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Advancing Grounded Theory: Using Theoretical Frameworks within Grounded Theory Studies

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Abstract

The founding fathers of grounded theory (GT) claimed it is an inductive methodological approach. Yet, some scholars argue that purely inductive GTs are not possible given researchers' involvement in data collection and analysis. Subsequently, a constructivist GT approach was introduced. Still, full-length methodological articles that include rationales or detailed explanations for using constructivist GT approaches are limited in peer-reviewed journals. The purpose of this article is to highlight the ways in which the author used a constructivist GT approach in his dissertation. Within the article, the author provides concrete examples and a rationale for the ways in which he used a theoretical framework within a constructivist GT study. First, the author introduces literature on GT. Next, the author introduces the theoretical framework used in the study, highlighting the introduction of a theoretical framework as a departure from the traditional tenets of GT. Finally, the author highlights the ways in which he used the theoretical framework to shape the research questions, data collection and analysis, and findings.

Keywords

Constructivist Grounded Theory, Grounded Theory, Theoretical Framework

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Advancing Grounded Theory: Using Theoretical Frameworks within Grounded Theory Studies

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The founding fathers of grounded theory (GT) claimed it is an inductive methodological approach. Yet, some scholars argue that purely inductive GTs are not possible given researchers' involvement in data collection and analysis. Subsequently, a constructivist GT approach was introduced. Still, full-length methodological articles that include rationales or detailed explanations for using constructivist GT approaches are limited in peer-reviewed journals. The purpose of this article is to highlight the ways in which the author used a constructivist GT approach in his dissertation. Within the article, the author provides concrete examples and a rationale for the ways in which he used a theoretical framework within a constructivist GT study. First, the author introduces literature on GT. Next, the author introduces the theoretical framework used in the study, highlighting the introduction of a theoretical framework as a departure from the traditional tenets of GT. Finally, the author highlights the ways in which he used the theoretical framework to shape the research questions, data collection and analysis, and findings. Keywords: Constructivist Grounded Theory, Grounded Theory, Theoretical Framework

My dissertation topic is well received as a scholarly investigation (see Mitchell, 2012); however, the way I approached the study is often debated. I categorize my dissertation a grounded theory (GT) study, but I used a theoretical framework to guide my inquiry, which departs from the foundational tenets of a traditional GT study. GT was introduced as a research methodology by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967 (Merriam, 2009). In GT studies, as in other qualitative methodologies (e.g., case studies, phenomenology, ethnography), the researcher is “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 29). While both scholars and practitioners are interested in my research on historically Black fraternities and sororities or Black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs) and their influence on the persistence of African Americans at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), some scholars question whether or not my dissertation can be labeled a GT study because of my use of a theoretical framework, or the quasi-deductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) I employed. Those who question if my study is truly a GT study in its “purest” or original sense argue valid points; however, I consider my dissertation a constructivist GT study, which is a more recent advancement of GT (see Charmaz, 2006).

Constructivist grounded theorists acknowledge that the theory that is formed is grounded in the experiences of the participants; nevertheless, the researcher helps co-create the theory based on their interactions with the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Further, I intentionally co-constructed the grounded theory that emerged by introducing social capital as the theoretical framework to guide the study. Social capital defined as “the norms and social relations embedded in the social structures of society that enable people to co-ordinate action and achieve desired goals” (Narayan, 1990, p. 6). Ultimately, as the researcher, I not only co-constructed the theory that emerged, but also brought with me an exposure to research and scholarship that has documented African American college students experiences at PWIs and

the social support or social capital cultural student organizations have provided African American students at PWIs. Because of the prior knowledge I brought to the study, I found a social capital theoretical lens appropriate in co-constructing the grounded theory that emerged.

I could have approached the study without a theoretical framework. Still, I would not have been as intentional in the development of the initial interview and focus group questions as traditional GT studies are typically guided by a grand tour question. In addition, I initiated the study with pre-conceived thoughts and beliefs; that is why scholars ask research questions—because of their interests in various topics. I posit these interests, beliefs, and pre-conceived thoughts are not absent from researchers when they decide to explore research questions using a GT approach.

I contend BGLOs are important avenues of social integration for African American students at PWIs. Going into the study, I “hypothesized” BGLOs may positively influence the persistence of African Americans at PWIs. Furthermore, I am a member of a BGLO, which means I have a general affinity for these organizations and advocate for BGLOs. Given my positionality, it would have been difficult—and unethical—for me to act as if I did not have preconceived thoughts or biases about BGLOs and their influence on educational outcomes, or as if I was going into the study uninformed of extant literature. I informed the research participants of my views in the informed consent document. In addition, I made readers of my dissertation aware of my stance on BGLOs by including a “researcher’s worldview” or positionality section in the methodology section of the study. As I sought to explore the ways in which BGLOs might provide African American students social capital at PWIs, and subsequently might affect persistence, a focused analytical lens allowed me to co-construct a focused theory grounded in the participants’ experiences.

While I made beliefs and biases clear, I also made every attempt to separate my beliefs and biases to maximize the trustworthiness of the data that emerged. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulating the data that emerged with existing literature; conducting a culminating focus group with the interview participants to make sure that the themes that emerged matched their lived experiences; and keeping a researcher’s journal to document my thoughts and feelings throughout the data collection process. Again, I could have conducted the study without a theoretical framework to align with the “purity” of a traditional GT study, but I am not sure of the added benefits to such an approach. My findings highlight the important role BGLO membership had on the persistence of the participants while focusing on the social networks developed—or social capital gained—as a result of involvement in their respective fraternities and sororities. I argue the findings and investigation would not have been as rich and informative in the absence of a theoretical framework.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the methodological approach I used in conducting my dissertation. As a result of scholars questioning whether researchers can conduct GT studies free from bias or preconceived thoughts (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994) constructivist GTs have emerged (e.g., Edwards & Jones, 2009). Still, full-length, methodological articles detailing the ways in which researchers co-construct GT studies are minimal. The present article provides both a concrete example and interpretation of the ways in which I used a theoretical framework within a constructivist GT study. First, I briefly introduce literature on GT, the methodological tenets of GT, and some criticisms and the advancements of GT. Next, I introduce Lin’s (1999) network theory of social capital, which served as my theoretical framework. Finally, I highlight the ways I used Nan Lin’s theory to co-construct the study while staying true to many tenets of a GT methodological approach.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (GT) “seeks not just to understand, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). GT—in its original sense—is a unique research methodology because the researchers do not begin their studies with a hypothesis. The theory that is formed is grounded in and emerges from the data; hence, the methodology was named grounded theory (Merriam, 2009). Because the researcher is heavily involved in the process, the subjective nature and rigor of GT studies are often questioned. Nevertheless, GT is a structured methodology as the development of grounded theories consists of systematic, rigorous, and orderly processes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After Glaser and Strauss first introduced GT in 1967, they later developed two opposing views of GT. Glaser argued researchers could form a grounded theory using *ad hoc* themes that emerged, while Corbin and Strauss introduced a *coding paradigm* to help researchers organize the data (Kelle, 2005). Glaser argued that Corbin and Strauss’ approach “forced” themes to emerge (Kelle, 2005). In the subsequent section I introduce GT using the coding guidelines introduced by Corbin and Strauss (2008) as I used their approach in my dissertation. I used Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) approach because their approach lends itself well to constructivist GT studies as I argue all GT studies are co-constructed by the researchers and participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

In GT, data collection and analysis are conducted somewhat simultaneously; this process is referred to as theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Throughout the theoretical sampling process, the researcher uses themes that emerge from previous data (e.g., interviews, focus groups) to develop questions for the next round of data collection; this is done until no new themes emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The constant comparative method is used to analyze the data. Like its name suggests, it is a constant comparison of the data as the researcher is collecting and analyzing the data and continues until the researcher can formulate a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The themes and concepts used to explain the GT are formed using a process of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is an analysis that identifies emerging concepts from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process is expansive, primarily conducted after the first round of interviews and helps develop the next round of interview questions (Merriam, 2009). Axial coding is the process of identifying sub-concepts, properties, and dimensions to fully explain the continua of concepts and to show relationships between concepts. Sub-concepts are based on their properties and dimensions. Properties describe concepts; dimensions are continua of properties (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Selective coding is the process of developing a narrative of the GT by integrating the concepts and connections that were proposed during axial coding. Lastly, creating a conditional matrix gives a visual picture of how the concepts are related to each other and represented in the data; this illustrates the GT that emerges (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Criticisms and Advancements

GT as a methodology has been criticized for lacking rigor, being too lengthy, consisting of small sample sizes, and its fluidity or “floating” hypothesis (Goldthorpe, 2000; Mjøset, 2005). Furthermore, some scholars argue that GT might not be plausible in its original sense because researchers bring their views, assumptions, and biases into the study (Charmaz, 2006; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). I agree and argue that is why constructivist GT studies have a place in qualitative research. Constructivist grounded theorists “do not attempt to be

objective in their data collection or analysis, but instead seek to clarify and problematize their assumptions and make those assumptions clear to others” (Edwards & Jones, 2009, p. 212). In addition, constructivist GT studies are important in socially constructed hierarchies such as race (Charmaz, 2006) because the researcher brings their knowledge of these social constructions to the study. For these reasons, I decided that a constructivist GT approach and using a theoretical framework was appropriate for exploring the research question.

Background of the Study

In my dissertation I explored the impact of Black Greek-lettered organizations (BGLOs) on the persistence of African Americans at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; see Mitchell, 2012). I defined persistence as a student’s goal to graduate. In my review of the literature I found that BGLOs have the potential to serve as an important form of support and social network for African American students (Harper, 2008b; Kimbrough, 1995). I also found affiliation in BGLOs may increase classroom engagement (Harper, 2008b), extra-curricular participation (Kimbrough, 1995), and leadership development (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). As a result, African American students may become more engaged during college via their BGLO affiliations, and therefore, may be more likely to graduate given the positive relationships between college involvement and persistence and graduation (Davis, 1991; Fisher, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Patilla, Trevino, & Gonzalez, 1997; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Researchers have also documented that social capital may be gained through the social networks established in minority student organizations and BGLOs (Harper, 2008a; McClure, 2006) and that social capital appears to be positively linked to academic achievement (Dika & Singh, 2002). The purpose of my dissertation was to explore whether there were any relationships between BGLOs and the persistence of African Americans at a PWI. To investigate these possible relationships, I placed emphasis on the social capital that may be gained through the social networks established in BGLOs. Ultimately, a social capital theoretical framework shaped the study.

Theoretical Framework

I used Nan Lin’s (1999) network theory of social capital to shape the study. Lin’s network theory of social capital highlights the idea that social capital is embedded in resources in social networks. Lin (1999) defines social capital more specifically as an “investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions” (p. 39). This definition of social capital is comprised of three key parts:

- 1) resources embedded in a social structure;
- 2) accessibility of resources by individuals; and,
- 3) the use of the social resources by individuals in purposeful actions.

Lin’s (1999) network theory of social capital is further explained using three key elements:

- 1) *inequalities*,
- 2) *capitalization*, and
- 3) *effects/returns*.

First, individuals do not possess the same amount of social capital; therefore, there are inequalities in the social capital individuals possess. Second, individuals capitalize or access and mobilize social capital. Third, the effects are the returns or the benefits associated with the social capital gained. The returns can be broken down into two outcomes:

- 1) returns of instrumental action, and
- 2) returns of expressive action.

Returns of instrumental action are gained resources not originally possessed by the individual and returns of expressive action are the maintenance of resources already possessed by the individual. Figure 1 depicts how Lin modeled his theory.

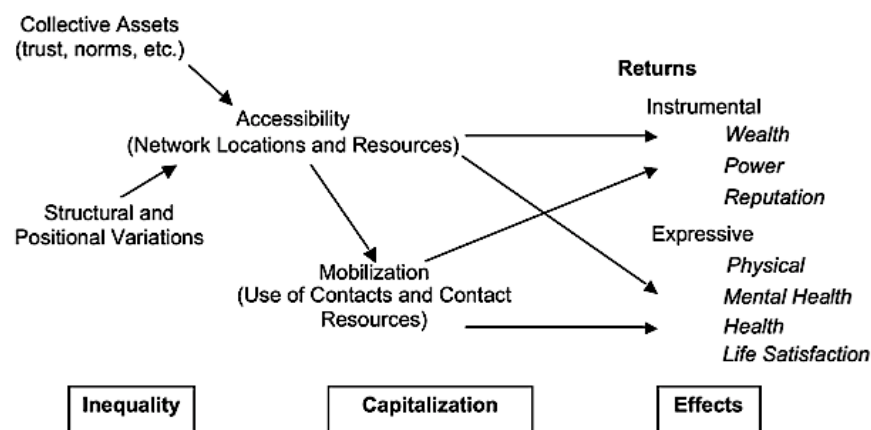


Figure 1. Modeling a Theory of Social Capital. From “Building a Network Theory of Social Capital,” by N. Lin 1999, *Connections*, 22(1), p. 42. Copyright 1999 by the INSCA. Reprinted with permission.

Participants

I selected the participants through purposeful sampling, more specifically, criterion sampling and with Institutional Review Board approval. The participants

- 1) self-identified as African American,
- 2) were members of a historically Black fraternity or sorority, and
- 3) attended a PWI.

The participants were students at a large, public predominantly White research-intensive university located in the Northeast United States. The university enrolled approximately 35,000 students, with approximately 11% of the students self-identifying as African American. I recruited participants by introducing the study during a council meeting of all of the historically Black fraternities and sororities at the university. A total of 7 women and 5 men volunteered to participate in the study. They were all members of one of four BGLOs—two fraternities and two sororities. In the subsequent sections I introduce the ways in which Lin’s (1999) theory helped concentrate my investigation while staying true to many of the methodological tenets of grounded theory.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study were:

- a) In what ways, if any, is social capital gained through African American students' participation in BGLOs?
- b) In what ways, if any, does social capital influence the persistence of African American students at PWIs?

In grounded theory (GT) researchers build theories based on the data collected. Using theoretical frameworks with GT studies would be considered deductive reasoning. Yet, I posit all GT studies use deductive reasoning and are co-created by researchers whether explicitly or implicitly stated or recognized. Researchers initiate studies because they have some interests in, and assumptions about, the topic being explored. The research questions illuminate that while I used social capital as a framework, I did not take the stance that students would receive social capital. I used the phrase, "In what ways, if any," purposefully. During theoretical sampling, if the data would have indicated that the social networks within BGLOs were not helpful in the participants' navigation of the PWI they attended, I would not have explored question two and focused my attention on question one.

Shifting my focus during the study highlights the ways in which using a theoretical framework within a GT approach does not influence the malleability or fluidness of the findings just as in a traditional GT. Thus, while I used a theoretical framework to shape the study or bring focus to a particular aspect of BGLOs, just as in a traditional GT, the participants guided the study. I was not seeking to build support for my preconceived thoughts or biases. In fact, I used a social capital framework at the start of the study to bring focus to the academic outcomes associated with the social networks established within these groups as the social benefits of these groups are well documented.

Interview and Focus Group Protocols

I also used Lin's (1999) network theory of social capital to form the initial and follow-up interview and focus group questions as I directed my attention to *inequalities*, *capitalization*, and *returns* as detailed by Lin. Subsequently, the initial questions developed represented a continuum from inequalities to returns. In addition, the questions highlighted the social networks built within the students' respective fraternity or sorority. Table 1 provides examples of questions asked during the initial round of interviews and focus groups and where the questions fit on the continuum of inequalities to returns.

Table 1. Spectrum of Interview and Focus Group Questions

Collection method	Question	Analytic Focus
Focus Groups	Tell me about your experiences as African Americans on a predominantly White campus.	Inequalities
Interviews	What were your academic and social expectations in attending a PWI? What influenced these expectations?	Inequalities
Focus groups	Why did you decide to join a BGLO?	Capitalization
Focus groups	Why did you choose your organization in particular?	Capitalization
Focus groups	In what ways, if any, have the social networks within your organization influenced your college experience?	Returns
Interview	In what ways, if any, have the social networks within your fraternity/sorority influenced your college experience as related to your persistence towards graduation?	Returns

As a result of using a theoretical framework in my investigation, I was able to craft questions that

- a) directly asked about the participants' experiences at a PWI;
- b) explored whether the participants believed the social networks established within their fraternity or sorority provided them social capital; and
- c) explored the ways in which their social networks or the social capital gained influenced persistence.

In doing this, I openly acknowledged my role in the co-construction of the GT and initially explored particular questions that were guided by Lin's theory. Still, I used the theoretical sampling process used in traditional GT studies to develop subsequent questions grounded in the participants' experiences.

Findings

I analyzed the data by reviewing the transcripts, audiotapes, and my research journal and using the theoretical sampling process until no new themes emerged. In the findings, I used Lin's (1999) social network theory of social capital to categorize themes that emerged. Again, Lin models his theory using three broad themes—*inequalities*, *capitalization*, and *effects/returns*—to explain gaining social capital through social networks. As a result, I used those themes—*a priori*—to categorize the experiences of the participants and to report the findings. First, I used *inequalities* as an *a priori* theme to position the participants' experiences as African Americans at a predominantly white institution (PWI). During my conversations with the participants, I found that their experiences were consistent with the experiences of the African American students highlighted in previous studies that span several decades (e.g., Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Figure 2 highlights how inequalities contextualized the participants' experiences at a PWI and, collectively, depicts how the themes and codes are related to form the GT that emerged.

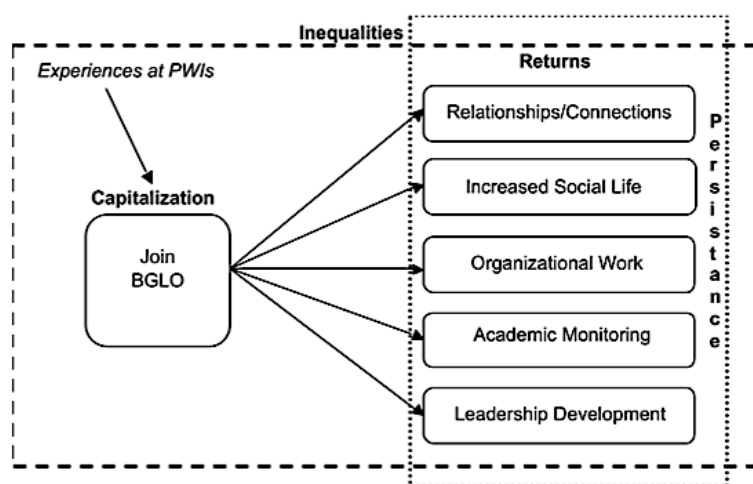


Figure 2. A Grounded Theory of the Influences of Black Greek-Lettered Organizations on the Persistence of African Americans at Predominantly White Colleges.

Next, I introduced the ways in which the participants *capitalized* on—and mobilized—his or her BGLO membership. The participants accessed and mobilized social capital by deciding to join a BGLO. I found that students joined their organizations for three primary reasons. Those reasons were

- a) family,
- b) the histories associated with each BGLO, and
- c) the influences of members of participants' organizations who served as role models.

Once the participant joined his or her organization, they mobilized through the networks established with their peers, faculty, and staff—they used the social capital gained through these established social networks. For example, one participant stated:

[M]y older sister became a member [when she went to college]. I used to visit her in college and I would see the social networking going on [between her and her sorority sisters] and from that point on [I knew I wanted to join my sorority]. I adopted all of her viewpoints on any other [Black Greek-lettered] organization and she has strong viewpoints on those organizations. I took [those views] from her and made [them] my own.... I already knew [my sorority] was what I was going to do. I had no other option in my mind [or any interests] to do anything else from 10 years old (Mitchell, 2012, p. 71).

Finally, I introduced the *effects* or *returns* of being involved in a BGLO at a PWI. The study revealed that

- a) relationships/connections,
- b) increased social lives,
- c) gaining community and administrative experiences,
- d) academic monitoring, and
- e) leadership development, which were all framed as “returns,” influenced persistence towards graduation in positive ways.

The following participant described how participating in his fraternity improved his collegiate experience noting,

My frat brothers...we have a real deep connection. They're just like family. So I rely on them a lot actually during my day; just for support, help, funds, especially on a White campus where sometimes it may be hard to find friends here in classes, or it might be hard to find someone to study with, or just even to hang out with. There's always someone there, no matter what (Mitchell, 2012, p. 79).

While the participants' experiences were categorized under *a priori* themes, the theory that emerged was in fact grounded by their collective experiences. The themes describing the participants' experiences did not include data that was “forced” as I followed the tenets of GT during data collection and analysis. For example, I used the constant comparative method along with open, axial, and selective coding to analyze the data, and through those processes, their experiences were grouped into the *a priori* themes to explain the GT that was formed. Ultimately, using a theoretical framework shaped my study in many ways; however, I remained true to the methodological processes of GT.

Conclusion

I highlighted several of the ways that Lin's (1999) network theory of social capital was used to shape my dissertation, a constructivist grounded theory (GT) study. While I departed from the foundations of GT as a purely inductive process, I found that using GT methods with a theoretical framework provided a concentrated investigation of the participants' lived experiences, while also allowed for other themes to emerge. While I highlighted the use of theoretical frameworks as an example of how to advance GT studies, I argue constructivist GT studies of all approaches should be recognized as acceptable practices and advancements of GT studies. In "pure" GT studies, researchers argue they use the methodological approach without sociohistorical factors influencing their thoughts and biases and by disconnecting themselves from the participants. Yet, as many constructivist qualitative theorists argue researchers cannot separate themselves from the participants, a constructivist GT approach—and in this particular case coupling GT methods with theoretical frameworks—might be the most realistic and trustworthy approach to GT studies. By acknowledging that researchers co-construct GTs, we advance its contributions to qualitative research and various academic fields.

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