GROUNDED THEORY AS A STRATEGY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: AN ATTEMPT AT DEMYSTIFYING ITS INTRICACIES

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Grounded theory is considered one of the most significant strategies of qualitative inquiry and its methodology has come a long way. With the objective of building middle-range theories, grounded theory is rooted in the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and entails an interpretive understanding of actions and interactions within the social phenomenon under investigation. However, what makes grounded theory really fascinating is the fact that its epistemology and techniques of data collection and analyses are still matters of animated debates among the social scientists. Grounded theory as a methodology is still evolving and this is best exemplified in its various epistemological positions, ranging from (post)positivism to constructivism and the postmodern situational analysis. This paper is an attempt to discuss the different aspects of grounded theory making a pellucid but informed analysis of its various nuances, with a view to making its application in fieldwork much simpler and easier. The paper also attempts to come up with some of its own observations and comments vis-à-vis the grounded theory.

[*Keywords*: coding; constructivism; memo; positivism; postmodernism; pragmatism; theoretical sampling]

Introduction

Grounded theory is identified as one of the 'methodologies' or 'strategies of inquiry' of qualitative research (Creswell 2009; Punch 2005) – the other prominent methodologies or strategies of inquiry being ethnography, case study, phenomenology and narrative research. Strauss and Corbin (1997: vii) say that grounded theory methodology is now among the most widely used modes of carrying out qualitative research *when generating theory is the researcher's main aim* [emphasis mine]. This mode of qualitative inquiry has spread from its original use by sociologists to an array of social science disciplines including the practitioner fields such as nursing, accounting, business management, public health and social work.

Creswell (2009: 13) defines grounded theory as a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action or interaction grounded in the views of the participants. The process involves multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information. The primary purpose of grounded theory is to develop a 'theory' and the theory so generated is based on data obtained from the field and attempts an 'interpretative' understanding of the meaning people attach to the phenomenon being investigated. Bryant and Charmaz (2007: 1) define grounded theory methodology as a systematic, inductive approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory. It is based on the premises of symbolic interactionism[1] and is designed to generate 'middle-range theories'[2]. The theory so developed can assume several forms such as a series of hypotheses or propositions, a narrative statement or even a visual picture (Creswell 2007: 65).

When used through symbolic interactionist theoretical lens, grounded theory enables not only the documentation of change within social groups, but also understanding of the core processes central to that change. It enables the identification and description of phenomena, their main attributes, the core social or social-psychological processes, as well as their associated interactions within a setting or around a particular event. Besides, it also provides us with the tools to synthesize these data, develop concepts, and mid-range theory that remains linked to these data, yet is generalisable to other instances and to future instances (Morse: 2009: 13-14).

Grounded theory has its inception in the work of Glaser and Strauss' 'Awareness of Dying' (1965). This was followed by their text 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (1967) which Charmaz (2007) calls a 'canonical' text in grounded theory. In this text, Glaser and

Strauss make a detailed explication of how to carry out grounded theory research – steps to be followed in grounded theory methodology, methods of data collection and the analysis of data so obtained to move towards a higher abstract theoretical level. This was followed by their another classic 'Time for Dying' (1968). However, it must be brought to light that the grounded theory methodology since its genesis has been at the centre of raging debates among the practitioners of qualitative research especially with regard to its epistemology, methods of data collection and analyses and the credibility of any such theory so generated (both in terms of depth of knowledge produced and its larger applicability). In fact, Glaser and Strauss themselves parted ways after some time and developed their own methodologies of grounded theory (this is discussed in detail later).

This paper focuses primarily on the epistemological debate surrounding the grounded theory methodology of social research. However, in order to maintain the wholeness of the discussion on grounded theory, some of the critical issues involving the practical dimension of actually carrying out the grounded theory method in the field, as enumerated by its leading practitioners, are also touched upon.

Epistemological Debate in Grounded Theory Methodology

Arguably, the most debated aspect of grounded theory is its epistemology. A brief sketch of the trajectory of the epistemology of grounded theory methodology is attempted here.

According to Charmaz (2007), the guiding purpose of Glaser and Strauss in 1965/67 in developing grounded theory was three fold: a) to bring in greater respect for qualitative research in the USA where at that time quantitative techniques and methods of social research held sway b) to give greater credence to inductive logic of theory building based on data generated from the field as against the prevalence of deductive logic where hypothesis generated through a priori theory was tested and c) to lay stress on the development of middle-range theories rooted in interpretive understanding of social processes as against the grand theories of Parsons and others whom Glaser and Strauss call 'theoretical capitalists'.

Glaser and Strauss (1967: 32-35) identify two types of grounded theories – a) substantive theory and b) formal theory. The substantive theory is 'developed for a substantive, or empirical area', while the formal theory is 'developed for a formal, or conceptual area'. Examples of the first kind are 'patient care, race relations, professional education or delinquency' while those of the second kind are 'stigma, deviant

behaviour, socialisation, authority and power or social mobility'. Both types of theories are to be found among the middle-range theories, somewhere between 'minor working hypotheses' and all-inclusive 'grand theories'. Though it is possible to generate both formal and substantive theories directly from data, it is preferable to start with the substantive theory, and then generate the formal theory from it. Further, any theory so generated should not be a 'forced' one rather should 'emerge' from the data itself.[3]

Commenting on the epistemological position of Glaser and Strauss, Charmaz (2006/07) says that their initial exposition did not vary much from the epistemology of positivism. For them, there is a reality lying outside and it is the duty of the researcher to 'discover' that reality in the form of a coherent abstract theoretical framework. She says that the fetish of Glaser and Strauss (1967) with objective data as something existing outside the researcher and to fit them into a theoretical frame were very much in consistent with positivist epistemology. Arguing from a social constructivist perspective, Charmaz (2007: 44) holds that for the positivists, data is an unproblematic concept: it is simply what one observes and notes down in the course of doing one's research. To Glaser and Strauss, data are external reality and they failed to examine how a researcher defines, produces and records data. They failed to acknowledge that researcher's own standpoints, historical locations and relative privileges shape what they can see. Any such theory constructed in grounded theory should be seen as 'a co-construction between the researcher and the participants, dependent on time, space and circumstances'. Charmaz calls the grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) 'objectivist grounded theory'. It is a form of positivist qualitative research in which the researcher takes the role of a dispassionate, neutral observer who remains separate from the research participants, and analyses their world as an outside expert (Charmaz 2007: 609).

To social constructivists (in contradistinction to the adherents of positivism), meanings are constructed by humans as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences and these meanings are varied and multiple. It is the duty of researchers to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings to a few categories or ideas (Creswell 2009: 8). A critical factor which separates constructivist approach from objectivism is reflexivity. Social constructionism stresses on reflexivity as a key component of research process wherein the researcher constantly deliberates and critically reflects upon his/her social position, assumptions, opinions and biases and considers how these may impact

the findings. Glaser (2001), however, is not upbeat about reflexivity being incorporated within grounded theory, warning that it would lead to 'reflexivity paralysis' in relation to analysis. Whatever biases the grounded theorists might have brought to the research processes are neutralised through making comparisons and by raising the level of abstractions of the categories.[4] By comparing data with data, data with categories, and categories with categories,   significant checks on a grounded theorist's biases can be maintained. Constructivists, on the other hand, not only acknowledge the relativity of the data but also that subjectivities enter the analysis as well as data collection. 'Rather than denying their existence and donning the cloak of the objective scientists, constructivists argue for explicating how their standpoints, positions, situations and interactions have influenced their analytic renderings' (Charmaz 2009: 140).

However, Charmaz (*ibid*.:) rejects extreme constructivist's position that either no external reality exists or all representations of reality should be accorded equal status (concept of relativism). She says 'My form of constructivism does not subscribe to the radical subjectivism and individual reductionism assumed by some advocates of constructivism. In such analyses, individual consciousness explains all. Social locations, cultural traditions, and interactional and situational contingencies are unrecognized. In contrast, constructivist grounded theory aims to position the research relative to the social circumstances impinging on it.' (*ibid*.: 134). She relies heavily on the classic work of Berger and Luckmann (1967) and says that the actor's view of the world is not constructed in a vacuum or in an arbitrary fashion. It is socially constructed formed through inter-subjective interactions within the historical and cultural settings of the participants. She also calls attention to Giddens' structuration theory wherein Giddens holds that 'the structure is both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems' (Charmaz 2007: 37-38). The task of a grounded theory researcher is to connect the dots to bring forth the socially constructed reality while being aware of one's own presuppositions.

However, some scholars such as Oktay (2012) consider the criticism of Charmaz against Glaser and Strauss too telling. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were aware of the limitations of the so-called 'rigid' or 'orthodox' positivism and their epistemological position can at best be held as postpositivism. The proponents of postpositivism argue that the standard of absolute certainty of knowledge is not realistic. This signals the move from a social science based on absolute truth to one based on degrees of probability. Further, all observations are to some extent

influenced by the perspective of the investigator. But the loss of absolute certainty is by no means reasons for giving up scientific inquiry. It is a mere limitation that must be factored in while investigating the social world (Baronov 2012: 6-7).

In course of time, Glaser and Strauss parted ways. When Glaser and Strauss collaborated in 1965/67, they, in fact, brought together two contrasting philosophical and methodological traditions. While Glaser was trained in Columbia school positivism and worked under Paul Lazersfeld, Strauss was trained in the school of symbolic interactionism (influenced by the philosophy of pragmatism) in Chicago University and worked under Herbert Blumer (Stern 2009: 23-24). Charmaz (2009) holds that the differences in their methodological approaches were apparent right since the beginning of their collaboration. Their disparate traditions placed grounded theory on somewhat unsteady epistemological grounds and planted the seeds of their subsequent divergent directions. While Glaser continued with the (post)positivist epistemology, later writings of Strauss such as 'Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists' (1987) and with Corbin 'Basics of Qualitative Research' (1990) moved towards pragmatism[5] (Charmaz 2007). In recent years, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) have also advocated a pragmatist approach to grounded theory, attempting to reconcile the positivist and the constructivist positions. Ontologically, pragmatism accepts the existence of an external reality, but its epistemology incorporates both objectivist and subjectivist points of view in arriving at the theory.

Strauss and Corbin make the most detailed explication of their grounded theory methodology rooted in the philosophy of pragmatism in 'Basics of Qualitative Research' (2008). Their approach is strongly influenced by the writings of Dewey (1929, 1938), Mead (1967) and Blumer (1969). Their explication also has the imprint of Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) and attempts to find the middle ground between positivism and social constructivism, but without compromising the basic tenet of interactionism and pragmatism that social reality is a construction of human agency as played out through the complex web of actions and interactions. The core elements of the pragmatist underpinnings of grounded theory methodology of Strauss and Corbin (2008) are:

First, the external world is a symbolic representation, a 'symbolic universe', created and recreated through interaction. Human beings interpret or 'define' each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their responses are not made directly to the actions of one another but instead are based on the meanings which

they attach to such actions. Actions may be preceded, accompanied, and/or succeeded by reflexive interactions (feeding back onto each other). Actions are not necessarily rational. Many are nonrational or, in common parlance, 'irrational'. Actions have emotional aspects too (Strauss and Corbin 2008: 1-13).[6]

Second, contingencies are an integral part of social processes which may alter the structure and process of interaction. Important here is to note the great varieties of human action, interaction, and emotional response that people have to the events and problems they encounter. This imparts tremendous fluidity and indeterminacy to the social world. The world is highly complex, where events are the result of multiple factors coming together and interacting in complex and often unanticipated ways (*ibid.*:).

Third, any methodology that attempts to understand experience and explain situations must attempt to capture as much of this social complexity as possible. However, it needs to be underscored that experience must be located within and cannot be divorced from the larger events in the social, political, cultural, racial, gender-related, informational, and technological framework and, therefore, these are essential aspects of research.[7] Strauss and Corbin subscribe to the assertion of Blumer (1969) that courses of interaction arise out of shared perspective, and when not shared, if action/interaction is to proceed, perspectives must be negotiated. Social phenomenon is partly determinable via naturalistic analysis, including the phenomena of men and women participating in the construction of the structures which shape their lives (Strauss and Corbin 2008: 6).

Fourth, pragmatism does not subscribe to the concept of duality between person and group (or collectivity). So, even if it is a single person, who discovers or creates some new understanding of reality, he or she does this only because of being already socialised to the perspectives that have been inherited. Pragmatism does not believe in radical relativism, rather, in accumulation of collective knowledge. Some social knowledge is cumulative and provides the basis for the evolution of thought and society (*ibid*.: 4-5).

Finally, pragmatist philosophy also espouses that any proposition or knowledge be considered true if holding to it is useful and is practically applicable (*ibid*.:).

Of late, Clarke (2003/05) has advocated the approach of postmodern situational analysis to grounded theory. Clarke's approach is strongly influenced by Charmaz's constructionism and Strauss'pragmatism, but tries to build over them in order to address the new challenges being thrown up by what Clarke (2003) calls

'postmodern turn' in social research. With the focus on analysing social processes and interactions within their contexts/situations, situational

Table1: The epistemological and ontological positions of different approaches to grounded theory based on Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998)

	Ontology	Epistemology
Positivism Glaser & Strauss (1967)	Assume that external reality exists and can be discovered.	Theory is discovered by the researcher; theory emerges from the data when grounded theory procedures are used; researcher maintains objectivity and minimises bias.
Social Constructionism Charmaz (2000/2006)	All reality is socially constructed.	The researcher cannot be separated from the study; the constructed perspective of the researcher and the respondents are equally important; the researcher uses reflexivity to make his/her constructions visible.
Pragmatism Strauss & Corbin (1990/98/2008)	Accept external reality; choose assumptions about reality that are most useful for the study's purpose.	The researcher can incorporate both objectivist and subjectivist points of view; and uses methods from both positivist and constructivist grounded theory models.

(Source: Oktay 2012:22).

analysis makes use of Situational Map (an analytic tool to study data within their contextual milieu) and hinges on three bases:

a. Social ecology: grounded theorising shifts from social process/action to social ecology/situation – grounding the analysis deeply and explicitly within the broader contexts/sites of inquiry of the research project.

b. Taking the nonhuman into account: only humans and their inter-subjective interactions cannot form the units of analyses; fresh methodological attention needs to be paid to nonhuman objects in situations. They include things of all kinds – cultural objects, technologies, animals, media, material culture and also the lively discourses that constitute the situations we study.

c. Foucault's discourse analysis: Foucault challenged the social sciences by decentring the 'knowing subject' (the individual human as agentic social order) to focus instead on 'the social' as constructed through discursive practices and on discourses as constitutive of subjectivities. 'Situational analysis goes beyond the 'knowing subject', as centred knower and decision-maker to also address and analyze salient discourses dwelling within the situation of inquiry. We are all constantly awash in seas of discourses that are constitutive of life itself. Situational analysis follows 'Foucault's footsteps' into sites of his serious theorizing – historical, narrative/textual and visual discourses' (Clarke 2009: 200-01).

Clarke (2003: 553) says that the postmodern turn has provoked an array of concerns about the nature of inquiry and crises of representation and legitimation. The complexities of social life and the paucity of means of addressing them analytically have become a serious concern afflicting the academia. Through situational maps and situational analyses, Clarke (2003/05) attempts to 'regenerate' and 'update' grounded theory to enable it to better address the problematics of differences and complexities of social life brought about by the postmodern turn. In contrast to modernism which emphasised universality, generalisation, homogeneity and permanence, postmodernism has shifted the focus to situatedness, positionalities, irregularities, fragmentation and heterogeneity (Clarke 2003: 555). Through the analytic tool of situational maps, Clarke attempts to produce knowledge 'situated' in their spatial and temporal contexts. She acknowledges the influence of interactionism and pragmatism in her grounded theory approach as these philosophies played a crucial role in sowing the seeds of producing what she calls 'situated knowledge' (*ibid*.:).

Clarke, however, avers that her 'situatedness' does not involve research that centres only on individual voice and its representation, as is done in autoethnography, life stories, interpretive phenomenology and many

forms of narrative analysis. Her focus, instead, is on the social to bring forth the 'full situation of inquiry' (Clarke 2003: 557). To quote her 'I am committed to situating interpretation….Interactionism (and others) should expand their theoretical environment, broaden their perspectives to be sensitive to and analyze more general, larger domains of social action' (*ibid*.: 556).

To accomplish this, Clarke predicates her situational analysis on three elements (discussed earlier) – social ecology, interaction between the human and non-human entities and Foucault's discourse analysis. Based on them, she advocates three kinds of analytic maps to study the social process – *a) situational maps*: they lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analyses of relations among them, *b) social worlds/arenas maps:* they lay out the collective actors, key nonhuman elements and the arena(s) of commitment within which they are engaged in ongoing negotiations, or meso-level interpretations of the situation and, *c) positional maps:* they lay out the major positions taken, and not taken, in the data vis-à-vis particular discursive axes of variation and difference, concern, and controversy surrounding complicated issues in the situation (Clarke 2003: 554). These maps attempt at elucidating complexities – the key elements and conditions that characterise postmodern social situations and processes. Situational analyses can deeply situate the research individually, collectively, institutionally, temporally, culturally, symbolically, and discursively. Their outcomes should be 'thick analyses' paralleling Geertz's (1973) 'thick descriptions' (*ibid*.).

Once the basic situational map is done, the next step is to go for relational analysis. The procedure here is to take each element on situational map in turn and think about it in relation to each other element on the map. The key is to keep on asking questions and memoing (explained in detail while discussing the steps involved in grounded theory research in the following section) the answers, specifying the interrelations between the elements. As described by Clarke 'this [relational analysis] is the major work one does with the situational map….it can trigger breakthrough thinking and this, after all, is the main analytic goal' (Clarke 2003: 569). Another very pertinent question Clarke raises is 'what is a good enough positional map, and how do you know when you have one ?' (*ibid*.: 570). To her, the keyword here is 'saturation' (discussed in the following section). In Clarke's words 'you have worked with your map many, many times – tinkered, added, deleted, reorganised. You can talk at some length about every entry and about its relations to other entries…It has been quite a

while since you felt the need to make any major changes. You don't think you have missed much of anything. You think these are the most important elements…' (Clarke 2003: 571).[8]

Steps Involved in Carrying out Grounded Theory Research

I discuss here, briefly, some of the steps involved in carrying out grounded theory, especially those which have been developed and dealt with at length by the leading practitioners of grounded theory during the course of their researches. However, the steps discussed here can also be used with equal effectiveness in other strategies of qualitative inquiry. To quote Strauss and Corbin (2008: 18) 'many of the procedures, such as making comparisons, asking generative questions, and theoretical sampling…can be used by anyone regardless of whether their research aim is theory building; rich, thick description; or case study analysis.'

The essential idea in grounded theory is to develop a theory at a higher level of abstraction (Punch 2005:205). In a grounded theory, data collection and theory generation take place concomitantly. Glaser and Strauss (1967) enumerate four key components in the development of grounded theory: a) *Theoretical sensitivity* – refers to the ability of the researcher to be analytic and involves his/her familiarity with sociological theories and concepts, b) *Constant comparison* – considered one of the most important component of grounded theory and involves comparing one case to another (data with data, concept with concept, concept with category and category with category, moving successively higher-up towards an abstract theoretical level (concepts and categories are discussed in somewhat greater detail below), c) *Theoretical sampling* – refers to the process where the sample to be studied is not determined in advance and the sample strategy is suitably changed as the study progresses driven by the emerging theoretical frame at each level and, d) *Theoretical saturation* – refers to the stage where no new concepts are emerging and the emergent theory is supported by the data further collected.

To Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory research is a patient and painstaking work. It involves multiple stages of data collection, comparison and analysis during the course of research to reach the stage of saturation. This is achieved through unalloyed diligence and undivided focus by the researcher in the field which Glaser and Strauss (1967) characterise as complete 'immersion into the social world' by the researcher.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) identify three principal steps in data analysis and theory generation. They do it under the larger rubric of 'coding' which they define as 'the analytic processes through which data are fractured, conceptualised, and integrated to form theory' (*ibid*.: 3). The three steps are:

a) open coding – the first step in grounded theory where data are analysed to develop 'concepts'. To Strauss and Corbin (2008:51), 'concepts represent an analyst's impressionistic understandings of what is being described in the experiences, spoken words, actions, interactions, problems, and issues expressed by the participants. The use of concepts provides a way of grouping/organizing the data that a researcher is working with', *b) axial coding* – where the process of abstraction moves higher up from first-order concepts to higher-order concepts, called 'categories'; and attempts are made to find some relationship among the concepts obtained through open coding and, *c) selective coding* – raising the level of abstraction to theory generation around a central core category. The core category is identified based on its frequency in the data, its abstract nature, and its explanatory power in relation to other categories. Selective coding involves development of the core category to the point of saturation. It also includes clear specification of the relation between the core category and other categories that constitute the theory (Oktay 2012: 151-52).

The coding process is accompanied with 'memoing' where the researcher pens down his/her ideas about the data (can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages) as they occur during coding and analysis. Memoing takes place at all the three stages of coding. Glaser (1978: 83) describes memos as the 'bedrock of theory generation'. Corbin (2009: 50) quite exquisitely highlights the significance of memos in grounded theory – 'in memos, it is not just the researcher and not just the data that are talking, but a combination of the researcher and the data interacting together to come up with an explanation of what is going on. Memos are a reflection, the records of that interaction. There is no possibility of omitting the writing of memos as a way of shortcutting the research process. In the end, not having those memos to refer back to gets reflected in the quality of the product that is produced. The density and variation are missing in the final product because there is no way that a researcher can remember all the details of the analyses'.

Tips for Memo Writing:
- *Date and Title of each memo*
- Write memos often, throughout data collection and analysis
- Write down anything you consider relevant
- Creativity in writing and analysis
- Go back and revise memos as you gather more data
- Use diagrams and matrices for clarity

(Source: Oktay: 2012: 69).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Birks (2011) identify interview of individual units, focus group interview, observation, documentary analysis and taking down field-notes as principal techniques of data collection. Grounded theory methodology generally discourages researchers from going for a literature review at the start of the study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) hold that a researcher should go into the field with an 'open mind' to look for new theoretical concepts untrammelled by the biasness acquired through review of previous studies. However, after Glaser and Strauss parted ways, they adopted different positions on literature review. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that to develop and enhance theoretical sensitivity, literature review is important and a researcher should go for it. But Glaser (1992) reaffirms the need to avoid reading in the substantive area completely. To develop theoretical sensitivity, one should engage extensively with literature but *outside the topic area of one's research* to avoid contaminating and constraining the analysis of data. However, as pertinently pointed out by Dey (1993), there is a difference between an 'open mind' and an 'empty mind', the researcher should go into the field with a brief idea of previous works done (Charmaz 2007).

Grounded theory during the initial years of its exposition and application stressed on inductive reasoning. However, now most scholars agree that grounded theory is best accomplished when based on abductive[10] logic – a prudent mix of induction and deduction. Oktay (2012: 149) defines abduction as a type of reasoning in grounded theory where inductive and deductive logics are used in a cyclical process to build theory. As theory is derived inductively from the data, it is confirmed deductively by seeking and examining additional data. In the words of Kathy Charmaz 'Grounded theory uses the iterative logic of abduction to check and refine the development of categories. In brief, abductive reasoning follows inductive inquiry and takes it further. When a grounded theory encounters a surprising finding while engaging in research, he/she 1) considers all conceivable theoretical ideas that

could account for the finding, 2) returns to the field and gathers more data and put these ideas to test, and 3) subsequently, adopts the most plausible theoretical interpretation. Abductive reasoning arises from experience, leads to logical but creative inferences, and invokes testing these inferences with hypotheses to arrive at a plausible theoretical explanation of experience' (Charmaz 2009: 137).

An instance of how Juliet Corbin (2009) used grounded theory in studying Vietnam War Veterans and developed 'concept' and 'category' and went for 'theoretical sampling'.

Corbin says that once while rummaging through her files, she found an interview done by Dr. Strauss with one of her friends about her experiences as a nurse during the Vietnam War. Corbin avers that after perusing the interview, she found the topic of her study – the Vietnam War. Initially, when she began her study, she had no specific research question in her mind. She just went through the data, let it flow in front of her, and penned down her thoughts in a series of memos.

When she went for her fieldwork, Corbin states, she analysed her data by breaking them apart into pieces corresponding to natural breaks in the flow of conversations. She sought to identify what the participants were trying to convey to her. She tried out various interpretations and discarded those which were unsupported by data. She used concepts to capture her interpretations.

Corbin gives an example to illustrate this. Participant #1 began the interview by explaining something about himself before going to war. Corbin developed the *concept* of 'prewar self' to describe this. Some of the properties of this pre-war self were youth, idealism and a sense of patriotism. Corbin says that the significance of the concept of 'prewar self' did not carry much weight with her early in the analysis. It was just important at that time to write a memo describing the characteristics of men and women before they went to Vietnam. According to her, it was not until she got deeper into the analysis that she discovered that the concept of 'prewar self' was part of the higher level concept or *category* which she termed 'changing self'. She made this discovery by noting that the manner in which women and men described themselves before going to war was considerably different from how they described during their time in Vietnam and after returning from Vietnam.

She also found two important things during her interviews. The experience of the combatant was different from that of a non-combatant (a nurse). Also, there was a lot of residual anger about

the war experience and how it was handled. Corbin posits that she mulled over them and came up with two questions that would guide the next steps of the research. The first question was: Would the war experience be different for combatants and non-combatants ? And the second question was: Why was there still so much residual anger? These questions guided the next step in her data collection and analysis. Corbin asserts that she was then doing *theoretical sampling* or directing data collection on the basis of the concepts 'combatant' and 'noncombatant' and 'residual anger'. She analysed the memoirs in the same way she did the interviews.
(Source: Corbin 2009: 35-53).

Conclusion

To sum up, grounded theory is derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another. A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind. Rather, the research begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the 'reality' than is theory derived by putting together a series of pre-developed concepts or solely through speculation. Grounded theories, based on constructionism and pragmatism, not only enhance understanding and offer insights, but also provide a meaningful guide to action (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 12).

Further, given the multiplicity in epistemological positions, and the contestation around the techniques of data collection and analysis, grounded theory is now regarded as a constellation of approaches rather than one particular methodological approach (Charmaz 2007). Morse (2009: 14) avers that there is no 'cookbook' or formulaic way of doing grounded theory. Every time grounded theory is used, it requires adaptation in particular ways as demanded by the research question, situation, and the participants for whom the research is being conducted. Grounded theory is primarily a particular way of thinking about data. And this way of thinking cannot be standardised. When grounded theory is used by researchers of different disciplines, researchers with different personalities, creative abilities, paradigmatic perspectives and research goals, it cannot be done in exactly the same way each time it is used. It also implies that the end results would not be identical in labels, forms or levels of abstraction.

Theory-building is not as simple as it appears to be. It requires a discerning mind and eye to cull out relevant and important information from a sea of data and creative cerebral powers to weave together the emerging concepts and categories into an abstract theoretical frame. Strauss and Corbin (1998: 13) say that although grounding concept in data is the main feature of grounded theory method, the creativity of the researcher is also an essential ingredient. This creativity manifests itself in the ability of researchers to aptly name concepts and categories, ask stimulating questions, make comparisons and extract an innovative, integrated and realistic scheme from the masses of unorganised raw data.

Besides, though critical self-reflection is very important while carrying out the research, an 'over-fixation' with it can be counter-productive. It might daunt a researcher from putting forward some new propositions for fear of imposing one's own preconceptions and biases over one's analysis. When Glaser (2001) says that reflexivity might paralyse grounded theory research (as discussed earlier), his words are not to be nonchalantly dismissed but need informed discussion and introspection. Also, the views of Karl Popper and Max Weber are quite instructive in this regard. Popper says that it is not necessary to seek objectivity at the level of an individual scientist. The objectivity of science is achieved at the collective level. It results from mutual criticism and in effect cancelling out individual biases. Far from a handicap to the progress of science, the partiality of its participants is a benefit for the very diversity of strongly held views will motivate the critical effort of trying to prove that other people's views are wrong (Sharrock et al. 1990: 205-06). Weber, too, believed that value judgments cannot be completely withdrawn from scientific discourse. 'An attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific objectivity' (1903-17/1949: 60). He admitted that values have a certain place, though he cautioned researchers to be careful about the role of values. 'It should be constantly made clear…exactly at which point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting persons begins to speak' (Weber 1903-17/1949: 60).

Notes

1. The term 'symbolic interactionism' was launched in 1938 by Herbert Blumer; but the general line of thought is much older, having arisen as a social-psychological movement at the beginning of the 20th century primarily through the writings of H. Mead and C. H. Cooley (Alvesson 2000: 13). Blumer (1969: 2) holds that symbolic interactionism rests on three premises: a) human beings act towards

things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things would include everything – physical objects, other human beings, institutions, guiding ideals etc. b) meanings of such things are derived from the social interactions one has with one's fellows. c) the meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealings with the things he encounters.

2.   The concept of middle-range theory was developed by Robert Merton in his *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957) to bridge the gap between the limited hypotheses of empiricist studies and grand abstract theories of the sort produced by Talcott Parsons. He defines middle-range theories as theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance in day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, organisation and social change (Marshall 2009: 470).

3.   The key steps enumerated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in carrying out ground theory research are discussed later.
     The terms 'category' and 'constant comparison' in grounded theory methodology are discussed later.
     Pragmatism is a North American philosophical tradition deriving its inspiration from the writings of Dewey (1929/1938), Mead (1959/1967) and Blumer (1969). It views reality as characterised by indeterminacy and fluidity. Pragmatism assumes that people are active and creative. In pragmatist philosophy, meanings emerge through meaningful actions to solve problems, and through actions people come to know the world (Charmaz 2006: 344). Pragmatism also assumes that any proposition is true if holding it is practically successful or advantageous (Mautner 2000: 440).

4.   One can discern the influence of Weber's interpretive sociology and his concept of social action on the philosophy of pragmatism. Weber defines sociology as a 'science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (Weber 1964: 88). To him. an 'action' is that human behaviour to which an actor attaches subjective meaning. Action is social, in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual, it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course (*ibid.*:). In fact, while outlining the methodological position of symbolic interactionism, when Blumer (1969: 2-5) states that the use of meanings by human beings in their actions occurs through a process of interpretation whereby the actors indicate to themselves the things towards which they are acting and attach subjective meanings to them through a process of self-communication and these meanings are further negotiated and modified during the course of social interaction, the imprint of Weber's sociology is quite evident.

5.   This averment of Strauss and Corbin (2008) also reminds one of C.W. Mills' (1959) argument as to how the micro and macro levels of analyses can be linked making use of what Mills calls 'sociological imagination'. Mills posits that individuals can understand their experiences fully by locating themselves within their particular historical periods. They, then, become aware of the life chances shared by all individuals in the same circumstances. Sociological imagination enables one to 'grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills 1959: 6).

6.   Because of space constraint, we discuss here only the core elements of Clarke's epistemological position and her approach towards grounded theory. Some of the

actual researches done using situational maps and analyses can be seen in Clarke (2003/2005).

7. Memo-writing is the pivotal intermediate step in grounded theory between data collection and writing drafts of papers. When grounded theorists write memos, they stop and analyse their ideas about their codes and emerging categories in whatever way that occurs to them. Memo-writing prompts researchers to analyze their data and to develop their codes into categories early in the research process. Writing successive memos keeps researchers involved in the analysis and helps them to increase the level of abstraction of their ideas (Charmaz 2006: 188).

8. Use of abductive reasoning in grounded theory was first advocated by Strauss (1987).

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