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Abstract

As a developing PhD student one must work to develop the ability to apply critical thinking skills and analysis. In my pursuit to further understand qualitative research methods, I chose to look more closely at grounded theory method due to its seemingly complex structure and unique method of theory development. Urquhart (2013) works to present the components of grounded theory method (GTM) as a reaction to confusion and frustration of postgraduate students struggling with the method. She provides a sequential “how to” guide on GTM while asserting the importance of staying flexible within the structure. She acknowledges and addresses the criticism of GTM and strives to dispel myths associated with the method.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Grounded Theory Method, Coding, Novice Researcher, Glaserian

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How to “Get” Grounded and Not “Get” Lost: Review of *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide*

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As a developing PhD student one must work to develop the ability to apply critical thinking skills and analysis. In my pursuit to further understand qualitative research methods, I chose to look more closely at grounded theory method due to its seemingly complex structure and unique method of theory development. Urquhart (2013) works to present the components of grounded theory method (GTM) as a reaction to confusion and frustration of postgraduate students struggling with the method. She provides a sequential “how to” guide on GTM while asserting the importance of staying flexible within the structure. She acknowledges and addresses the criticism of GTM and strives to dispel myths associated with the method. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Grounded Theory Method, Coding, Novice Researcher, Glaserian

Qualitative research methods continue to gain popularity and credibility within the research community which for many years was primarily focused on quantitative methods to produce valid results. While qualitative research as a whole has maintained a steady forward momentum, the grounded theory research method is still having to clear its name among the research community. This is not because of the method itself but due to skepticism in both the quantitative and qualitative community of researchers along with misapplications of the term “grounded theory.” It’s working twice as hard to show it has a place alongside other esteemed research methods and as Urquhart (2013) explains; it is often due to ignorance and prejudice that grounded theory method is dismissed and overlooked. Urquhart (2013) explains that using the terminology “grounded theory method” is a more accurate depiction of the method because “grounded theory” is the result of applying the method (p. 2). *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* (Urquhart, 2013) is ideal for beginning researchers interested in utilizing grounded theory method (GTM) as it clearly takes the reader through the building blocks of the method. Furthermore, seasoned researchers will benefit from the text as Urquhart (2013) works tirelessly at defending the method and providing a clearer understanding of the concepts and theories, particularly the use of coding. The text was developed out of a response to postgraduate students wanting a better explanation of the approach and Urquhart capitalizes on this opportunity by formulated the text as a reaction to gaps and barriers students were encountering as they attempted to utilize the method.

I chose to review this method to confront my own criticism of qualitative research. Grounded theory seemed like a “stab in the dark” idea with a “hope and a prayer” of coming out on the other side with something of value. My approach to the text, in the spirit of GTM, was to let the data inform and guide me as I navigated the details of the research process. In spite of my good intentions, in retrospect, I can see how I began this pursuit with preconceived ideas of what the material had to offer. Which demonstrates one of my continued struggles with GTM: can we truly ever set aside our biases and preconceived notions? And if we can’t, how does it affect the development of the emerging theories in GTM? That being said, the text left me pleasantly surprised as it aptly addressed my skepticism regarding the method and its applicability.

The text is divided into three sections; introduction (chapters 1-2) , method in practice (chapters 3-6) and theory building and reflections (chapters 7-9). The introductory chapters address basic techniques, historical context and the development of GTM over time. Urquhart (2013) really stresses her desire to present a guide to utilizing GTM without being prescriptive and maintaining flexibility. Charmaz (2006) states GTM “consists of systemic, yet flexible guidelines” (p. 2); great emphasis is placed on the importance of the method to remain adaptable. Furthermore, Urquhart (2013) spends significant time presenting the two strands of GTM, Glaserian and Straussian. She openly discloses her bias towards the Glaserian strand but emphasizes the importance of fully understanding what makes the two strands different and how this will affect the research design. Munhall and Chenail (2008) echo this importance by stating one must learn “a method thoroughly in a way you understand and about which you can communicate. You must know the inside and outside of this method, as well as the permeable circumference” (p. 35). This is especially true as Glaserian and Straussian approaches overlap greatly but the differences between the two are considered so foundational that it caused the split into two strands. The author also makes a point to discuss what theory actually is, which is the whole point of the GTM process. While this idea may seem basic, by reviewing the general definition and formulation of theory and then presenting the components of a theory in GTM, it helped to provide a guiding light towards the final result (pp. 5-6).

The “meat” of the text addresses the practicality of conducting grounded theory research. It is here that two examples are introduced, President Obama’s inauguration speech and a Master’s project. These examples follow the reader through the coding processes and perhaps bring to life the concept of coding. By seeing how the text is evaluated through each process, it’s clearer to see the application of the coding language. Urquhart (2013) gives substantial focus to the coding process as it is often the most misunderstood, misapplied and challenging component of GTM. She clearly addresses the frequent, and inaccurate, use of GTM as a “blanket term” for coding (p. 3). Additionally, she admonishes researchers utilizing GTM that complete the coding process and then fail to extrapolate theory from the data. After all, while the founders stress that grounded theory is “discovery of theory from data - systematically obtained and analysed in social research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1), they also worked diligently to show that further abstraction of the theory should be emphasized. Throughout the text, Urquhart (2013) refers back to the development and early beginnings of GTM while giving voice to the evolution of the method. She addresses the positivist vs interpretivist (constructivist) differences and how they apply to method and research design. She excels in presenting information, disclosing her bias and then proceeding to demonstrate how both sides are represented in the information. As I read through each chapter I began making notes of repetitive words that seemed woven into the heart of the method: rich, connection, systematic, cohesive, recursive, conceptual, discovery, flexible, inductive, comparison and concurrent. Urquhart demonstrates in this language, possibly unintentionally, the importance of creative writing skills in qualitative research designs and how the ability to integrate concepts seamlessly with data is crucial.

Lastly, but certainly not the least important according to Urquhart (2013), she discusses what to do once a theory emerges from the coding process. She openly admits there is truth to the criticism that GTM produces low-level theories due to its focus on micro-phenomena. However, she is proficient in her explanation of how these theories can be scaled-up (p. 130) and how important it is for the researcher to then engage their theory with current theories within the discipline.

Perhaps the most useful components of the text are found at the end of each chapter. For each chapter, Urquhart (2013) includes a summary, exercises, web resources, further readings and frequently asked questions. What I like specifically about this is that, as you

work through the text, it's as if you are sitting through a lecture series with Cathy Urquhart on GTM. It challenges the reader to not only consume the information she presents but to engage with it, try it out and really wrestle with the concepts. This aspect created a much richer learning experience for me as I worked to pick apart the framework of GTM.

Urquhart (2013) does well in presenting the book sequentially and concisely. She is able to present essential information and theoretical concepts without flooding the reader with details and lengthy descriptions. However, Urquhart (2013) only briefly addresses reflexivity (p. 70) and bias. As this text is directed towards beginning researchers I would think a more substantive portion be designated to address the potential of researcher bias, particularly in the coding process. How does GTM account for cultural differences, translated data from one language to another? Researcher bias can have a considerable effect on outcomes, particularly in GTM. Urquhart (2013) fails to guide the beginning researcher in how to avoid this pitfall as it pertains specifically to GTM. Furthermore, when considering how language changes, how will research derived from the shifting, morphing framework of GTM remain understandable over time. Due to changes in how data are coded and evolving semantics, will findings utilizing GTM be difficult to interpret in the future? Perhaps, there are no easy answers or solutions for these questions but I can't help but think the text falls short in addressing these concerns.

It is clear in her writing that Urquhart (2013) has a vast knowledge and understanding of grounded theory. While she is an expert in the methodology she demonstrates her creative writing skills (important to grounded theory) as she explains the complex and sometimes confusing components to her readers. She presents the information with a true passion and excitement for GTM. Her idea of GTM is that it is a living concept and continues to evolve and change with the contributions from different researchers. Perhaps she views it as McCallin (2011) describes, that it gives voice to what is "actually happening in practical life, rather than describing what should be going on" (p. 2325). Urquhart (2013) writes from firsthand experience of having used the method and seeing desired results. She has been a witness to the struggles of postgraduate students wrestling with concepts and barriers. These experiences allow her to demonstrate honest insight and empathy to the reader searching for the same answers. Overall, *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* by Cathy Urquhart (2013) is wellwritten, easy to understand, clearly demonstrates practical application and boldly responds to presented criticisms. I highly recommend this book to anyone, beginner or expert, curious about the method or interested in utilizing GTM in research.

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