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Contrasting Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist Grounded Theory: Methodological and Philosophical Conflicts

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Abstract

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Keywords

Classic Grounded Theory, Straussian Grounded Theory, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Coding, Framework, Research Philosophy, Paradigms, Methodology, Differences between Grounded Theories, Grounded Theory Diagrams, Literature Reviews, Use of Literature

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Contrasting Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist Grounded Theory: Methodological and Philosophical Conflicts

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Grounded Theory (GT) is an innovative research methodology, consisting of three prevailing traditions: Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT. Despite arising from the same root, and sharing a number of the original methodological techniques, Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT have nevertheless diverged to such an extent that they are neither homogenous nor interchangeable methodologies. They are differentiated by contrasting philosophical frameworks and conflicting methodological directives. Through a careful analysis of the literature, the authors propose that the incongruity of the three GT traditions hinges on three principal and paramount demarcations: Firstly, their contending coding procedures; secondly, their opposing philosophical positions; and thirdly, their conflicting use of literature. The authors argue that these three areas of contention represent the quintessential distinction between the three GT traditions. Accordingly, this article will illustrate and contrast the contending coding conventions, uncover the underlying philosophical positions, and explore the contrasting uses of literature embedded within Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT.

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Grounded Theory (GT) is an innovative methodology, consisting of three prevailing traditions: Classic, Straussian and Constructivist GT. Despite their significant divergence, the three factions of grounded theorists claim the same origin and continue to embrace a number of the original methodological techniques penned by Glaser and Strauss in the original GT text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). A detailed background of this history is available in the authors' previous article (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). Although this present article is concentrating on the distinctions which differentiate these three factions of GT, it is imperative to first acknowledge their points of methodological convergence and identify a number of the foundational GT concepts (as featured in the original Classic GT publication in 1967), which Straussian and Constructivist GT continue to embrace and endorse.

Points of Convergence

The original textbook of GT (*The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 1967) outlined that at the preliminary stages of a study, the researcher should only make choices regarding the initial gathering of data rather than predetermining the entire procedure of data collection from the outset of the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) contended that decisions regarding data collection cannot be entirely prearranged because the analysis of data will reveal the need for more data. This becomes evident at a number of stages throughout the research. Firstly, as data are initially coded and categorized, gaps will become evident, thereby identifying the specific need for further evidence in a particular sphere (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Secondly, during the simultaneous collecting, coding, and analysis

of data, unexpected concepts may emerge which change the direction of the study considerably, thereby redirecting the research, and necessitating further data-collection that could not have been anticipated in advance. Finally, as the underlying hypothesis begins to surface, gaps in the emerging theory will become evident to the researcher, who subsequently identifies the specific need for further evidence in a particular sphere. As a consequence, the researcher's progressive research sample will be guided by these unfolding identifications rather than predetermined at the outset of the study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) named this evolving process *theoretical sampling*. This procedure of theoretical sampling continues until the point of *saturation*, when the analysis has been exhausted and no new data are emerging. Significantly, these precepts remain intrinsic to Classic, Straussian and Constructivist GT as they each contend that the research sample cannot be predetermined; instead, it must be a theoretical sample, dynamically led by the emerging theory until the point of saturation.

The original GT methodology (1967) forged a very specific approach to analysing data which is underlined by the method of *constant comparison*. As raw data are meticulously analysed line by line, every incident in the data is coded with a conceptual label. These codes are collated into a plethora of categories denoting higher-level concepts. Glaser and Holton¹ identified that as the researcher is simultaneously collecting, coding, analyzing and categorizing data, she is engaged in three levels of constant comparisons (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Holton, 2010):

- 1) Codes are compared with codes,
- 2) Codes are compared with emerging categories, and
- 3) Categories are compared with one another.

At the latter stages of research, Glaser and Holton (2004; Holton 2010) suggest that comparative analysis encompasses a final dimension (which the authors suggests could be depicted as the fourth tier of the constant comparative technique):

- 4) The emerging theory is compared with the literature.

Glaser and Strauss insisted that this dance of the collection, coding and analysis of data, punctuated by the beat of the constant comparison should “blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 43). The constant comparison was a distinguishing characteristic of the methodology to the extent that GT was also known as the constant comparative method (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Giske & Artinian, 2007; Jones & Alony, 2011). Accordingly, this remains an essential precept in all three factions of GT as it enables the analyst to proficiently engender a theory that is credible, consistent, and closely integrated with the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As well as pioneering the constant comparison, the original GT methodology also introduced the technique of *memo writing*. As concepts begin to emerge through the process of coding and constant comparison, the researcher reflects on the data by recording memos of her reflections, deliberations and conjectures. Recording memos is critical during this entire process as it “provides an immediate illustration for an idea” and serves to develop reflection, ideas, and codes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 108). Glaser and Strauss (1967) also stipulated that as the researcher begins to write a theory, it is imperative to gather all of the memos

¹In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss identify four stages of the constant comparative method: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). However, the elucidation of this develops with increasing lucidity and coherence in Glaser's successive publications. Consequently, the author will utilize these later publications to ensure clarity.

pertaining to each category, in order to have a succinct illustration of each concept, which in turn facilitates the theorizing process. Furthermore, they delineated that when it comes to the final stages of writing the research into a thesis or journal paper, the successive memos will provide the map for the researcher to articulate the journey of conceptualizing the data, wrestling with complications, and eventually fashioning a theory. Thus, memo writing is intrinsic to GT methodology and continues to pervade Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist variations of GT.

The Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967) also distinguished between substantive and formal theory. Glaser and Strauss originally cautioned that the process of generating a GT within a very specific arena, such as parental coping with an early diagnosis of their child's hearing loss, yields a limited substantive theory applicable only to this specific field. The question of whether or not this theory has wider applicability, for example, parental coping with any trauma or coping in general, represents a leap from substantive (local) to formal (all-inclusive) theory and necessitates a further study. Glaser and Strauss suggested that substantive theory is the bedrock for formal theory and advised that the researcher should focus on generating only one or the other during the course of a study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Significantly, Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT continue to operate within this framework and maintain this distinction between substantive and formal theory.

The above precepts (theoretical sampling, saturation, comparative analysis, memos, and substantive versus formal theory) signify quintessential characteristics of GT. These features are deeply embedded within the three derivatives which comprise the GT family. As a consequence, Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT retain a familial resemblance.

Points of Divergence

Despite sharing fundamental GT tenets, Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT are not homogenous or interchangeable entities. Their incongruity essentially hinges on three principal demarcations: firstly their contending *coding procedures*, secondly, their opposing *philosophical positions*, and thirdly their contrasting *use of literature*. From a careful analysis of the literature, we argue that these three areas of contention represent the quintessential distinction between the three GT traditions.

The remainder of this article will concentrate on these three distinguishing areas which demarcate Classic, Straussian and Constructivist GT as diverging methodologies. Firstly the coding conventions of Classic, Straussian and Constructivist GT will each be investigated in turn. Secondly, the philosophical assumptions underlying each tradition will each be examined consecutively. Finally the contrasting use of literature will be explored within Classic, Straussian and Constructivist GT.

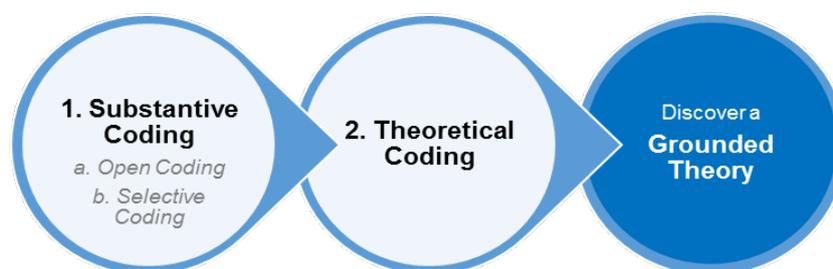
Coding Conventions

Classic GT: The Original Coding Convention

While the basic coding procedure of the original Classic GT has been maintained, the presentation of it has developed with increasing lucidity. Glaser's recent collaborative work with Judith A. Holton (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007), and Holton's own publications (2010), present the coding procedures of Classic GT with a succinct clarity. Glaser and Holton propose that the researcher approaches GT data analysis with a series of questions including "What is the main concern being faced by the participants?" and "What accounts for the continual resolving of this concern?" (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 48). They asserted that the researcher wrestles with these underlying questions through the process of coding the

data, which Holton (2010) cohesively summarized as substantive and theoretical coding. As depicted in the diagram below, these two stages of coding precipitate the *discovery* of a GT:

Figure 1. The Coding Procedure of Classic GT (Holton, 2010)



These coding stages are imperative to Classic GT as they bind all the concepts of the methodology together and undergird the entire research process from conception to conclusion (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Holton 2010). They are described in detail in Table 1:

Table 1: The Coding Procedure of Classic GT (Holton, 2010)

Stage	Description
Substantive Coding: a) Open Coding	As data are collected and analysed line-by-line, each incident is coded with a key word, which synthesizes sections of data (Glaser & Holton, 2004). Coded segments are fragmented from the transcript, compared to each other, and grouped conceptually. These groupings (called conceptual categories) are given a conceptual title by the researcher, who forms as many conceptual categories as possible. The researcher engages in the three levels of <i>constant comparison</i> (as outlined previously). As new evidence continues to be gathered, compared, analyzed, and categorized, categories become dense and complex and their inter-relationships begin to become apparent. Subsequently, a principal core category (or core variable) will emerge. This will encompass the chief concern of the study, interact with most of the other categories in a significant capacity, and be sophisticated enough to account for the complexity and nuances within the data (Giske & Artinian, 2007; Glaser & Holton, 2004; Holton, 2010; Jones & Alony, 2011).
Substantive Coding: b) Selective Coding	The researcher reduces her focus to the core category and the categories which meaningfully relate to it. She engages in <i>theoretical sampling</i> and refines the interview questions accordingly (Jones & Alony, 2011). For the purpose of filtering out extraneous material, the collection and coding of incoming data is selectively restricted (or <i>delimited</i>) to focus exclusively on relevant data (Holton, 2010). As the researcher saturates these categories, the core category will become increasingly dense and its theoretical relationships with other relevant categories will become apparent. Subsequently, the researcher integrates (or <i>reduces</i>) the categories into higher-level substantive concepts to reach a higher level of conceptualization (Giske & Artinian, 2007; Glaser & Holton, 2004; Holton, 2010; Jones & Alony, 2011).
Theoretical Coding	Theoretical coding comprises the final level of abstraction, as the researcher conceptualizes the inter-relationships of the substantive concepts. This gives rise to an emerging grounded theory that can “account for the relationships between the concepts thereby explaining the latent pattern of social behaviour” (Holton, 2010, para. 1). Glaser insists on <i>trusting in emergence</i> of a theory at this point in the research (Glaser, 1992). At this point literature should be employed as a comparison and conceptual mapping may also be utilised to facilitate this process (Giske & Artinian, 2007). Theoretical sorting of

memos can retrospectively convey the progressive formulation of the theory in writing (Giske & Artinian, 2007; Holton, 2010; Glaser & Holton, 2004; Jones & Alony, 2011).

The Classic GT coding procedure is underlined by the principle of the natural *emergence* of a theory to be *discovered* from the content of the data. Glaser insisted that while employing the coding procedure, the researcher should patiently “trust that emergence will occur and it does” (Glaser, 1992, p. 3-4; Glaser & Holton, 2004). Glaser conceded that as analysts are human, they inevitably have a natural tendency to unintentionally influence the research with personal biases or interpretations (Glaser, 2002). However, he argued that if the researcher carefully undertakes the coding procedures, rigorously employs the constant comparison technique, abstains from literature, and collects a large breadth of data from many different sources, the totality of these precepts will “correct for bias,” diminish the effects of the researcher’s personal input, and uncover the underlying “latent patterns” of the phenomena (Glaser, 2002, para. 24). Thus, Glaser argued that this will ultimately “make the data objective” (Glaser, 2002, para. 24).

Despite his clarity with regard to methodological directives, Glaser was ambivalent about what research paradigm Classic GT corresponds to. However, Charmaz (2006), Bryant (2002), Jones and Alony (2011), and Madill et al. (2000) highlighted the implicit positivist assumptions imbued within the pursuit of objectivity and the assertions of the researcher’s unobtrusive *discovery* of a latent grounded theory within the content of collected data. Subsequently, these authors stress the connotations of a naïve realist ontology within Classic GT. They contend that Classic GT represents a “soft positivism” which proposes that that research entails “a process of revealing or discovering pre-existing phenomena and the relationship between them” (Madill et al., 2000, p. 4). This is the subject of much criticism, which will be examined later.

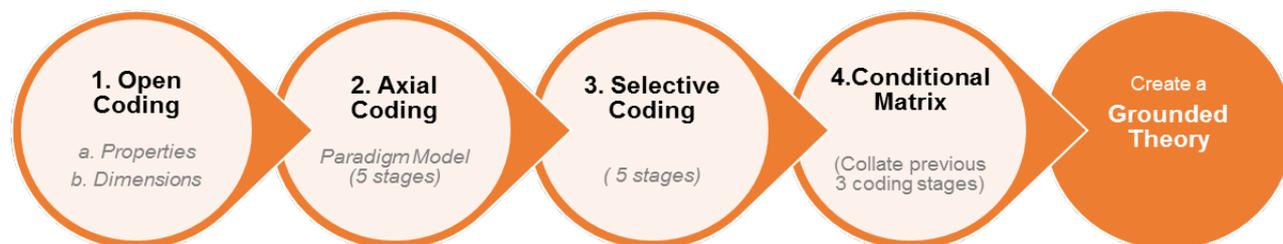
A number of authors have questioned the assertions of objectivity claimed by the proponents of the Classic GT coding procedure. Urquhart (2002) averred that the process of coding is inevitably “subjective” as the analyst collects, codes, conceptualizes, and collates the data according to his or her personal discretion (p. 272). The subjectivity of this process is inevitable as two researchers coding the same interview transcripts inexorably engender different conceptual categories (Madill et al., 2000). Moreover the researcher’s influence permeates every stage of the research, from choices of data collection at the genesis of a study, to discretionary conceptualization at the conclusion. Thus, rather than unobtrusively or neutrally *discovering* an *emergent* hypothesis, the analyst inevitably has an implicit interpretative influence in the entire process of generating a GT. Therefore, Classic GT can be critiqued as an inconsistent methodology as it employs an interpretivist coding procedure within an objectivist, positivist paradigm (Bryant, 2002, Jones & Alony, 2011, Kelle, 2005).

Straussian GT: Coding with Structure

Although Anselm Strauss was the co-author of the original Classic GT, Glaser and Strauss diverged in their academic affiliation, and published ensuing literature on GT methodology separately rather than conjointly (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). By 1990 Strauss co-authored a further exposition of GT with Juliet Corbin, titled *The Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. This publication refined and edited specific aspects of the original (Classic) GT. In particular, Strauss and Corbin (1990) reconfigured the GT coding procedure. They designed a highly systematic and rigorous coding structure to *create* (rather than to *discover*) a rigorous theory which closely corresponds to the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998). Strauss and Corbin classified four coding stages but qualified that the dividing line between each of the successive phases

is somewhat artificial as the researcher constantly moves back and forth between them in consecutive coding sessions (1990). Significantly, this reformation of GT was so distinctive that it became known as Straussian GT. Their framework is illustrated in the diagram below:

Figure 2. The Coding Procedure of Straussian GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)



Strauss and Corbin's robust procedure largely followed the same sequential progression as Glaser's, but is far more meticulous and specified. They argued that their more specific and complex coding strategies were beneficial for a number reasons. Firstly, Strauss and Corbin elucidated that they were "designed to enhance the effectiveness of this methodology" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Secondly, Strauss and Corbin conceded that their assiduous coding process may appear complicated, but they argued that this is appropriate because human life is complicated (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin explicated that the volume and precision of their specific coding directives were not intended to confuse the novice researcher. To the contrary, they were specifically designed to "spell out the procedures and techniques" in meticulous "step-by-step fashion" to assist "persons who are about to embark upon their first qualitative analysis project" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 8). Thus, their more specific coding directives were written for the purpose of enhancement and clarity, rather than confusion. The detailed coding process advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The Coding Procedure of Straussian GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

Stage	Description
Open Coding	<p>As described in Classic GT, the researcher begins data analysis by openly coding segments of data with conceptual labels to denote the concept they represent. Through questioning and the constant comparative method, these concepts are grouped into corresponding categories. During open coding, as categories become increasingly dense, the researcher may develop sub-categories. Furthermore, categories may also be subsumed under increasingly abstract, higher-order categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61).</p> <p>a. Properties of each category As each category is developed and saturated, the range of properties (features or characteristics) within each category is demarcated (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).</p> <p>b. Dimensions of each category Strauss & Corbin specify that properties pertaining to a category are scrutinized in terms of the category's <i>dimensional ranges</i>, for example, the range of frequency (often/never), the range of intensity (high/low), the range of degree (more/less), the range of duration (long/short), or any other dimensional ranges which are evident in data analysis (1990, p. 72). Subsequently, properties are located (or <i>dimensionalised</i>) along a continuum (called a <i>dimensional continuum</i>) thus giving each category a complex <i>dimensional profile</i> (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 70).</p>

Axial Coding	<p>Axial coding represents the process of forging links between a category and its emerging sub-categories. They are connected through a very specific set of relationships outlined in the paradigm model.</p> <p>Paradigm Model</p> <p>The paradigm model demarcates five sub-categories within every category: <i>a) causal conditions, b) context, c) intervening conditions, d) action/interactional strategies</i> and <i>e) consequences</i>. Each of these sub-categories has properties and dimensions. They are linked to the overarching category through the relationship specified in their title. This procedure reconfigures some previous standalone categories and refashions them as sub-categories to a higher-level conceptual category. Several overarching categories emerge through this process. They grow in density and precision and mature beyond their aforementioned properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).</p>
Selective Coding	<p>Selective coding encapsulates the process of integrating the categories with a higher level of abstraction, to fashion a GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As categories become dense, rich, and precise, their inter-relationships with one another become apparent. Subsequently, one dominant <i>core category</i> is selected which is broad and abstract enough to integrate the other categories and to cement the components of the phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the core category is selected, the researcher engages in five crucial steps (not necessarily in sequential order) to nurture the emerging concepts and engender “a picture of reality that is conceptual, comprehensible, and above all grounded” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 117).</p> <p>a. Story line</p> <p>The researcher presents a “general descriptive overview” of the core phenomenon of the study; this descriptive story should be limited to a few sentences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 119). The researcher should relate the storyline of the study in analytical terms, delineating the core category.</p> <p>b. Relating subsidiary categories around the core category with a paradigm</p> <p>The researcher employs the paradigm model to establish the relationship between the <i>core category</i> and its newly defined <i>subsidiary categories</i>. This ordering of a hierarchy of concepts will begin to yield an overarching theory. As Strauss and Corbin explicate, it takes the form of: “A (conditions) leads to B (phenomenon), which leads to C (context), which leads to D (action/interaction, including strategies), which leads to E (consequences)” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 125).</p> <p>c. Relating categories at a dimensional level</p> <p>The properties and dimensions within the <i>core category</i> will also be established. The <i>subsidiary categories</i> will be grouped and located “along the dimensional ranges of their properties in accordance with discovered patterns” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 125). This occurs in tandem with the previous stage.</p> <p>d. Validating their relationships against data</p> <p>The emerging theory will be considered provisional until it is validated against the collected data to ensure that it is indisputably grounded in the collected material.</p> <p>e. Filling in categories that may need further refinement</p> <p>If there are any remaining “missing details” in the categories, the researcher employs theoretical sampling to fill in the gaps and ensure <i>conceptual density</i> (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 141).</p>

Conditional Matrix	<p>The conditional matrix is not a fourth level of coding analysis; it is a “framework that summarizes and integrates” the previous three levels of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 158–159). The matrix was designed as an “analytic aid” to assist the researcher in identifying the breadth of determining conditions and consequences related to the subject of study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 158). Strauss and Corbin specify that the matrix encompasses the following eight levels of influence which range from a micro to a macro scale (1990, p. 163),:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Action Pertaining to a Phenomenon</i> 2) <i>Interaction</i> 3) <i>Group, Individual, Collective</i> 4) <i>Sub-Organizational, Sub-institutional Level;</i> 5) <i>Organizational and Institutional Level;</i> 6) <i>Community;</i> 7) <i>National</i> 8) <i>International</i> <p>The breadth of these successive levels ranges from the specific individual incidents to the general national/international scale (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher utilizes the matrix by tracing a specific incident within the studied phenomenon through the successive levels of the matrix in order to ascertain the <i>conditional path</i> of the incident. This will help the researcher identify the significant conditions activating the phenomena, and/or the consequences arising from it. For example, the researcher takes a specific incident, such as a parent’s experience of receiving an early diagnosis of their child’s hearing loss with no after-care family support, and traces this incident through the matrix levels to ascertain the cause, the determining conditions, the manner in which conditions were manifested, and the resultant consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This may lead the researcher to the national level of the matrix to consider the government’s budgetary cut backs in health care.</p>
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Strauss and Corbin’s fastidious coding structure was criticized by both Glaser and Charmaz. Glaser (1992) contended that Strauss “misconceives our conceptions of grounded theory to an extreme degree, even destructive degree” (p. 3). In particular, Glaser contested the complicated coding instructions and protested that the researcher is effectively “forcing” the data into “preconceived” concepts in order to coerce a theory (Glaser, 1992, p. 3-4). He asserted that this serves to “interrupt the true emergence” of a theory and, as a consequence, the “true nature of the data is lost forever” (Glaser, 1992, p. 4). Similarly, Charmaz criticized that the Straussian GT encompasses an excessive “maze of techniques” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 512). She argued that Strauss and Corbin transformed the “original flexible” coding guidelines into “immutable rules” which she characterized as positivist, rigid, narrow, and over complicated (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz asserted that axial coding in particular results in “awkward scientific terms and clumsy categories” which detract from participants’ experiences and obfuscates analysis with excessive jargon (Charmaz, 2000, p. 525). She also undermined Straussian conceptual diagrams and maps, criticizing that they create an “overly complex architecture” that confounds the data and “obscures experience” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 525). Significantly, several contemporary grounded theorists have supported Charmaz’s and Glaser’s criticisms and argued that the “densely codified operation” of Straussian GT is excessive (Goulding, 1999, p. 7).

However, Strauss and Corbin defended their coding conception. Before these criticisms were even published, Strauss and Corbin had already clarified that their coding procedure should be applied flexibly and adapted to different circumstances and studies, a directive which Glaser and Charmaz overlooked in their critical analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

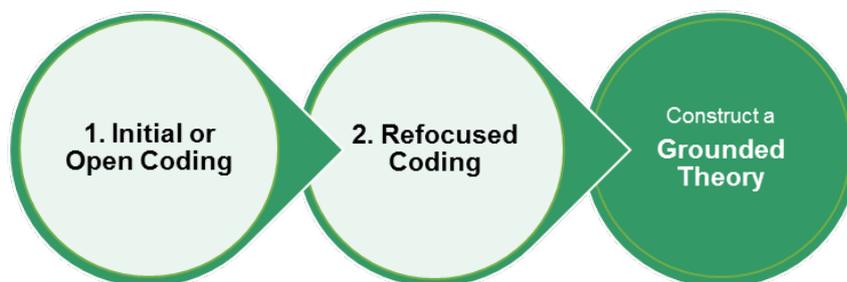
Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin defended the complexity of their structure with a number of justifications. Firstly, they argued that the prescribed stages are critical to dispel the researcher’s prejudices and preconceptions which they inevitably bring to, and develop, throughout the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Secondly, they asserted that employing the model will assist, rather than hinder, the researcher as it will facilitate an exacting and systematic analysis of data which will allow the researcher to relate concepts in a highly accurate, convincing, and complex capacity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, they insisted that this model allows the researcher to build a “rich, tightly woven, explanatory theory that closely approximates the reality it represents” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57). Thus, Strauss and Corbin concluded that “unless you make use of this model your grounded theory analyses will lack density and precision” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 99).

Straussian GT did not remain a stagnant entity. Following Strauss’s death in 1996, Corbin continued to publish, and released a second edition of the *Basics of Qualitative Research* in 1998, a third edition in 2008, and a fourth edition in December 2014. Corbin’s successive publications relaxed the formulaic Straussian coding convention, and refashioned the underlying philosophical assumptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). However, she was careful to distinguish sections of the book that Strauss may not have been in accord with (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Significantly, Corbin’s reformation of Straussian GT moved the methodology in the direction of Constructivist GT.

Constructivist GT: Coding and Contention

Charmaz, a former student of Glaser and Strauss at the University of California, San Francisco forged a radical departure from both Straussian and Classic GT. She presented a third adaptation of GT coding, characterized by a distinctly constructivist philosophy. In stark contrast to Straussian GT, Charmaz (2008) resisted a concrete, rule-bound, prescriptive approach to coding, arguing that this stifles and suppresses the researcher’s creativity. Instead, she fashioned highly adaptable coding guidelines which endorsed an “imaginative engagement with data” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 168). Charmaz stressed the principle of flexibility in particular, insisting that the analyst must “learn to tolerate ambiguity” and “become receptive to creating emergent categories and strategies” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 168). As illustrated in the diagram below, she proposed a fluid framework, with “at least two stages” to coding (Charmaz, 2008, p. 159):

Figure 3. The Coding Procedure of Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2008)



Charmaz’s constructivist coding procedure is punctuated by many generic GT techniques, including memo writing, constant comparisons, theoretical sampling, and saturation (Charmaz, 2008). Significantly, this framework, although vastly more malleable, is analogous with the two-tier structure of Classic GT. Charmaz’s framework is elucidated in Table 3.:

Table 3. The Coding Procedure of Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2008)

Stage	Description
1) Initial or Open Coding	During initial (or open) coding, Charmaz (2008) suggested that by employing Glaser's two key questions, "what is the chief concern of participants?" and "how do they resolve this concern?" the analyst gleans an invaluable insight in to the collected data (p. 163). She proposed that the analyst codes for actions and potential theoretical cues rather than for themes. Charmaz advised that coding with "gerunds, that is, noun forms of verbs, such as revealing, defining, feeling, or wanting, helps to define what is happening in a fragment" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 164). This exposes "implicit processes, to make connections between codes, and to keep their analyses active and emergent" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 164). Charmaz also proposed the generic GT use of <i>in vivo</i> codes, which encompasses utilizing the language of the participants as codes (2008).
2) Refocused Coding	The researcher moves into the next stage, <i>re-focused coding</i> , by identifying the codes that are recurring or particularly significant in illuminating the studied phenomenon (Charmaz, 2008). These codes typically have "analytic momentum" and are pertinent to "carry the weight of the analysis," which is also described as having the ability to "capacity carry" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 164). The researcher elevates these codes as provisional theoretical categories which subsequently undergo selective or focused coding through the GT techniques of theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and memo writing (Charmaz, 2008). Memo writing, in particular, is vital to the process of constructing a theory. Through the medium of memo writing, the researcher can scrutinize the codes and categories, highlight determining conditions, and trace progression and consequences (Charmaz, 2008). The memos may also document "gaps in the data" and help develop conceptual "conjectures" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 166). Thus, writing and sorting memos captures the unfolding process of interpreting the phenomena and constructing a theory.

Charmaz's coding procedure is patently more interpretative, intuitive, and impressionistic than the Classic or Straussian GT (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz placed a particularly strong emphasis on in-depth, intensive interviewing to purposely yield an intimate exploration of the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Hallberg, 2006). Although these interviews are analysed through the constructivist coding procedure, the analysis rarely culminates into a prognostic or predicative theory presented at the conclusion of the research (Hallberg, 2006). Instead, a Constructivist GT study typically concludes with the researcher's interpretative understanding (rather than explanation) of the studied social process which is presented in the form of a "story" (Hallberg, 2006). Constructivist grounded theorists argue that this narrative approach to GT does not neglect abstraction as it weaves conceptualization into description (Charmaz, 2006; Hallberg, 2006), particularly as the concluding story encompasses "categories, conditions, conceptual relationships, and consequences" (Hallberg, 2006, p. 147).

Charmaz's reconfiguration of GT was strongly criticized by Glaser. He opposed the constructivist emphasis on descriptive capture, asserting that it "denies and blocks" the "true conceptual nature" of GT (Glaser, 2002, para. 28). Glaser argued that the unequivocal objective of GT is conceptualization, rather than a faithful description of participants' experiences (Glaser, 2002). Due to Charmaz's emphasis on the latter, Glaser asserted that Charmaz is "misled" in considering her methodology to be a GT as a more accurate classification would be *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Glaser, 2002, para. 40). In contrast,

Strauss and Corbin upheld the value of description and shared a sense of obligation to give their participants a voice and “tell their stories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 281). However, Strauss and Corbin implemented this value within a rigorous and robust coding framework which stands in stark contrast with Charmaz’s flexible coding guidelines (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin also retained the goal of producing a “conceptually dense” theory at the conclusion of the study which could accurately account for relationships between concepts constructed from data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 278). Accordingly, Glaser criticized that the exclusive endeavor to theorize is compromised within Constructivist GT as it promotes narration to the extent that it is “neglecting the fundamental properties of abstraction analysis” (Glaser, 2002, para. 19).

Glaser also rejected Charmaz’s underlying constructivist epistemology embedded within her coding procedure. He asserted that the interviewer and interviewee’s mutual construction and interpretation of data inappropriately elevates the researcher to the status of co-creator and composer of the story (Glaser, 2002). Glaser argued that this diminishes, rather than augments, the participant’s perception of a phenomenon, as it permits his or her experience to be recast by the researcher (Glaser, 2002). He insisted that this “unwarranted intrusion of the researcher” represents a gross violation of GT as it effectively renders the “researcher’s interactive impact on data more important than the participants” (Glaser, 2002, para. 8, 20). Glaser avowed that the participant’s perspective should always be paramount and should always correct and refine the researcher’s abstractions. As a consequence, he asserted that the researcher should “take great pains not to intrude their own views in the data” (Glaser, 2002, para. 14). However, Charmaz defended her position, asserting that it is impossible for the researcher to forge an unobtrusive relationship with social research as “we are part of the world we study and the data we collect” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Ultimately, Glaser and Charmaz’s dispute hinged on epistemological differences: Glaser presupposed a neutral researcher with an unobtrusive impact on data while Charmaz averred the inescapable interactive impact of the researcher on data. These opposing philosophical positions (which will be analysed in the following section) are tangibly manifested in contending frameworks and criticisms of coding and data analysis.

Contending Coding Conventions

The three factions of GT encapsulate three distinct coding structures. The Classic framework retains and refines the original GT coding procedure which was designed to *discover* an *emergent* theory through systematic analysis of data (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2010). Straussian GT embodies a more rigorous and robust coding structure which was forged to *create* (rather than *discover*) a theory that closely apprehends the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Constructivist GT encapsulates a more impressionistic coding procedure which was fashioned to *construct* a conceptual interpretation (rather than exact apprehension) of the phenomena (Charmaz, 2006, 2008). Significantly, these divergent coding conventions arise from opposing philosophical positions embedded within competing research paradigms. Therefore it is essential to understand the philosophical presuppositions underlying the three traditions of GT.

Corresponding Paradigms

There is ample debate in the academic literature as to which paradigm Classic GT best corresponds to. Bryant (2002) and Urquhart (2002) attested that the original GT texts were virtually silent on the questions of epistemology and ontology, which has continued to cloak the philosophical position of Classic GT in ambiguity. Glaser maintained that the

methodology itself was “discovered, not invented” and as such he resisted marrying it with a research paradigm, stating that it “stands alone, on its own, as a conceptualizing methodology” (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 75, 39). Glaser primarily perceived GT to be a research method, which he divorced from philosophical considerations (Urquhart, 2002). He reiterated his position at a conference address, stating “Let me be clear. Grounded theory is a general method. It can be used on any data or combination of data” (Glaser, 1999, as cited in Urquhart, 2002, p. 47). As a consequence of Glaser’s philosophical abstruseness, Moore (2009) suggested that the covert epistemological assumptions embedded within grounded theory are not clearly articulated or defined, which has resulted in the “misinterpretation and misuse of the method” (p. 8).

Charmaz addressed this ambiguity directly. She argued that, despite Glaser’s reticence, the original Classic GT appears to be closely correlated with traditional positivism as it implicitly assumes “an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and objectivist rendering of data” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). Charmaz traces Glaser’s inclination towards objectivism back to his formative experience as a graduate student at the Columbia University where Glaser was influenced by his rigorous quantitative and positivist training under Paul Lasarsfelt (Charmaz, 2000). As explicated previously, a host of academics, including Bryant (2002), Jones & Alony (2011), and Madill et al., (2000), echo Charmaz’s assessment. Significantly, even Strauss, the original co-founder of GT, conceded the positivist nuances embedded within the terminology of *discovering* a pre-existent theory which emerges from “out there” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279).

However, Charmaz’s assessment is not unanimously accepted. McCann and Clark (2003) argued that Classic GT is demarcated by an implicit post-positivist (rather than positivist) paradigm and underlined with a critical realist (rather than realist) ontology (cited in Moore, 2009). Urquhart (2002) also holds this position, which she attributed to the influence of symbolic interactionism from the inception of GT through the input of Strauss. However, Glaser himself later resisted this philosophy stating “GT became considered, wrongly, as a symbolic interaction method” (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 38). He also objected that at times “grounded theory is considered qualitative, symbolic interaction research” which he described as “a kind of takeover” (Glaser, 1999, as cited in Urquhart 2001, p. 16). Glaser’s rejection of symbolic interactionism, which encompasses a critical realist ontology and is a derivate of a post-positive philosophy, indicates his disassociation of Classic GT with Strauss’ more defined philosophical position. Furthermore, while Charmaz details Strauss’ considerable influence in weaving symbolic interactionism into the methodology of Classic GT, she affirms that it is Glaser’s “epistemological assumptions” that pervade the underlying philosophy of GT (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7).

Glaser’s writing indicates his cognizance of his alleged positivist proclivity (Glaser, 2002). Glaser cited Charmaz’s classification of his ontological and epistemological position in his article *Constructivist Grounded Theory?* (2002). He directly quoted Charmaz’s assertion that Classic GT assumes “an external reality” which is “independent of the observer and the methods used to produce it” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513, as cited in Glaser 2002, para. 18). In his lengthy citation, Glaser also referenced Charmaz’s avowal that Classic GT “follow[s] the canons of objective reportage” and culminates in an “objective stance” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513, as cited in Glaser 2002, para. 18). Although Glaser proceeded to unequivocally criticize Charmaz’s handling of GT, he did not refute her identification of positivist connotations or challenge her classification of the objectivist ontology and epistemology embedded within Classic GT (Glaser, 2002). Instead, he responded with a defense of the GT techniques and methodology, contending that they serve to “make the generated theory as objective as humanly possible” (Glaser, 2002, para. 19). Thus, while

Glaser criticized Charmaz's constructivist paradigm and her subsequent reinterpretation of GT, he refrained from contesting her classification of Classic GT as implicitly positivist. This reticence may be indicative of his acquiescence.

Charmaz also argued that Strauss and Corbin's rendition of Straussian GT is also undergirded with positivist assumptions. To corroborate her assertion, she highlighted the Straussian ontological presupposition of an external and objective reality, as well as the array of meticulous methodological procedures which, she argued, strive towards impartial data collection and espouse the precept of verification (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz tempered her assessment with the acknowledgement that Strauss and Corbin's position is more nuanced than that of Glaser, particularly given their incorporation of the participant's story into the research, as well as their acknowledgement that the participant and analyst may not share the same perspective (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz identified these distinctions (and others) as strands of post-positivism and traced this disposition back to Strauss' exposure to the philosophies of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism as a graduate student in the University of Chicago (Charmaz, 2000). Despite Charmaz's acknowledgement of these various influences and nuances, she ultimately asserted that, regardless of Glaser and Strauss's divergence, both authors continue to retain a methodology "imbued with positivism with its objectivist underpinnings" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). Thus, Charmaz concluded that "both endorse a realist ontology and positivist epistemology, albeit with some sharp differences" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513).

However, Charmaz's conclusion is disputable. Strauss and Corbin (1991, 1994, 1998) were very clear about their departure from a positivist realist ontology and unambiguously expounded a post-positivist critical realist ontology. While they affirmed that there is an external, objective reality, they clearly averred that the analyst's grasp of it is limited, and "only God" can perfectly apprehend the "*real* nature of reality" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 4). Strauss and Corbin asserted that the purpose of social research is to journey towards an "increasingly greater," but not immutable, representation of reality (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 4). Strauss and Corbin located their methodology within the philosophy of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism and emphasized their close affiliation with the philosophical writings of Dewey (1922) and Mead (1934). With this critical realist perspective, they argued that a "theory is not the formation of some discovered aspect of a pre-existing reality *out there*" but instead emphasized that theories represent "interpretations made from given perspectives" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279). They attested that the "human grasp of reality never can be that of God's" and as such all grounded theories are to some extent "fallible," "temporarily limited," and "provisional," particularly as they are forged within a particular culture and time, and embedded in a specific historical context (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 4; 1994, p. 279, 280). Ultimately, Strauss and Corbin's assertions are consistent with a post-positivist paradigm which contends that "although reality exists to be uncovered by inquiry, it is never perfectly apprehensible" (Ghezaljah & Emami, 2009, p. 17; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Strauss and Corbin's flavor of post-positivism is very specific as the philosophy of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism pervade the methodology. These two philosophies are closely intertwined as symbolic interactionism originally emerged out of pragmatist philosophy (Jeon, 2004). One of the founders of the philosophy, Herbert Blumer, outlined that symbolic interactionism is underlined by three simple principles (1986). Firstly, he stated that "human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1986, p. 2). Secondly, he asserted that meanings are not intrinsically present within entities but that meaning is ascribed to objects, gestures, actions, and ideas through social interaction (Blumer, 1986, p. 3). Thirdly, Blumer posited that these ascribed meanings are always subject to modification as they are defined and redefined through an interpretative process (Blumer, 1986). This interpretative process consists of internal interaction with

oneself and social interaction with people, and also encompasses resultant actions (Blumer, 1986). Strauss and Corbin (1998, 2008) embraced the symbolic interactionist perspective and depicted humans as active agents who reflectively act and interact with one another on the basis of interpreted meanings. They contended that the process of generating meaning is mediated through language, defined through interaction, and materializes into action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Language, in particular, is the essential medium of this interpersonal and interpretative process. Thus, Strauss and Corbin embraced the symbolic interactionist perspective that “human beings respond to a particular situation through how they define that situation, rather than how the situation is objectively presented to them” (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011, p. 1067).

Strauss and Corbin also embraced the behavioristic philosophy of pragmatism which prioritizes the significance of the resultant action (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 2). Strauss and Corbin cite Dewey’s assertion that “the test of ideas, of thinking generally, is found in the consequences of the acts to which the ideas lead” (Dewey, cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 3). Dewey resisted the misconstrued dualism of knowledge and action, insisting that these entities are inextricably intertwined (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). He asserted that knowledge impregnates a new idea which gives birth to action, and that action may also give rise to new insights and knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These principles are embedded within the action-oriented model of Straussian GT. Ultimately, as Strauss and Corbin asserted, pragmatism and symbolic interactionism are “easily recognizable as the framework for our own methodology” as Straussian GT is concerned with how participants interpret, act, and interact with the studied phenomena (Corbin & Strass, 2008, p. 2).

The significance and influence of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism receives increasing attention in Strauss and Corbin’s successive publications (1998, 2008). They explain that in earlier publications of their literature, namely the second edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1998), their discussion of symbolic interactionism and pragmatist philosophy was removed by the editor, as the content was considered “too theoretical” and philosophical debates of research paradigms were not as prevalent at the time (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. x). These deleted segments were later included in the 3rd edition of their publication (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Consequently, Strauss and Corbin’s (combined) successive writings on research philosophy, differ only in detail, rather than in philosophical position. Thus, the authors have quoted from the breadth of Strauss and Corbin’s combined writings on philosophy, without making chronological distinctions.

Charmaz endorsed the principles of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism but criticized the Straussian post-positivist expression of it in their systematic coding procedure and critical-realist ontology (2006). In particular, Charmaz resisted its integration in the coding procedures, criticizing that the overly prescriptive regulations impinged on creative analysis. Thus, Charmaz proposed recovering the pragmatist and symbolic interactionist emphasis on meaning, language, interpretation, and interaction, by introducing them to a constructivist paradigm with a relativist ontology and a more interpretative methodology (2006).

Charmaz clearly defined her ontological, epistemological and methodological position (2000, 2006). Her Constructivist GT is unambiguously underlined by a relativist ontology, which presupposes the existence of manifold social realities (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). Charmaz emphasized that her epistemological position unequivocally endorses the researcher and participant’s co-construction of knowledge and mutual interpretation of meaning, with the objective of fashioning an interpretive depiction of participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz refashioned the methodology of GT by reclaiming the potent tools of GT from their positivist origins to forge a more flexible, intuitive, and open-ended methodology which dovetails with a constructivist paradigm (Charmaz, 2000). Ultimately, Charmaz

argued that her alternative Constructivist GT not only “offers accessible methods for taking research into the 21st century” but also represents “a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510).

However, Charmaz’s depiction of Constructivist GT as a middle ground between the polarities of postmodernism and positivism is questionable. Charmaz’s Constructivist GT is closely associated with a postmodernist relativist ontology (encompassing many realities), a postmodern relativist epistemology (denoting a high influence of the researcher in the research), and a postmodern interpretative rendition of the GT methodology (salvaging it from its positivist roots). Consequently, rather than representing a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, Charmaz’s constructivist paradigm is closely correlated with a postmodernist philosophy. This philosophical position is the subject of much criticism, and is neither exclusively contemporary, novel, nor unique. Relativism can be traced back to the Sophists (“educators in fifth- and fourth-century BC Greece”) who propagated a relativist ontological position, advocating that “there is no absolute or objective truth, no truth that everyone must acknowledge” (Frame, 2008, p. 73). The Sophists advocated that “reality is what man thinks it is” and held “that there is no objective truth at all, but only truth “for me” and “for you.”” (Frame, 2008, p. 76, 73) In Plato’s literature, this ontological position is irredeemably undermined as Socrates accuses that “Sophists themselves are making assertions of fact. If there is no objective truth, then the Sophists’ positions are not objectively true” (Frame, 2008, p. 76). Thus Socrates exposes this position as contradictory and self-refuting (Frame, 2008).

The Use of Literature

As a result of their contending philosophical frameworks, the Classic, Straussian and Constructivist GT stances on the use of literature is divergent. Glaser and Holton (2004) recommended that when embarking on research, the GT analyst should suspend any pre-existing knowledge from literature or professional/personal experience, to ensure an open mind, free of undue influences. This position encapsulates the positivist’s concern to remove the researcher from the research. Furthermore, Glaser asserted that it is essential not to consult relevant academic literature prior to, or during the process of, undertaking a GT study. He argued that prior knowledge “violates the basic premise of GT” as it clouds and compromises the analyst’s ability to perceive a dynamic new concept which has not featured in the aforementioned literature (Glaser & Holton, 2004, para. 46). Glaser advised that consulting the literature should be restricted to a *constant comparison* at the end of the study, at which point a specific literature review may be compiled if desired. Ultimately, Glaser’s position was inspired by the positivist “concern to not contaminate, be constrained by, inhibit, stifle or otherwise impede” the natural emergence of theory from data (Kelle, 2005, p. 31).

Strauss and Corbin challenged Glaser’s position. They encouraged the appropriate use of literature at every stage of the study, discerning the difference between an *empty head* and an *open mind* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Kelle, 2005). They argued that the analyst’s previous experience and exposure to the subject, as well as a wide variety of literature may (and should) be employed throughout all phases of the research, from conception to conclusion (Charmaz, 2006, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This is consistent with their post-positivist philosophy which accepts that the researcher inevitably influences the research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) maintained that a prior and on-going consultation with pertinent literature engenders manifold benefits: it reveals gaps in the academic literature; it can be employed as a secondary source of data; it can inspire questions; it can guide theoretical sampling; it can be utilised for supplementary validation; and it provides an insight into existing theories and philosophical frameworks. However, Strauss and Corbin’s engagement with the literature

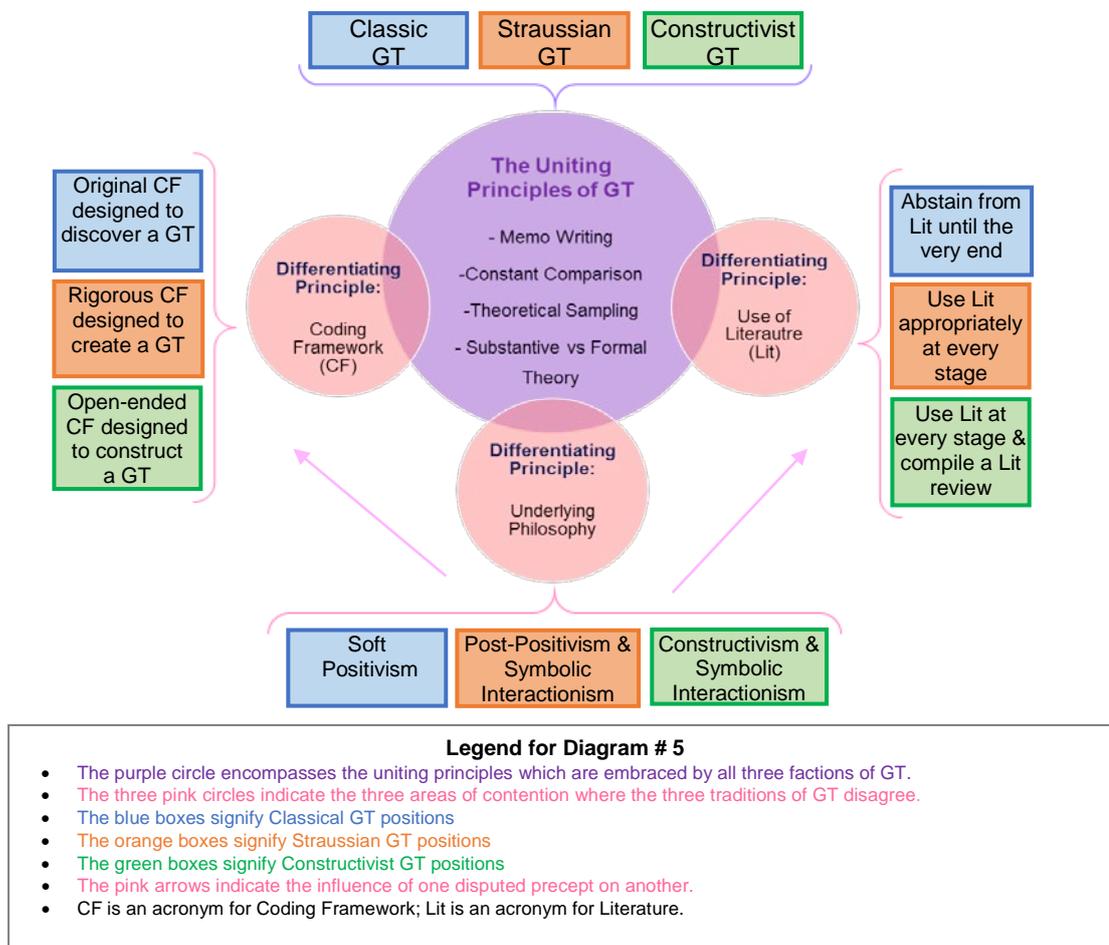
was not unqualified. While they affirmed the use of literature at every stage of the research, they did not recommend an exhaustive and comprehensive prior review of *all* the relevant literature before embarking on research. They warned that “we do not want to be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even stifled in terms of creative efforts by our knowledge of it” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 50). Thus, while embracing the continuous use of literature, Strauss and Corbin also advised restraint, to guard against becoming so blinded by it as to prevent a new revelation of the studied phenomena. This is consistent with the critical-realist concern to strive for the closest representation of reality as possible.

Charmaz echoed Strauss and Corbin’s endorsement of literature but developed it a step further. She suggested that the literature should be compiled in a specific literature review chapter as well as interspersed throughout the entire thesis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166). To guard against this danger of becoming immersed in literature to the extent of losing one’s creativity, Charmaz advised delaying writing a specific literature review chapter until after data analysis. She proposed that this resolution would facilitate a comprehensive literature review without compromising the researcher’s openness and creativity. She argued that a comprehensive literature review, compiled after data analysis, is efficacious for a number of reasons: it facilitates the researcher to enter into the dialogue of the pertaining academic field; it reinforces the researcher’s credibility, authority, and ensuing argument; and it can justify and explicate the researcher’s rationale in the ensuing chapters of the thesis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166-167). Furthermore, the balanced approach of utilizing literature at every point of the research, but delaying total immersion until the end of the study, efficaciously augments, rather than asphyxiates, creativity. Charmaz’s position is consistent with constructivist philosophy, which insists that research does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is influenced and informed by the context in which the researcher is operating.

Conclusion

It is essential for the GT researcher to comprehend both the principles that unite and differentiate the three GT traditions, in order to locate their research within a particular GT tradition and defend their rationale for selecting one tradition above the other two). Accordingly, the final diagram (Figure 4) on the following page provides a visual map to guide the researcher in this important endeavor:

Figure 4. The Uniting and Differentiating Principles of GT



As illustrated in the concluding diagram (Figure 5), the three traditions of GT are distinct entities. However, the researcher doesn't necessarily have to adopt a pure form of one tradition, and indeed, within the parameters of consistency, there is freedom to blur the boundaries between Classic, Straussian, or Constructivist GT. In our personal experience, we began a research endeavor with a clear identification of Straussian GT as the guiding methodology. However, in the process of data collection and analysis, it became increasingly evident that while the underlining philosophical position was apt, the formulaic structure of Straussian GT coding was too rigid for this particular subject of study, which didn't naturally fit into Strauss and Corbin's prescribed paradigm model. Consequently, while retaining the philosophical foundation of Straussian GT, we relaxed the coding procedure to the extent that it resembled the coding instructions of Classic GT. Importantly, this did not violate the integrity of the methodology as Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) repeatedly insisted that their guidelines should be employed in a flexible capacity and adapted to best suit the unique dynamics of a study. Thus, while there are clear parameters differentiating the three traditions of GT, and the researcher needs to ensure a consistent approach, there is nevertheless room for creativity and flexibility within the execution of the selected GT methodology.

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