with participants and data
Coding stages	Substantive coding (open, then selective), then theoretical coding	Open, axial and selective coding	Initial and focused coding, with theoretical coding as an optional further stage
The literature	Not reviewed in the substantive area until the core category has emerged	May be used before the study begins	Read early but treated as provisional; full review written after the analysis
Characteristic tools	Main concern, core variable, coding families	Coding paradigm (paradigm model)	Gerund (action) codes, strong reflexivity, a flexible approach

The coding stages in Table 1 follow Chun Tie et al. (2019) and Kenny and Fourie (2015), and the remaining rows follow the sources cited in Sections 3.1 to 3.3. The coding labels are not interchangeable: each school's vocabulary signals which procedure a study claims to have followed.

3.1 Classic grounded theory

Glaser prefers the term "classic" for his version, in recognition of the method's origins (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 4). Its aim is a conceptual theory that explains the **main concern** of the people in a substantive area and how they continually resolve it. As categories develop, one of them emerges as the **core category** (Glaser's "core variable"): the category that accounts for most of the variation around that main concern. It then becomes the focus of further data collection and coding (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 54). Coding moves from line-by-line open coding to selective coding, which begins only once the core variable has been identified and is limited to the variables related to it (Glaser & Holton, 2004, paras. 48, 55). Holton (2010, as cited in Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1273) groups open and selective coding together as substantive coding. Substantive codes name, in conceptual terms, the empirical content of the area under study, and theoretical codes then "conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory" (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 47). Glaser offered an extended list of terms for theoretical coding, grouped into "coding families," such as a "degree family" of terms like "limit," "range" and "extent" (Kelle, 2005, para. 13).

Classic grounded theory takes the firmest position on the literature. The *Discovery* book advised researchers to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study so that the emergence of categories would not be contaminated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Kelle, 2005, para. 3), and Glaser kept that position. Glaser and Holton (2004) argue that an extensive literature review before the core category has emerged violates the premise that the theory comes from the data. In their view, the literature should instead be treated as further data and integrated once the core category and related categories have emerged (para. 46). Glaser also holds that grounded theory can use any kind of data, summed up in his dictum "all is data" (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 45).

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Commentators have described the classic version as positivist (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1284). Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) find residues of positivism in both Glaser's and Strauss and Corbin's texts, which in their reading "presuppose neutral observers who (1) assume an external world, which can be discovered by meticulous observation" (p. 311). That is their characterization, not Glaser's.

3.2 Straussian grounded theory

Strauss's version offers more explicit procedures. Open coding scrutinizes the data closely, line by line or even word by word, to produce concepts that fit the data (Strauss, 1987, as cited in Kelle, 2005, para. 15). Strauss proposed a **coding paradigm** of four items: "conditions," "interaction among the actors," "strategies and tactics" and "consequences." The paradigm structures the data and clarifies relations between codes. Strauss described axial coding as intense analysis around one category at a time in terms of those four items (Strauss, 1987, as cited in Kelle, 2005, para. 15). Strauss and Corbin's 1990 book developed this into a paradigm model rooted in pragmatist and interactionist social theory. The model relates categories to the phenomenon at which action and interaction are directed, and to that phenomenon's causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action and interaction strategies, and consequences (Kelle, 2005, paras. 16–17). Selective coding then builds a storyline around a core category that connects the other categories (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Strauss and Corbin also took a more liberal position on the literature, holding that "all kinds of literature can be used before a research study is begun" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 56, as cited in Kelle, 2005, para. 18). Kelle (2005) accepts that Glaser's suspicion of forcing "cannot simply be dismissed" but finds the critique overdrawn, because the paradigm rests on a broad understanding of human action that fits many different sociological theories (para. 21).

Commentators describe Strauss and Corbin's stance as post-positivist, with roots in symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective concerned with the symbolic meaning people give to social interaction (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1284). The Straussian version has also changed over time. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) describe the 1990 and 1998 manuals as coming "across as rigid and prescriptive" (p. 311), but they list the 2008 and 2015 editions by Corbin and Strauss among the contemporary versions that take a flexible approach and adopt more recent epistemologies. A study that follows Strauss and Corbin should therefore say which edition it follows.

3.3 Constructivist grounded theory

Charmaz's version keeps the core practices of grounded theory, including constant comparison, memo-writing and theoretical sampling (Kenny & Fourie, 2015, pp. 1271–1272), and is one of the flexible contemporary versions mentioned in Section 3.2 (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 311). Its starting assumption is that data and theories are not simply discovered but are constructed by the researcher through interaction with participants and data. Charmaz stated the position as follows: "Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510, as cited in Glaser, 2002, para. 7). Theory, on this view, is interpretive rather than predictive: it "emphasizes interpretation and gives abstract un-

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derstanding greater priority than explanation" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 230, as cited in Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 315). Constructivist grounded theory therefore requires strong reflexivity, meaning that researchers make their assumptions and their influence on the data explicit throughout the study (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Coding in the constructivist version has at least two stages (Charmaz, 2008, as cited in Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1278). **Initial coding**, often line by line, labels fragments of data and stays close to them; Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) advocate line-by-line coding as a first step because "it forces the researcher to take a fresh look at the data" (p. 307). Charmaz advises coding for actions rather than for themes, using gerunds (noun forms of verbs, such as "defining" or "wanting"), so that the codes show what is happening in the data (Charmaz, 2008, as cited in Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1279). **Focused coding** then selects the most significant codes: those that account for more of the data and take in related codes. These focused codes are used to work through large batches of data and to build tentative categories (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 308). Theoretical coding may follow, as it did in the bullying study Charmaz and Thornberg (2021, p. 318) use as their example.

Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) depart from the classic position on the literature. They recommend, "in contrast to Glaserian grounded theory but in line with Straussian and constructivist grounded theory," that researchers "review the literature to establish a defensible rationale for the study, to avoid re-inventing the wheel, and to increase theoretical sensitivity" (pp. 321–322). Theoretical sensitivity is the ability to recognize when a segment of data is important to the developing theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Charmaz and Thornberg advise treating the literature as provisional and fallible and comparing the completed analysis with it again at the end. This is consistent with Charmaz's earlier advice to use the literature throughout but to delay writing the full literature review chapter until after the analysis (Charmaz, 2006, as cited in Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1285).

Glaser rejects the constructivist version outright. He opens his reply to Charmaz with the statement that "Constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) is a misnomer" (Glaser, 2002, para. 1) and argues that data jointly constructed by interviewer and participant are a small part of what grounded theory uses.

3.4 Choosing a school

The schools rest on different assumptions about what a theory is and what the researcher contributes to it. A study should adopt the school **whose assumptions match its own research philosophy** and then follow it consistently. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) put the question directly to researchers: which version of grounded theory has been adopted, why, and what its ontological and epistemological assumptions mean for the research process and the findings (p. 321). A researcher who sees their own interpretation as part of the analysis will usually be best served by the constructivist version; a researcher who wants a detailed coding procedure may prefer Strauss and Corbin; and a researcher willing to delay the substantive literature and to let a main concern emerge may follow the classic version.

Whichever school is chosen, the methodology chapter should cite that school's own texts for its procedures and use its labels consistently. A chapter that calls the first stage "open coding" in one paragraph and "initial coding" in the next, without explanation, invites the question of which

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procedure was actually followed; Section 5 notes an instance in a published thesis. Where a study borrows a technique from another school, it should say so and give the reason.

4. Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis

Many studies described as grounded theory are closer to thematic analysis. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) observe that numerous researchers use several grounded theory strategies to conduct thematic analyses (p. 306). Both methods code qualitative data, compare segments and build higher-order groupings, and that similarity can hide a basic difference in what each produces (Vander Linden, 2026). Thematic analysis develops patterns of shared meaning; grounded theory aims at an integrated theory. As Vander Linden (2026), writing from the classic school, puts it, "Themes are neither a stage in grounded theory analysis nor an intermediate step on the way to theory" (p. 3).

Thematic analysis is a well-established method in its own right. Vander Linden (2026) stresses that the problem is not themes as such: where the purpose is an interpretive account of patterned meaning, thematic analysis may be the appropriate choice. The difficulty arises when a study claims grounded theory and reports themes. Table 2 compares grounded theory with reflexive thematic analysis, a form of thematic analysis in which the researcher actively develops themes by engaging with the data, rather than finding them as topics that occur frequently (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, as cited in Vander Linden, 2026, p. 2). Read across each row to see where the two designs differ.

Table 2. Grounded theory and reflexive thematic analysis compared.

	Grounded theory	Reflexive thematic analysis
Aim	Construct a theory that explains a process or concern	Develop and interpret patterns of shared meaning
Data collection	In rounds, alongside analysis	May be completed before analysis begins
Sampling	Theoretical: the analysis decides what to collect next	Can be decided in advance
Stopping point	Theoretical saturation of the categories	Analysis of the planned dataset
Product	Categories integrated into a theory, usually around a core category	A set of themes and an account of them
The literature	Depends on the school; delayed in the classic version	Can be used from the outset, especially in deductive work

A practical test is to look at the planned findings. If they read as a list of themes with no account of how they connect into a process, the analysis is probably closer to thematic analysis. Vander Linden (2026) lists findings statements that signal this drift, such as "The five themes describe participants' experiences" (p. 5), and contrasts them with a theory that explains how participants address a main concern. A study that codes interviews inductively but neither samples theoretically nor builds a theory is more accurately described as thematic analysis.

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5. A Worked Example: From an In Vivo Code to a Core Category

A published doctoral thesis by Costa (2018), in nursing at Queen's University in Canada, shows the grounded theory practices at work and reports its analysis in enough detail to follow one code from start to finish. The study used Charmaz's constructivist version to develop a theory of how people with diabetic foot ulcers come to engage in self-care management. Costa conducted intensive semi-structured interviews with 30 people attending a wound care clinic in southeastern Ontario (Costa, 2018, p. ii). The thesis is available under a CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US license; the participant extracts quoted below are not covered by this article's CC BY license.

The thesis shows early analysis changing the study. After the first five interviews, Costa reviewed the transcripts and discussed early impressions with the supervisor, and together they modified the research questions and the interview guide (Costa, 2018, p. 32). Costa followed initial sampling with theoretical sampling and recruited later participants "according to emergent categories" (p. 30). The analytic codes and categories "also became the foundation of the follow-up interview questions" (p. 37).

Coding began with open coding, which Charmaz calls initial coding. Costa intended to code line by line but found that the long, detailed answers suited an idea-by-idea approach better (p. 40); this produced 529 codes (p. 36). Where appropriate, Costa used **in vivo codes**, which take participants' own words as the code label. Costa quotes five participants who described their management of diabetes in similar terms. Costa coded these extracts as "being a bad diabetic," a label taken from participants' own words:

> I'm a bad diabetic. (Junior).
> I'm not a very good diabetic, that's for sure. (Shelby)
> Very little. I'm bad. (Sam)
> I still don't do a heck of a lot of it. (Finn)
> I know I am a strange diabetic. (Duke)
>
> Participants quoted in Costa (2018, p. 41)

Constant comparison then developed the code. Costa returned to all the sources of data to see how each participant spoke about taking care of diabetes. Costa then examined the factors associated with "being a bad diabetic," the code's relation to the first foot ulcer, participants' responses to controlling diabetes, their daily activities and the support they had in place (p. 43). The code was elevated to a concept within a category titled "Perception of Illness" (p. 43). That category became **the first of five phases** in a single process, which the thesis names as its core category and theory: "The Journey Toward Engagement in SCM" (self-care management). The other four phases run from noticing foot changes and realizing seriousness to beginning to learn about, and then engaging in, self-care management. Contextual factors influence the whole process, including aging or living with multiple chronic conditions, motivations, self-efficacy, self-care knowledge and support, and access to services and resources (p. ii). Table 3 summarizes the thread.

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Table 3. One analytic thread in Costa (2018), from participants' words to the core category.

Level	In Costa (2018)	Page
Participants' words	Five participants describe their own self-care of diabetes, such as "I'm a bad diabetic"	41
Code (in vivo)	"being a bad diabetic"	41
Concept	The code, refined by constant comparison across all sources of data	43
Category	"Perception of Illness," Phase 1 of the process	43
Core category	"The Journey Toward Engagement in SCM," five phases in one process	ii, 37

The core category is what distinguishes this analysis from a thematic one. During focused coding, Costa combined the initial codes into categories and collapsed or deleted redundant ones (p. 36). About 250 codes were then grouped mostly into the five phases of the core category, with others grouped into six contextual factors that influence it (Costa, 2018, p. 37), so the analysis is organized around one process. Costa reports that saturation was reached when no new properties for the core category were obtained, with theoretical sampling guiding additional and follow-up interviews (p. 47).

The example also raises questions that a reviewer or examiner could reasonably ask of any grounded theory study. Three stand out.

The first concerns scope. All participants were recruited from one clinic, so theoretical sampling had limited room to reach different settings. In addition, the deposited copy of the thesis ends partway through Chapter 4, at page 56, so the method can be followed in full but not all of the findings.

The second concerns saturation, where Costa's account mixes two criteria. Under the heading "Theoretical Sufficiency," the thesis reports that no new properties for the core category were obtained. It also reports that saturation occurred when themes and sub-categories became repetitive, so that "no new information could be gathered by further data collection" (p. 47). The thesis calls the first of these data saturation and the second theoretical saturation, yet the second is closer to the data saturation described in Section 2.

The third concerns coding labels. The second coding stage appears as "focused coding or selective coding" (p. 42), which pairs a constructivist label with one from the classic and Straussian versions. This is the kind of mixing Section 3.4 warns against.

These points are not criticisms of the study. They show the kind of evidence a methodology chapter should supply.

6. Grounded Theory in a Thesis or Funded Project

Grounded theory was first worked out by researchers able to return to the field repeatedly. A thesis usually differs in four ways: an ethics application and a literature review are often required before any data are collected, the researcher works alone, the deadline is fixed, and an examiner will

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expect to see how the theory was derived from the data. Each pulls against the method, and each can be planned for.

6.1 Ethics review for an evolving design

Theoretical sampling means that participants and questions cannot all be specified in advance, while ethics committees usually expect both. Sbaraini et al. (2011) describe how one team handled this in a grounded theory study of dental practices. Their application explained that grounded theory procedures evolve, provided a long list of possible recruitment strategies and interview questions, as Charmaz suggests, and stated that they would apply to modify their protocols as the study progressed. The committee approved each modification without difficulty. That is one committee's experience rather than a guarantee, but the approach is sound: describe the evolving design at the outset and allow time in the schedule for amendments.

6.2 The timing of the literature review

The classic advice to delay reading the substantive literature (Section 3.1) is difficult to follow in many programs. Thornberg (2012) points out that researchers usually have to prepare proposals for funding and undergo ethical review before data collection, and that both processes normally require an overview of the related literature. He argues that the dictum of delaying the literature review is problematic and proposes what he calls **informed grounded theory**, in which both the research process and its product are grounded in data and informed by existing research and theory. Extant concepts are used as sensitizing tools rather than as frames forced onto the data, and Thornberg cites Dey's reminder that there is "a difference between an open mind and empty head" (Dey, 1993, p. 63, as cited in Thornberg, 2012).

Either position is defensible if it is consistent with the chosen school and stated. A methodology chapter should say when the literature was read and how the researcher guarded against reading the data through earlier theory. Memos and a reflexive journal provide the natural evidence for this.

6.3 Rounds of data collection

Because theoretical sampling needs analysis to guide collection, grounded theory needs more than one round of data collection. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) note that early analysis lets researchers ask more pointed questions in later interviews and pursue areas they had not anticipated (p. 307). When a researcher gathers all the data in a single phase, or fixes the dataset in advance, the analysis can no longer decide what to collect next. Theoretical sampling is then reduced to choosing among material already held. A schedule for a grounded theory thesis should therefore allow for at least two cycles of collection and analysis, together with any ethics amendments they require.

6.4 Showing the method

A sentence such as "data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach" tells a reader very little. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) ask researchers to be transparent: to describe how the study was conducted, how the sample was obtained and how grounded theory and the data collection

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methods were used, with justifications for each choice (p. 322). In practice, a methodology chapter should name the school and then show each practice: how coding was done, with an excerpt, as Costa (2018) does; how constant comparison changed the codes; how sampling followed the analysis; what a memo looked like; and how saturation was judged. Sbaraini et al. (2011) offer a full published model of this kind of reporting. The findings chapter should then present the theory itself, its categories and how they connect.

7. When Another Design Fits Better

Grounded theory is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon and the aim is an explanatory theory of a process (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The method also requires a study that can collect data in rounds (Section 6.3). Another design is usually a better fit in four situations:

- **The study applies or tests an existing framework.** That is deductive work, for which thematic analysis or qualitative content analysis with the framework as a lens is better suited.
- **The dataset is small and fixed, or can be collected only once.** Theoretical sampling will have little room to operate, and a case study design or thematic analysis is likely to be easier to defend.
- **The aim is to describe experiences rather than explain a process.** Phenomenology or thematic analysis will usually fit better.
- **The timeline is short.** Rounds of collection and analysis, together with ethics amendments, take time that a one-year master's program may not allow.

None of these alternatives is a lesser method. A design that fits the research question and is named accurately is easier to defend than a more prestigious label whose commitments the study does not meet.

8. Conclusion

Grounded theory is a research design for constructing a theory from data. It commits a study to collecting and analyzing data together, to constant comparison, to theoretical sampling, to memo-writing and to theoretical saturation judged category by category. Its product is a theory that explains a process or concern rather than a set of themes. Its three main schools differ in what they take a theory to be, in their coding stages and in their use of the literature. The classic version expects a core category to emerge and delays the substantive literature. The Straussian version supplies explicit procedures such as axial coding. The constructivist version treats the theory as the researcher's interpretive construction and calls for strong reflexivity. A study gives a reader good grounds to accept that its theory is grounded in its data when it names one school, uses that school's vocabulary or explains what it borrows from another, and shows each step of the analysis. Costa's (2018) thesis shows the last of these well by tracing an in vivo code to a core category, and its mixed coding labels show why consistent vocabulary also matters.

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