

A New Explanation for the Conflict Between Constructivist and Objectivist Grounded Theory

International Journal of Qualitative Methods
Volume 19: 1–5
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DOI: 10.1177/1609406920938280
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq


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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to produce a new explanation for the conflict between constructivist grounded theory and objectivist grounded theory. Grounded theory (GT) has drawn much attention because it enables qualitative researchers to produce theoretical explanations about what is going on. Since Glaser and Strauss invented the term “grounded theory,” there have been debates about what grounded theory is and what are its components. In this article, epistemological, ontological, and methodological beliefs about constructivist and objectivist grounded theory are explained and compared, and definitional analytical aspects of the two approaches are addressed by emphasizing their paradigmatic roots. As a result, it was concluded that objectivistic grounded theory is an agreement between positivism and the naturalistic approach advocating that researchers can be value laden but must stay as objective as possible. On the other hand, it is proposed that constructivist grounded theory is a value-laden logical operation in producing theoretical explanations.

Keywords

constructivist grounded theory, objectivist grounded theory, research paradigm, definitional dimension of research paradigm, analytical dimension of research paradigm

Introduction

Advantages of Grounded Theory

Since Glaser and Strauss (1967) asked “What is going on here?” and coined the term “grounded theory,” it has drawn much attention. Grounded theory (GT) has allowed qualitative researchers to sensitize theoretical abstraction and concepts and generate theoretical explanations about phenomena related to human behavior. Furthermore, GT moves the qualitative research tradition beyond description due to the fact that it includes a set of general principles, guidelines, strategies, and heuristic devices (Charmaz, 2014). Glaser and Strauss (1967) offered a set of strategies to develop theory rather than to deduce testable and verifiable hypotheses from extant theories. The strategies refuted the views that qualitative research is impressionistic and unsystematic, so they made qualitative research more robust. They also discarded suppositions that qualitative research should be aligned with quantitative research standards and moved the arbitrary division between theory and research. Moreover, they allowed qualitative researchers to generate their own theories. Therefore, they challenged views that theory development should belong to the elite and enabled separation

between data gathering and data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that GT is used to explicate causes, conditions, contexts, contingencies, consequences, and covariances, which are components of social processes. As a result, GT has enabled qualitative researchers to develop and construct theories, so it has drawn remarkable attention. In addition, GT helps qualitative researchers to go beyond description by generating explanations on what is going on. Hence, it has been used by social scientists from nursing research to education. However, a conflict about what GT is, what its components are, and what its assumptions are has arisen. As a result of the conflict, objectivist grounded theory (OGT) developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and constructivist grounded theory (CGT) designated by Charmaz (2008; 2014) were created.

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GT has its roots in Chicago School. Glaser and Strauss (1967), inventor of GT, viewed constant comparison method as core essence of GT. Based on the notion of constant comparison method, Strauss and Corbin (1998) developed OGT and explained all the details of it in terms of research paradigm and analytical cycle on how to code qualitative data. OGT has been extensively used by qualitative researchers who seek out objective findings and prescriptive and standard analytic cycle. However, Charmaz (2008) opposed prescriptive and strict analytical data analysis of OGT and developed CGT that suggests flexible analytical cycle. Emergence of OGT and CGT has triggered a discussion on the nature of GT. Complete understanding of conflict between CGT and OGT is required to consider research paradigm for both CGT and OGT.

Nature of the Conflict Between CGT and OGT

CGT and OGT agree on constant comparison, iterative reading, blind entry into the research setting and data analysis, symbolic interactionism as an essential premise of GT, inductive reasoning, staying away from extant theories and theoretical knowledge in the analytic process, hand by hand data collection and analysis, and memo writing. However, there are remarkable differences between CGT and OGT, and they cannot be ignored (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These differences stem from the research paradigm.

A paradigm can be described as a set of beliefs that determine fundamental rules about worldview. The research paradigm determines what the research is and what falls within and outside the limits of the research. The research paradigm consists of three components: ontological, epistemological, and methodological compounds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There is a cyclical relationship among these compounds. Ontological assumptions bring about epistemological assumptions; those assumptions, in turn, lead to issues related to methodological assumptions such as instrumentation and data collection (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). The three paradigmatic parts are not enough to explain the differences between OGT and CGT. In addition, analytic and descriptive parts should be added to discussion in order to fully understand the conflict. Therefore, elements of the research paradigm can be extended into five basic subdivisions.

The ontological element is about what the form of reality is. In the ontological element, the researcher decides if social reality is independent from consciousness (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). OGT highlights “discovery” to grasp what is going in a social setting. The term discovery implies the independent existence of something from the mind (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). Therefore, discovery requires a positivist notion. Contrary to the positivistic assumption of OGT, OGT also views social reality as an enacted phenomenon of the researcher. Furthermore, OGT considers theory as a provisional feature of concepts related to human behavior and that knowledge about human behavior is not fully apprehensible (Blumer, 1969; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Consequently, OGT accepts both assumptions of the positivistic position and interpretivist position. As a result, OGT can be viewed as postpositivist in

terms of ontology. CGT assumes that social reality emerges through the researcher’s past and present involvement and interactions with research participants, perspectives, and research applications. Thus, social reality is not independent from the researcher’s mind, and social reality is created in the mind. Consequently, CGT depends on a constructivist paradigm. More interestingly OGT and CGT accept that symbolic interactionism underlies GT (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Symbolic interactionism is a reference frame and claims that social interactions shape individuals’ interpretation and actions, individuals develop symbols and interact with each other through these symbols (Blumer, 1969). However, OGT addresses symbolic interactionism in the framework of action–interaction–consequence and reduces action–interaction to concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), whereas CGT places symbolic interaction in the theory–method package and suggests that ontology and epistemology are constructive. Consequently, OGT can be seen as an approach integrating positivism and interpretivism because OGT assumes that social reality is external but cannot be fully and perfectly grasped by the mind, but certain procedural applications and operations must be taken into consideration in the research process. As a result, OGT is ontologically critical realist and falls in the postpositivist stance. On the other hand, CGT considers that social reality is internal and dependent on the mind, has multiple forms, it cannot be fully and perfectly apprehended or discovered but can be constructed. Hence, CGT rests upon relativism and constructivism in terms of ontology.

Ontological assumptions lead to epistemological assumptions so that epistemology is another element in the research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Epistemology concerns the relationship between the knower and the known object. If the existence of objective reality is assumed, this assumption requires a positivistic standpoint where it is accepted that object–subject relations must be established and all values must be detached. On the other hand, if it is assumed that social reality is not independent from the mind and has multiple forms, subject–subject relations must be accepted in terms of epistemological sense, and researchers’ values and perspectives must be taken into consideration in designing the research, data collection, and analysis. This epistemological stance is called constructivism. There are epistemological differences between CGT and OGT. CGT assumes that facts and values are not separable from each other, so the researchers’ perspective must be taken into consideration. Therefore, CGT sees data and data analysis as constructed through experiences and relationships with participants and other data sources. In the epistemological sense, CGT rejects object–subject relations but adopts subject–subject relationships (Giddens, 1976). Moreover, CGT acknowledges that what can be seen in the research process is influenced by which values are held (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). Hence, CGT entails an awareness of presuppositions, beliefs, experiences, values, and reflexivity. As for OGT, it acknowledges the duality of realities. In other words, it accepts both the independent existence of reality and the notion that reality is not separable from the

mind. Thus, OGT considers that the construction of social reality is essential to understand how humans make sense of the world but this making sense should be intersubjective to transmit knowledge. In this sense of intersubjectivity, objectivity is inevitable (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). On the other hand, OGT attaches considerable importance to reflexivity of the researcher, and it also concerns objectivity in reflexivity. Therefore, conditional matrixes, diagrams, and core categories play key roles in terms of persuading the readers, editors, or reviewers. Moreover, OGT uses concepts and opposes absolute truth but concerns objectivity to share reality. Both CGT and OGT focus on how the participants make sense of the world but CGT credits credibility, whereas OGT is concerned with persuading the readers. As a result, OGT is postpositivist in the epistemological sense, while on the contrary, CGT has a constructive viewpoint in terms of epistemology.

Epistemological assumptions require consideration of the methodological element in the research paradigm. The methodological element entails the researcher to ask how the researcher will proceed to find out whatever can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). CGT and OGT oppose the notion of absolute truth and propose that values and facts cannot be separated from each other. This kind of epistemological stance leads to a research paradigm that aims to understand what is going on in a social setting. Besides this, the epistemological stance moves GT to understand concerns about how the researcher views their world and what the researcher sees in accordance with the understanding being held (Cohen et al., 2000). However, a misconception that GT is a personal statement or is a tool which is used by narrative journalists might develop in the minds of novice researchers. What makes GT scientific is that it enables demonstration of empirical warrants of the findings indicating coherence between statements in GT and what is happening or what has happened in the world (Cuff & Payne, 1979). In the methodological sense, both CGT and OGT share the same methodological stance because they oppose manipulation, experiments, surveying, and assigning numbers to events, but try to grasp social reality through observation, interviews, and documents. The methodological foundations of CGT and OGT entail understanding social processes and structures and action in a social setting. As a result, there is no conflict between CGT and OGT in terms of the methodological element.

New Elements for Understanding the Conflict: Definitional and Analytical Compounds

Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that the research paradigm includes three components of ontological, epistemological, and methodological components. However, the three components are not enough to understand the conflict and distinction between CGT and OGT. In order to grasp the conflict and distinction between both GT approaches more precisely, analytical and definitional dimensions must be taken into consideration. As for the definitional element, CGT views GT as a way of constructing theories. According to CGT, GT is an integration of inductive and abductive reasoning, the

researcher's interaction with data, theorizing research activity to construct a theory, and product of the reflection of the researcher on what is happening in a social setting (Charmaz, 2014). In terms of definition, according to CGT, theorizing depends on reflection requiring pondering–rumination and fresh thinking. Reflection through stop to ponder, rumination, and thinking afresh leads to construction of the theory.

OGT describes the GT research process as discovery about what is going on in the social environment. More specifically, discovery entails objectivity because discovery implies the independent existence of social reality from the mind; this makes this definition dependent on objectivity. Contrary to objectivity as a result of discovery, OGT rejects absolute apprehension of social reality. For OGT, theorizing implies an integration of conceiving and intuition with the logical systematic formulation of concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). On the other hand, Charmaz (2014), developer of CGT, emphasizes the flexibility of GT in the definition of GT, while Strauss and Corbin (1994, 1998) stress discovery and systematic theorizing in their definition. Based on the contrasts between OGT and CGT, it can be concluded that definitional differences rest upon the two contrasts: discovery and construction. Discovery depends on the external existence of social reality; construction implies flexibility and reflection. Consequently, it can be concluded that CGT adopts a constructivist perspective in its definition, whereas OGT defines GT along with postpositivism.

The analytic dimension is another added component which is addressed to explain the distinction between CGT and OGT. Data analysis is described as a way of processing and transforming data along with the purpose of the research. There is a remarkable difference between CGT and OGT in terms of analytic framework. Ontological, epistemological, and methodological concerns shape how to analyze the data that are collected. Constant comparison, meaning comparison of data with previously collected data, plays a key role in both CGT and OGT. However, OGT considers constant comparison as a way of asking generative and concept-based questions, while CGT views constant comparison as a way of reflecting. Moreover, they also adopt inductive data analysis, but abductive reasoning is only possible in CGT. As in all qualitative research traditions, data analysis is conducted through coding in GT. However, there is a difference in the coding process between CGT and OGT. Coding means attaching labels to segments of data; a way of distilling, sorting, and providing an analytic handle for CGT (Charmaz, 2014). As for OGT, coding is a close examination of data and denotes conceptualization and classification of events, actions, and outcomes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In OGT, the analytic framework starts with finding and identifying patterns and conceptualizing them through labeling and proceeds by determining variation according to properties and dimensions of concepts. Therefore, analytic procedures depend on conceptualization and classification. Conceptualization and classification of data help categories underlying the foundations of the developing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In terms of OGT, identifying concepts and conceptual change is fulfilled in open coding. This method of data analysis is the

Table 1. Comparison of CGT and OGT.

Compounds	CGT	OGT
Ontology	Assumes that social reality is constructed	Assumes external reality but opposes complete grasping of social reality
Epistemology	Suggests that social reality can be grasped through interaction with data and participants	Integrates interpretivism with objectivism so reduces actions into concepts and emphasizes remarkable importance to diagrams, matrixes
Methodology	Adopt observation, interviews, and documents as sole ways to construct the reality, view symbolic interactionism and constant comparison as the core of grounded theory	Discovery of social reality
Definition	Construction of social reality	Discovery of social reality
Analysis	Avoidance from prescriptive and mechanical way of data analysis but emphasis on flexible data analysis and reflection on research process	Prescriptive and mechanical data analysis to objectively transmit findings

process in which a huge bulk of data is reduced to more manageable size (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, this is not enough for identifying concepts, and conceptual change is fulfilled in open coding. Noticing subcategories accounts for why, when, where, who, and what consequences about a phenomenon. However, this is not enough. Concepts and their subdimensions may represent categories, but linking a category with another is necessary to discover what is going on. In open coding, a category and subdimensions along with their properties are revealed. Categories discovered in open coding need to be systematically developed. OGT offers procedural analytic tools to code axially. Laying out the properties of a category and its dimensions identifies the types of conditions, actions–interactions and outcomes, associates a category with its subcategories along with statements, and searches for clues in the data about how major categories can be related to each other (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). As a result of axial coding, structures denote the conditional context in which a category is embedded and processes account for consequences of an action. Identifying a category with its subcategories through asking the questions why, when, how, where, and what consequences and relating major categories with each other along with relational statements determine the process and structure of a phenomenon. This kind of analytic framework gives casual-analytic form to OGT. Moreover, this kind of analytic framework focuses on finding empirical uniformities in data and aims to generate causal explanations. Besides, at the analytical level, OGT suggests the use of diagrams and conditional matrix, memo writing, and theoretical integration which involves moving from a singular action or individual behavior to macro level. However, conditional matrix and diagramming are tools to provide certain procedural and prescriptive aspects which depend on systematic replicability of the research. Hence, the analytic framework is highly prescriptive in OGT (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The analytic framework of CGT consists of two stages: initial coding and focused coding. Initial coding includes several strategies to label data. Those strategies are line-by-line coding, breaking data up into their components, defining actions, looking for tacit assumptions, explication of implicit actions and meanings, crystallizing the important points,

comparing data with data, and identifying gaps in the data. Focused coding entails decisions about which initial codes make analytic sense to categorize the data precisely and fully. Focused coding is dependent on initial codes because it proceeds from initial coding. Focused coding is more conceptual than initial coding. In focused coding, the initial codes account for the data. After focused coding, theoretical coding is abstract coding. In focused coding, constantly compared codes develop a sensation in a code that is more abstract and can relate substantive codes to each other. In focused coding, theoretical codes are distilled through memo writing. Theoretical codes, in turn, provide coherence among categories. Memo writing allows the analytic progress to arise from initial codes to focused coding and determination of theoretical codes. Memo writing helps the qualitative researcher ponder data analysis from the start, think afresh, and reflect on the data analysis process. Moreover, memo writing changes the qualitative researcher's interaction with the data and enables constant comparison and flexibility of data analysis. Therefore, memo writing plays a key role in abstraction of data analysis, reflection, and construction of the theory. Hence, CGT addresses data analysis as a way of grasping social reality with multiple forms by building symbolic and meaningful constructions from the data. Along with this feature of CGT, it sees social reality as something to be constructed rather than to be discovered. Thus, CGT takes the researcher's perspectives and interactions with data and participants into consideration. Therefore, CGT avoids prescriptive and mechanical methods of data analysis (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). Detailed comparison of CGT and OGT was displayed in Table 1.

Conclusion

To sum up, advocates of CGT criticize OGT due to axial coding with its highly prescriptive and procedural nature. The analytical difference between CGT and OGT stems from the difference in terms of ontological, epistemological, and definitional aspects. Constructivism underlies the foundations of CGT. Rejection of absolute truth and full grasp of absolute truth brings about the construction of social reality and requires constructive and flexible analytic methods. On the contrary, OGT adopts the assumptions of postpositivism which rejects

complete grasp of social reality but stresses intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity brings about transmission of analytic results through objective paths. As a result, the analytic framework of OGT allows qualitative researchers to use their subjective perspective in data analysis but requires presentation of data analysis through objective methods as much as possible.

Choosing CGT for another or vice versa completely depends on our epistemological, ontological, and methodological viewpoints and how we define GT and which analytical framework we employ. Historically, OGT was developed before the development of CGT. Therefore, Charmaz (2014) criticized Strauss and Corbin (1998) due to their highly prescriptive and objectivistic stance to qualitative research. However, it is not sensible to propose that the one is superior to the other because OGT is coherent with its research paradigm, definitional and analytical framework, and CGT is too. It is not right to claim a true research process for CGT because CGT rejects the grasp of absolute truth. On the other hand, it is not appropriate to view CGT as not scientific due to its rejection of objectivity. CGT is scientific because of the fact that reflection in CGT engages empirical data and coherency between what was constructed and what data were collected.

Based on this, I conclude that OGT is an agreement between positivism and naturalistic approaches advocating that researchers can be value laden, and I propose that CGT is a value-laden logical operation in building theoretical explanations. CGT assumes that social reality is dependent on the mind, and the analytical framework of CGT depends on reflexivity. The assumption of the dependency of social reality on the mind requires that qualitative researchers have value in the research process. However, the flexible analytic process with reflexivity emphasizes turning individual experience back upon the self, and reflexivity is a means, which enables qualitative researchers to ruminate on social processes and identify participants' minds and selves (Mead, 1972). As a result, CGT has two significant characteristics: assumption of dependency of social reality on the mind with reflexivity as a way of thinking about the analytical process and identification the participants' minds and selves. Therefore, CGT can be viewed as an integration of the assumption of the dependency of social reality on mind with reflexivity. These characteristics enable CGT to feature value-laden logical operations.

Implications for Qualitative Researchers

Each of the GT has different philosophical backgrounds in terms of research paradigm including definitional and analytical compounds. If a qualitative researcher prioritizes objective transmission of findings to others and endorses impossibility of complete grasp of social reality, OGT is more useful. On the contrary, if the qualitative researcher aims to construct social reality by reflecting on social realities, CGT fits better to this aim.

GT is a method in qualitative research, but nonetheless, it includes significant distinctions in terms of ontological, epistemological, definitional, and analytical cycles. Historically, the first OGT was developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990),

and CGT emerged in opposition to OGT. Choosing either CGT or OGT depends on ontological and analytical viewpoints of the qualitative researcher. If the qualitative researcher focuses on transmission of their findings to others, OGT is more useful due to its prescriptive analytic process. On the contrary, CGT functions best if the qualitative researcher determines construction of social reality through reflexivity and the values of the researcher as core aim of the research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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