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## Grounded Theory and the Conundrum of Literature Review: Framework for Novice Researchers

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### Abstract

The issue of the literature review remains a conundrum and a controversy within the discourse on grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory researchers are expected to minimize preconceptions to ensure the concept of interest is grounded in data, yet at the same time are required to evaluate existing literature to support institutional ethics and scientific review of the research proposal. In addressing this dilemma, we espouse that literature review in grounded theory should comprise a multistage nonlinear approach to the literature and introduce a framework for novice grounded theory researchers. This framework offers a reflexive, dynamic and integrative process for conducting a literature review that allows researchers to minimize preconceptions while maintaining the original intent of grounded theory methodology.

### Keywords

Grounded Theory, Literature Review, Research Methodology

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## Grounded Theory and the Conundrum of Literature Review: Framework for Novice Researchers

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*The issue of the literature review remains a conundrum and a controversy within the discourse on grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory researchers are expected to minimize preconceptions to ensure the concept of interest is grounded in data, yet at the same time are required to evaluate existing literature to support institutional ethics and scientific review of the research proposal. In addressing this dilemma, we espouse that literature review in grounded theory should comprise a multistage nonlinear approach to the literature and introduce a framework for novice grounded theory researchers. This framework offers a reflexive, dynamic and integrative process for conducting a literature review that allows researchers to minimize preconceptions while maintaining the original intent of grounded theory methodology. Keywords: Grounded Theory, Literature Review, Research Methodology*

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### Controversial Issue: Literature Review in Grounded Theory

Appropriate approaches to extant literature have been a topic of debate among grounded theorists who generally value the ability to approach data with an open mind (Dey, 1999). Throughout the evolution of grounded theory (GT), researchers have repeatedly questioned traditional approaches towards utilization of existing literature within the research study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) encouraged researchers to remain theoretically sensitive to their research topics: that is, to develop and make use of existing theoretical insight into one's area of research while simultaneously considering the emerging data. Nevertheless, Glaser and Strauss were unequivocal in directing researchers to write the literature review only after completing analysis so as not to contaminate research findings. They added that reviewing literature in advance influences researchers' theoretical preconceptions and, therefore, should be delayed until completion of data analysis. Glaser and Strauss originally adopted the objectivist school of thought where researchers were expected to approach the field as a tabula rasa. In later publications, Glaser and Strauss and Corbin separately offered increasingly ambiguous positions on the status of extant literature leading to a degree of confusion. For example, Glaser (1978) argued against "naïve inductivism" suggesting that researchers incorporate theoretical sensitivity and use established coding families (p. 57). Strauss and Corbin (1998) stressed the importance of using accumulated knowledge during GT data analysis, asserting that because "there is always something new to discover" (p. 36), it was unnecessary to review all of the literature prior to the start of the study. Subsequently, there is confusion as some contemporary grounded theory authors (Christiansen, 2011; Glaser, 1978) and graduate students (especially those using Glaserian GT); continue to posit that researchers enter the field with no formal review of the literature, while others note the importance of understanding discourse surrounding their topic (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) as necessary to both "situate your work within the body of related literature" (p. 123), and to "set the stage for what you do in subsequent sections or chapters" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166).

In summarizing and clarifying these debates, Charmaz (2006) argues that the literature review provides an opportunity for researchers to summarize and evaluate the literature as well as situate themselves in relation to current discourse. She highlighted the importance of sensitizing concepts, “ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience that are embedded in our disciplinary lenses” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 515). Using this position as a starting point researchers can incorporate sensitizing concepts into inquiry without forcing preconceived notions on emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006). Over three decades of discourse among grounded theorists has done little to quell the controversy related to literature review. A conundrum continues to exist, as researchers are increasingly under pressure to meet methodological expectations, along with requirements of institutional funding agencies and research ethics boards.

### **Unavoidable Need and Discovery of Buried Treasure Within Preliminary Literature Review**

Practically, the preliminary literature review is requisite for institutional research proposal requirements. This requirement provides researchers with an opportunity to consider the potential tensions and advantages of preliminary literature review in GT, and how an intentional systematic approach to such review is aligned with the original intention of the method. While noted scholars have largely glossed over this conundrum, provision of clarity regarding the preliminary literature review is akin to buried treasure that will assist novice scholars to engage effectively, ethically and intentionally in GT research. Preliminary literature review provides context and sensitizes the researcher’s knowledge and understanding about relevant issues and topics (Charmaz, 2006; Stebbins, 2001). The significance of this context was further elaborated upon by Hammersley (2008), who contended that the idea of human action can only be understood in “context.” Hammersley argued that human actions are situated and people’s actions and words should not be interpreted without integrating context. He maintained that it would be difficult to comprehend immediate, local context without taking into consideration the context of the larger society and “global processes” (p. 122). Stebbins (2001) further cautioned the researcher about conducting a preliminary literature review “without modification” (p. 42) and recommended to first search for studies that come closest to examining what these researchers explored and found, then show how these studies/findings have left unexplored specific critical aspects of the area under investigation.

We espouse that literature review in GT is a multistage nonlinear approach to the literature. During the first stage, researchers identify the gap in the literature, and justify the reason for conducting the study. We believe that knowing the literature is a substantial guide for interviewing in GT research. Comprehensive awareness of the literature will help researchers to direct and construct the interview guide in a way to guard against familiar observations. We believe that Glaser’s claim that GT is about the participants’ main concern (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) often limits the discovery of new knowledge and we question Glaser’s intention of using this mantra over and over. We also acknowledge that it is not unusual for the main concern to have been noted in some way in the published literature. As such GT that only captures the participants’ main concern falls short of capturing the meso and macro perspectives that potentially shaped the thinking of participants and the organization of their work. Emerging GT researchers should acknowledge the importance of some level of literature review to guide scholarly exploration and generation of new knowledge.

In grand scheme, the participants’ lives are a bigger picture than immediately perceivable in everyday life. We believe that the GT researchers’ job is also to see the participant’s bigger picture and show how it relates to their everyday life as revealed through interviews and participant observations. While we recognize that Glaser’s (1978) approach

tends to miss the macro/societal big picture analysis, we see GT research as a qualitative method where findings are highly shaped by the context that is unique, often examining a complex social process. In our view, since GT inquiry is based on a fulsome contextual understanding (Hammersley, 2008), then a well-rounded literature review is respected to offer such context, including at the preliminary stage of research. In the following section, we describe an innovative framework that connects the purpose of GT with systematic approach to literature review that is dynamic, reflexive and integrative (DRI). In the following sections, we describe the DRI zipper framework in detail, as a “basic underlying structure” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) to provide guidance for novice researchers who may find themselves confounded by the current ambiguity of the discourse on literature review in GT.

### **Dynamic Reflexive Integrative (DRI) Zipper Framework for Grounded Theory Literature Review**

Existing scholarly writing on the conundrum of the literature review in GT is thought provoking regarding the benefits of reflexivity in preliminary literature review (Giles, King, & deLacey, 2013). However this is incomplete, as we still do not understand how to conduct a well-rounded literature review within the full GT research process. This is of particular importance to guide practical application for novice researchers who are learning to engage in the research process, while also noting pressures from funders or academic supervisors to conduct inquiry in alignment with institutional requirements (Mruck & May, 2007). We assert that GT is best supported by a preliminary and iterative literature review, characterized by a dynamic, reflexive and integrative (DRI) framework. The DRI zipper framework provides a systematic approach establishing clarity regarding the rationale, while iteratively reconnecting to the researcher’s inherent purpose of applying GT. This check-in guides the researcher to determine if the literature review informs concept generation that is grounded in data from the studied concern, behavior or process while minimizing preconceptions. This process requires critical appraisal identifying *why, what, when, how and the extent* of the literature review.

#### **Dynamic**

We engage in GT literature review through a systematic dynamic process that stimulates conceptualization by means of Glaser’s mantra “all is data” in favor of building theoretical categories to capture the core concept. Critical inquiry may validate existing knowledge, or reveal gaps in our understanding. Nonetheless, we must maintain a stance of wonder and curiosity to explore so that the concept of interest is fully understood. Stebbins (2001) affirmed that, to be truthful to the exploration, “exhaustive literature reviews are wholly justified...to determine the nature and scope of prior scientific activity there, so that proposed work will truly add to the corpus of writings” (p. 42). He added that literature reviews are done to demonstrate the scarcity of research that has been conducted on a specific group, process, or activity under consideration and that “an open-ended approach to data collection is therefore, wholly justified” (p. 42). We come full circle, as the extent and depth of literature reviewed is determined by our purpose, ensuring that we fully are exploring with intention, without overstepping bounds. Doing this keeps researchers immersed and engaged in the data.

To inspire a sense of wonder, researchers are required to be critical in their analysis and interpretation of the literature. We believe that just reporting about the literature is an academic flaw and unless the reviewer challenges his own assumptions trying to find a unique interpretation of the literature, the review is just “more of the same” and does not amount to critical review of the literature.

Stebbins (2001) explained that to explore is to become familiar with the phenomenon/basic social process to be discovered by testing and experimenting within the inquiry. He added that this approach does not end until all the essential conditions, processes, and variables for understanding are discovered, stressing that to explore is to “travel over or through a particular space for the purpose of discovery” (p. 2). Adopting the mentality of the explorer will ensure that researchers are destined to generate new knowledge rather than simply validating existing literature or explaining what is already known. Moreover, Stebbins espoused that exploration is the preferred methodological approach for situations where process, activity, or situation in a certain group has received little systematic inquiry or has been tested using prediction and control rather than flexibility and open-mindedness. We recommend that Stebbins’s ideas be used as a filter/sieve while interacting with the literature. If done methodically, not only it will lead to new observations but it will also ground researchers in subject matter and enrich their knowledge to the extent of providing a lens through which to filter older information from newer generalizations and outliers.

There is a unanimous agreement that GT is a qualitative research method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Stebbins (2001) established that lack of motivation is still an issue deterring progress of qualitative studies. We believe that one of the perceived de- motivators among new scholars is conducting a thorough literature review. Another challenge is building a well-focused program of research due to their scattered approach to research projects.

To overcome these hurdles Stebbins (2001) proposed the concept of “concatenation” (p. 12) which is a dynamic approach to literature review. Concatenated exploration is an expression coined by Stebbins in 1992 and “refers at once to research process and the resulting set of field studies that are linked together, as it were in a chain leading to cumulative grounded, or inductively generated, theory” (2001, p. 435). Therefore, it is a process that links a set of field studies together and as such keep the researcher engaged and focused on certain area for further exploration. Early studies at the beginning of the chain are mostly exploratory. Each study acts as a link in the chain that examines a specific social process, thus qualitative researchers using concatenation would have a head start in understanding the social life of one setting that was previously studied in analogous settings. Stebbins added that “those who concatenate their exploratory studies need not start from scratch with each new project, as would be necessary for someone unfamiliar with the research area” (p. 16).

Therefore Concatenation calls for a very limited review of the lit, since the review only bears directly on the phenomenon on which a GT is being constructed. Utilizing concatenation will draw the future path for new researchers and keep them dynamically immersed in their field to the extent of building a capacity to filter out new generalizations and concepts from extant data.

Another point that is worth raising is if GT is all about concept generation therefore we espouse that concatenation expands the range of applicability and level of validity of the accumulated findings. It will also broaden the conceptual and empirical base of the emerging theory. Stebbins (2001) added that “as data accumulate across the chain of exploratory studies, the grounded theory emerging from them grows in details, breadth and validity” (p. 14). Lofland (1976) on the other hand, stated that despite the significance of this process, that is, “Concatenation,” researchers lack motivation to pursue it and explicated that:

...qualitative strategy analysts have published relatively little to indicate concern with how their inquiries might cumulate or be consolidated into larger wholes. Each of their studies tends to be, rather, an individual cameo, a pretty thing standing more or less alone...but not by any strict sense of programmed, specific contribution to an existing and clearly articulated “theory.” (pp. 91-92)

## Reflexive

In a basic sense, reflexivity is the action by researchers “to make their influence on the research explicit—to themselves, and often to their audience...[as] as key requirement in quality appraisal” (Gentles, Jack, Nicholas, & McKibbin, 2014, p. 1). In GT, staying reflexive serves to minimize preconceptions and suspend the researcher’s own biases and temptations into forcing data into concepts. According to Stebbins (2001), previous knowledge must be scrutinized and critically analyzed in order to produce new knowledge. Such previous knowledge includes our own scholarly and personal experiences that may bias our exploration of data. Charmaz (2006) supports this claim, noting that even without any review of literature prior to the inquiry process, researchers possess knowledge that has potential to bias research process and findings. Charmaz (2014) suggested that, instead of “don[ning] a cloak of objectivity,” researchers must readily acknowledge and account for their preconceptions as these are “inherently ideological activities” (p. 305). The argument about a literature review becomes rhetorical, and focus should not be on when the literature is reviewed, but how and for what reasons the review is done over the course of the study (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Dey (2007) suggested that examining previous knowledge is an important way to ground our emergent theories in current discourse. He added that the point is not to avoid preconceptions but to ensure they are well grounded in arguments and evidence and always subject to investigation, revision and refutation.

Since researchers come to their area of interest with prior knowledge, a priori assumptions are expected and critically examined. This is done through a reflexive process. Reflexivity is well documented in qualitative research and is increasingly discussed within the context of GT inquiry. Lynch (2000) attributed reflexivity in research to a form of “methodological self-consciousness” (p. 29); that is an imperative for researchers to be conscious of their own assumptions and prejudices and to focus upon uncertainties and possible sources of bias. He cautioned that reflexivity requires that conceptual frameworks within which we work be subjected to critical examination. In the same spirit, Hall and Callery (2001) have subsequently defined reflexivity in a GT context as a process that addresses the influence of the investigator on the research.

Theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is another tool that can be used to ensure reflexivity during data analysis. Theoretical sensitivity is a core concept in GT research and reflects the researchers’ ability to use personal and professional experiences and knowledge in order to see data from different angles and think abstractly about it in the process of construing theory. Theoretical sensitivity can also be seen as the researchers’ manipulation in order to explain data in a way that best reflects reality. Therefore, this theoretical sensitivity should be complemented by reflexivity, concerning for example, how the researcher-participant interaction and researchers’ perspective affect analysis and results (Hall & Callery, 2001). This approach is consistent with Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) definition of theoretical sensitivity, which also emphasized reflexive use of self in the processes of developing research questions and doing analysis. By adopting theoretical sensitivity, they encouraged researchers to use personal and professional experiences and the literature to see the research situation and data in new ways and inform the developing theory. Several grounded theorists have increasingly posited that familiarity with the relevant literature is an important factor in developing theoretical sensitivity (Gibson, 2007). If indeed this relationship is an important element in GT, so too is the interaction between the researcher and previous knowledge construction. However, reflexivity is seldom discussed in relation to reviewing the literature and analyzing previous knowledge in the area of GT. We suggest here that how we approach this previous knowledge; when we conduct the literature review; and how we

integrate sensitizing concepts into theory generation requires increased gaze and enhanced reflexivity.

Recently some grounded theorists have begun to examine reflexivity. For instance, Neill (2006) described reflecting on process, context, and self during sampling in a GT study, and concluded that remaining reflexive during the literature review is an important part of achieving an integrative methodology. Similarly, Urquhart (2007) suggested that researchers can engage their self-awareness when appreciating previous theories in order to prevent imposing them on the data. In a practical offering, Chiovetti and Piran (2003) described tools they used to limit the influence of pre-existing constructions. They suggested a personal journal to monitor how the literature review was used and to limit the previous theoretical constructions. However, we suggest a practical approach called “bridling” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 6) as a practical application that becomes part of the research audit trail. This approach stems from phenomenology whereby researchers keep a diary before and after each data collection to intentionally document their connections and biases to the studied process and concept so that later on they can compare their interpretations of data with these diaries in an attempt to minimize prejudice. Researchers do not formulate hypothesis in advance, and approach the research area with as few preconceptions as possible. Preconceptions, taken-for-granted assumptions, and interpretations must be handled by reflexive strategies in line with “bridling.” Bridling covers the meaning of “bracketing” (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1998), that is, restraining of one’s pre-understanding in the form of personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that otherwise would mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit researching openness. However, the term “bridling” is much broader than “bracketing,” as “bridling” represents an understanding that not only takes care of particular pre-understanding, but understanding as a whole. According to Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003), “bridling” understanding ensures that we do not understand too quick, too careless, or slovenly, or in other words, that we do not make definite what is indefinite. Bridling as perceived by Dahlberg, (2006) denotes an intention to be “actively waiting” for the social process, and its meaning(s), to surface in a “non-willing” or “dwelling” fashion. In GT research, we apply “bridling” as a tool to restrain preconceptions and reflect on the interpretation of data in order to unearth nascent interpretations. A “bridling” approach is essential when categorizing data in a GT study to ensure that each concept actively earns its way into the emerging theory. The term *earn* was intentionally used to reflect the cognitive effort the researchers must perform to filter out biases to reach the category that conceptually encompasses the social process of the participants.

## **Integrative**

An integrative approach to literature review is met with the researchers’ ability to differentiate new knowledge from what is already discovered. This connects back to purpose, since true GT scholars add to the body of knowledge, rather than rework established ideas under the guise of innovation. Integration of literature is required in GT, as this illuminates *if and how* researchers are developing original ideas. Integrative literature review is conducted to systematically report new knowledge from existing literature in “emerging” or established areas (Torraco, 2005, p. 367). Torraco (2005) recommended that integrative literature review is characterized first by a “broad conception of what is known about the topic and potential areas where new knowledge may be needed” (p. 359). The structure of the integrative literature review includes “topic... competing models...(and) methodology” (pp. 359-361), with “critical analysis...synthesizing new knowledge...and conceptual reasoning” (p. 363). Critical appraisal of the literature may fit, agree, disagree or add to our understanding of data.

Charmaz (2014) recommended a comprehensive and purposeful literature review to support the position of the researcher and to avoid “rehashing old empirical problems” (p. 306). Charmaz (2006) elaborated by asking the researcher to go “across fields and disciplines” (p. 166) and to “give earlier works its due” (p. 166) stressing that they should avoid being “cavalier” (p. 166) and superficial in their literature reviews. However, Charmaz (2006) also cautioned that a literature review may hinder creativity and “strangle the theory” (p. 166) and drenches it with preconceived ideas and pre-existing categories. She summarized her argument focusing on the significance of literature review in uncovering gaps in extant knowledge and demonstrating how emerging GT will bridge this gap.

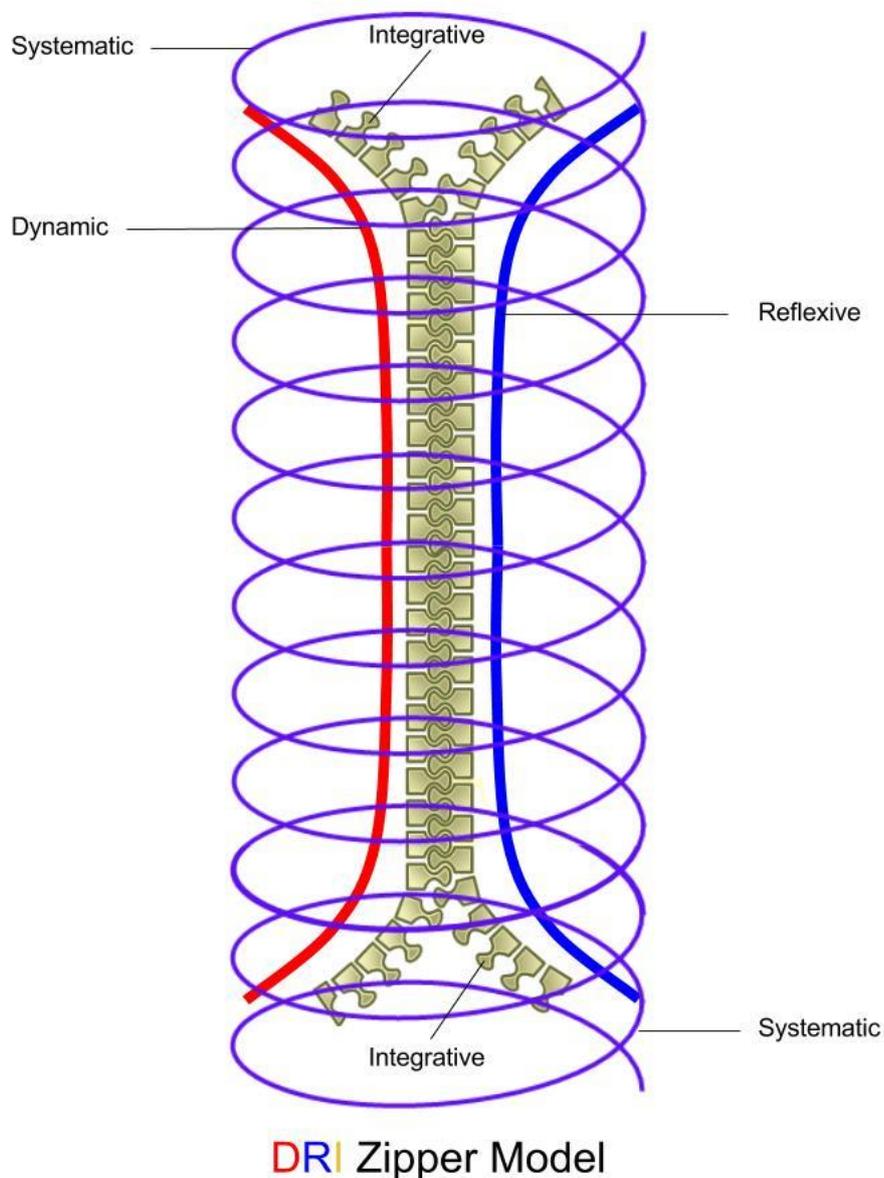
Our position on literature review is similar to Charmaz’s position as the path of exploration can be doomed to failure if not culminating with a product of new knowledge that will change practice or aid in further understanding a social phenomenon. Thus, in alignment with Charmaz’s approach to GT tradition, we suggest a dynamic approach in dealing with the literature, engaging in the literature as an ongoing practice throughout the entirety of the research process “without letting it stifle creativity” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 308). Thus the literature review in GT must be considered as part of an iterative and integrated approach. The important consideration is not just how or when to conduct the literature review but how to understand it as an embedded and integrated element within the larger research process. Important questions to ask may be: when do we revisit the literature review? When do we bracket it? and how do we best incorporate it into the sampling, analysis and theory generating process?

It is common to see rehashing of the literature and this prevents us from being innovative with our new knowledge construction. We are required to construct new knowledge at each stage of the DRI. The researcher is challenged to find an interpretation that is unique and different from the literature interpretation. Grounded theory is about weaving the fabrics of different interpretations. Often times, a new GT researcher may hide behind the label of contextualization to come across as legitimate GT research. We conducted a search in “dissertation and thesis online” covering the last three years. We realized that some of the newly generated grounded theories started with the word “Contextualizing.” We tend to think that due to lack of an approach such as the DRI, the authors of those dissertations were stuck in the mud of description and failed to ascend to conceptualization.

### **Dynamic Reflexive Integrative (DRI) Zipper Framework**

We offer a framework to illustrate how to address the conundrum of literature review in GT. Grounded theory purpose is supported by systematic literature review throughout the whole research inquiry, utilizing a dynamic, reflexive and integrative approach

Figure 1: Dynamic Integrative Reflexive (DRI) Zipper Framework to Guide GT Literature Review



### **DRI Zipper Framework: Connecting GT Purpose through Systematic Exploration**

Using the DRI zipper framework will ensure simultaneous, systematic, dynamic, reflexive, and integrative, open ended approach to grappling with the literature. Moreover, it is important understand how the approach of systematic exploration supports a dynamic, reflexive and integrative (DRI) literature review process, while also supporting the original intention of GT. The purpose of GT inquiry is to afford meaning, understanding, and description of the phenomenon under study, while making the generation of theory possible (Glaser, 1978). Renowned GT scholars (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) gave direction on data collection and analysis, without clear directions on how to conduct the literature review. Their legacy offered confusion, and deterred researchers from addressing this issue in a practical manner. Glaser

(1978) defined GT as “systematic generating of theory from data that itself is systematically obtained from social research” (p. 2). Strauss and Corbin (1990) echoed this definition in their statement that GT is “a qualitative research method that uses a systematized set of procedures to develop and inductively derive grounded theory about a phenomenon” (p. 24). Charmaz (2014) views GT as a flexible qualitative method characterized by its systematic, inductive, and iterative approach for gathering and analyzing data. In this paper we extend such interpretations of “systematic,” arguing that the systematic approach is not limited to data collection and analysis, but also guides the dynamic, reflexive and integrative literature review process.

Systematic exploration is beneficial in the auditing and appraising of GT data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since “all is data” (Glaser, 2001, p. 145), and systematic transactions with the literature can serve similar purposes and ascertain the originality of generated knowledge. El Hussein et al. (2014) maintained that this systematic approach to data analysis gives GT rigor and demonstrates trustworthiness in the emerging theory. Stebbins (2001) supported the systematic approach to data gathering and analysis by differentiating between accidental discovery (serendipity) and systematic exploration that is based on the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the explorer. Stebbins (2001) further added that systematic exploration is sustainable because it is based on a “broad-ranging, purposive, and pre-arranged undertaking” (p. 4) during which researchers actively and purposefully place themselves in a position to inquire about “discoveries” (p. 4) instead of continuing their standard research and passively waiting for the “aha” moments or serendipity to strike (Stebbins, 2001). Systematic approaches such as DRI, in addition to simultaneous collection and analysis of data guided by the constant comparative logic and culminating in a theory emerging from data adds a level of conceptual validity not accounted for in other qualitative approaches. The systematic approach to the literature provides researchers with traceable evidence to support their generalizations and to justify the need to conduct the study. The features of GT method delineate the strong need for concomitant, data collection, analysis and systematic literature review. In summary, we support the purpose of generating meaningful GT through systematic exploration including DRI literature review, so that researchers may begin entry to inquiry in alignment with the method and institutional requirements.

## Conclusion

The conundrum of literature review may be clarified through application of the DRI framework. It is the responsibility of the GT researcher to engage with the intention to animate new knowledge from the start of literature review. Masters and doctoral students are cautioned to avoid becoming stuck in their paradigm, and encouraged to generate new knowledge in order to meet academic standards of graduate school. The combination of DRI Zipper framework processes are requisite to generate GT within academia. The DRI zipper framework was developed to assist the novice GT researcher to gain clearer direction on how to proceed with literature review as part of their emerging scholarship. We recognize the utility of this framework for broader application in GT, and welcome critical analysis of this framework to enhance methodological rigor.

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