METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN NURSING RESEARCH

A synthesis technique for grounded theory data analysis

Yvonne D. Eaves PhD RN
Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

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Correspondence:
Yvonne Eaves,
School of Nursing,
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill,
Carrington Hall, CB #7460,
Chapel Hill,
NC 27599-7460,
USA.
E-mail: yvonne_eaves@unc.edu

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Aims. The purposes of this paper are to examine the issues surrounding current changes in grounded theory (GT) research methods and to explicate an innovative synthesis technique to GT data analysis.

Background. In recent years there has been a steady rise in the number of published research reports that use the GT method. However, this growing body of GT literature has been criticized for its lack of adherence to the method as explicated by its originators, Glaser and Strauss.

Methods. Recent and past literature that explicates, describes, and discusses GT methods is reviewed. A synthesis technique for grounded theory data analysis was developed to analyse qualitative data collected for a grounded theory study on caregiving. This synthesis technique was derived from the works of four grounded theorists (Kathy Charmaz, Mark Chesler, Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss).

Results. The lack of clarity and the inconsistencies surrounding GT analysis, as reported in the literature, resulted in the development of a synthesis technique based on the works of the aforementioned-grounded theorists. The product was a synthesis approach that included analytical steps from each of these authors.

Conclusions. This synthesis approach increased understanding and enhanced clarity of GT data analysis techniques. This paper illustrates how integration of works by noted qualitative scholars is an appropriate and effective means to advance the discourse on data analysis for GT research studies.

Keywords: caregiving, grounded theory data analysis, grounded theory method, grounded theory research, novice researchers, qualitative research, synthesis technique

Introduction
Recent years have seen an unprecedented growth in the use of qualitative research methods. In particular, there has been a steady rise in the number of published research reports that use the grounded theory (GT) method. However, this growing body of GT literature has been criticized for its lack of adherence to the method as explicated by its originators (Stern 1994, Wilson & Hutchinson 1996). The purposes of this paper are: to examine the issues surrounding current usage of GT research methods and to explicate an innovative synthesis technique to GT data analysis. Literatures that explicated and described GT methods were reviewed. The lack of clarity and inconsistencies involved in GT analysis led to the synthesis technique reported here, which was based on the works of Charmaz (1983), Chesler (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The purposes of this paper are to examine the issues surrounding current changes in GT methods and to explicate an innovative synthesis technique that lends clarity to the analytic processes of GT that may be useful for novice researchers and graduate students as they gain expertise in GT methods.
The GT method

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that was developed for the purpose of studying social phenomena from the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Bowers 1988). Grounded theory uses a systematic set of data collection and analysis procedures to develop an inductively derived theory from the data (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1994). Field research and interviews are the usual methods for gathering data (Morse & Field 1995). The generation of the theory occurs during actual research (Strauss & Corbin 1994), and is based on comparative analyses between or among groups of persons within a particular area of interest (Morse & Field 1995). This comparative analysis is a central feature of GT and is often referred to as the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Strauss & Corbin 1994). Therefore, the GT method, along with its technique of constant comparison, allows a researcher to identify patterns and relationships between these patterns (Glaser 1978, 1992).

According to Morse and Field (1995) the process of generating GT is: 'both hierarchical and recursive because researchers must systematically categorize data and limit theorizing until patterns in the data emerge from the categorizing operation. This method requires data collecting, open categorizing, writing memos, determining a core category, recycling earlier steps in terms of the core category, sorting memos, and writing up the theory’ (p. 157). The primary purpose of GT, then, is to generate explanatory models of human social processes that are grounded in the data (Morse & Field 1995). A second purpose of GT is to elaborate on and modify existing theories (Strauss & Corbin 1990). According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), the major distinguishing factor between GT and other qualitative research methods is its emphasis on theory development, either substantive or formal. A substantive theory is grounded in research on one specific content area such as patient care. Hence, substantive theory evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated in one particular situational context (Strauss & Corbin 1990). In contrast, formal theory pertains to a conceptual area such as pain or violence (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Therefore, a formal theory emerges from a study of a phenomenon examined under several different types of situations (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Historical overview

Grounded theory was developed in the 1960s by two sociologists: Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser. Anselm Strauss came from the University of Chicago, often referred to as the Chicago School of sociology (Baker et al. 1992), which had a long history and tradition in qualitative research methods (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Interactionist and pragmatist writings influenced Strauss while he was at the University of Chicago. Thus, the works of Robert E. Park, W.I. Thomas, John Dewey, G.H. Mead, Everett Hughes, and Herbert Blumer impacted upon Strauss’ thinking. This background contributed to the grounded theory method as Strauss became aware of: (a) the need to get out in the field to depict and understand accurately what was going on, (b) the importance of theory grounded in reality to the development and advancement of a discipline, (c) the nature of experience as dynamic and continually evolving, (d) the active role of persons in shaping the worlds in which they live, (e) the importance of change and process, and the variability and complexity of life and (f) the interrelationships among conditions, meaning, and action (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Barney Glaser in contrast received his training at Columbia University and was influenced by Paul Lazarsfeld, considered at that time to be an innovator of quantitative methods. While involved in some qualitative analysis Glaser realized the need for an explicit and systematic set of techniques and procedures for both coding and testing hypotheses generated from qualitative research methods (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

After developing their method of grounded theory, both Glaser and Strauss joined the faculty of the nursing doctoral program at the University of California, San Francisco (Stern 1985). These appointments led to the introduction of GT to nursing students, resulting in nursing studies using this methodology (Baker et al. 1992). These early grounded theory nursing studies focused on: the nurse and the dying patient (Quint 1967), the politics of pain management (Fagerhaugh & Strauss 1977), affiliation in stepfather families (Stern 1978), and the management of chronic illness (Corbin & Strauss 1988).

Assumptions of the GT method

Although Glaser and Strauss never state explicitly the assumptions (or label certain criteria as assumptions) underlying the GT method, these assumptions are inherent in their and others’ writings. The major assumptions of GT methodology can be summarized as follows:

- Inquiry is structured by discovery of social and social psychological processes.
- Data collection and analysis phases of research proceed simultaneously.
- Both the processes and products of research are shaped from the data rather than from preconceived logically deduced theoretical frameworks.
- Analytic processes prompt discovery and theory development rather than verification of pre-existing theories.
Theoretical sampling refines, elaborates, and exhausts conceptual categories.

- Grounded theory methodology is not only aimed at studying processes, but also assumes that making theoretical sense of social life is itself a process.
- The systematic application of GT analytical techniques leads progressively to more abstract analytic levels (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Charmaz 1983).

Furthermore, as the purpose of grounded theory is to construct theory from the data itself, solid, rich data are required to elicit thorough, accurate, and complete development of conceptual and analytic issues. Data collection is shaped by analytic interpretations and discoveries, and thus, causes the grounded theorist to sharpen his/her observations. Early discoveries result in continued data collection until the grounded theorist is able adequately to substantiate explanations and theories that fully explain and interpret emerging ideas (Charmaz 1983).

Theoretical and philosophical framework

Grounded theory, as noted previously, has its roots in the social sciences. More specifically, GT is rooted in the symbolic interaction tradition of social psychology and sociology (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Chenitz & Swanson 1986). Symbolic interactionism (SI) is a theory about human behaviour; it is an approach to the study of human conduct and human group life (Chenitz & Swanson 1986). Symbolic interactionism is concerned with the meanings of events to people and the symbols they use to convey those meanings (Baker et al. 1992). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the inner or ‘experiential’ aspects of human behaviour, or how people define events and reality and how they act according to their beliefs (Chenitz & Swanson 1986). In other words, SI holds that people are in a continual process of interpretation and definition as they move from one situation to another.

Blumer (1969) cited three basic premises of SI. The first premise is that ‘human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them’ (p. 2). These things may include objects, other human beings, institutions, ideals, beliefs, activities of others, and situations, or any combination of these. The second premise states that ‘the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows’. The third and final premise is that ‘these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters’ (Blumer 1969, p. 2).

Denzin (1989), a sociologist, provided further elaboration and development to the theory of SI. According to Denzin, there are three underlying assumptions of SI. First, ‘social reality as it is sensed, known, and understood is a social production’. Second, ‘humans are assumed to be capable of engaging in “minded”, self-reflexive behaviour’. Third, ‘in the course of taking their own standpoint and fitting that standpoint to the behaviours of others, humans interact with one another’ (Denzin 1989, p. 5).

Current issues in the debate

In recent years debates about the current status of GT have been growing. In fact, questions have been raised about ‘the diffusion and dilution of the GT method’ (May 1996, p. 310). Moreover, issues have been raised about the quality of nursing research labelled as GT (Benoliel 1996, May 1996), and some nursing scholars have attributed this to a lack of mentorship in the method by GT’s originators or their students (May 1996, Wilson & Hutchinson 1996).

At the centre of the GT debate is Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) text, which has been criticized for deviating from the original method (Wilson & Hutchinson 1996). Strauss and Corbin suggested a new coding technique using ‘a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences’ (p. 96). Glaser responded that Strauss and Corbin were no longer doing GT, but had explicated a new method that Glaser referred to as ‘full conceptual description’ and ‘forcing’ the data and theory, rather than allowing emergence. Subsequently, Glaser (1992) put forth his ‘corrected’ version of generating GT emphasizing ‘emergence’ (Wilson & Hutchinson 1996).

Although Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) book has been criticized for being procedural, how-to, and cumbersome in the number of steps they outlined, Benoliel (1996) and Melia (1996) do not share Glaser’s perspective that Strauss and Corbin are no longer doing GT. In fact, Benoliel and Melia view Strauss and Corbin’s work, and in the case of Benoliel, the work of other grounded theorists, as adding to the initial work of GT in the Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967) by Glaser and Strauss. Furthermore, Benoliel and Melia share the perspective that in order for knowledge generation to take place, methodologies must be re-examined, revised, further explicated, and improved in terms of clarity.

A large portion of published GT research has been criticized for failing to adhere to the underlying principles of the GT method. Benoliel (1996) conducted an analysis of 146 GT publications by nurses between the years 1990 and 1994. Benoliel found three categories of GT that she labelled: GT approach, GT methods and GT research. Grounded theory approach referred to research that used interview data only and failed to identify basic social processes. Articles labelled as GT methods tended to discuss GT as a method, rather than reporting research. Articles identified as GT
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Wilson and Hutchinson stated that this violation most often occurs in quantitative studies in which open-ended questions are added to survey instruments. However, these authors cautioned against confusing methodological transgression with triangulation and with mixed quantitative and qualitative designs, which when conducted according to their own philosophical tenets are legitimate methods.

Explication of synthesis technique used to analyse data

The analytical approach that this paper describes was performed on data collected in a research project titled ‘Caregiving in Rural African American Families for Elderly Stroke Survivors’ (Eaves 1997). The overall purpose of this GT study was to examine the process of caregiving from the perspective of African American families living in rural settings who were caring for a family member who had suffered a recent stroke. Another aim of the study was to generate a model (or substantive theory) to explain the impact caregiving had on the lives of rural African Americans.

A multi-step data analysis technique was used to analyse the data. The development of this multi-step data analysis technique was a synthesis based on the works of four grounded theorists; Charmaz (1983), Chesler (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Hence, several works on the explication of GT were synthesized in order to understand and conduct it in a way that seemed clearer. The reason for this synthesis was the evident lack of clarity between authors in the literature on GT methods. While Charmaz’ writings seemed logical and understandable, an attempt to follow her analysis technique revealed that Charmaz neglected to explain all the smaller steps between the major phases of coding and analysis. On the other hand, Strauss and Corbin explicated a very complicated technique that was filled with numerous smaller steps. As previously noted, Strauss and Corbin’s work has been criticized for being procedural and unmanageable because of the number of steps they outline (Benoliel 1996, Melia 1996). However, Strauss and Corbin’s work has been commended for providing novice researchers and doctoral students with direction in carrying out GT analysis (Melia 1996).

Analytical steps

The initial step in synthesizing the aforementioned works of GT analysis was to make a diagram of the analytical steps. Of course, a diagram does not accurately depict GT as the method is a recursive process rather than a linear one, and at
any one time the grounded theorist is in various stages of the process depending upon the concept, category, or pattern under examination. Still, these diagrams helped to determine the specific analytical steps and how to proceed to the next step(s) (see Figures 1–3). After a diagram had been made of the analytical techniques of Charmaz, Chesler, and Strauss and Corbin, a diagram was drawn of the synthesis approach that was followed in the current study (see Figure 4). The synthesis approach, then, included some analytical steps from each of the aforementioned authors; a description of these steps follows in the next paragraphs.

First, line-by-line in-vivo coding was done on a transcript that was considered to be exceptionally thick in description. In line-by-line in-vivo coding the researcher uses key phrases in the informants’ own words (Chesler 1987). The transcript chosen for in-vivo coding was read very carefully, key words were underlined, and then these key words were written in the right hand margin of the transcript. Secondly, a listing was made of all in-vivo codes and shorter code phrases were then developed that captured the main idea of what the informant said (Chesler 1987). Codes are shorthand devices used to label, separate, compile, and organize data (Charmaz 1983). MARTIN, a qualitative text analyses software package was used to code and organize the data (Diekelmann et al. 1991). Thirdly, code phrases were reduced by grouping together similar code phrases. Fourth, the groupings of similar code phrases were grouped together to create clusters. Clusters were then reduced into meta-clusters with labels. Fifth, these labels became concepts.

Sixth, similar concepts were grouped together to develop categories. Categories are classifications of concepts, and are discovered when codes are compared against one another and pertains to a similar phenomenon. Categories, then, are of a higher, more abstract order than are codes (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Embedded in this sixth step was Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) technique of constant comparison which is a method of comparing codes and categories for similarities and relationships that exist among codes and categories.

Seventh, subcategories were identified. Subcategories are characteristics and properties of categories along a continuum or dimensional range (Charmaz 1983, Strauss & Corbin 1990). Eighth, linkages were made among categories, to allow for some conceptual order to be placed on the data. This was done by asking questions about relationships in the data (constant comparison) or by testing bunches against the data (Corbin 1986). Another way that this was done was by using the literature to outline and compare relationships among the categories (Charmaz 1983).

Ninth, core categories were identified. According to Charmaz (1983) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) the core category is the central theme or story line of the data, around which all the other categories can be subsumed. Hence, it seems for these authors that for every set of data one core category can be identified. It can be proposed, however, as there are several stories or story lines in a particular study, there must be several core categories that can be identified in any given set of data.

Tenth, the core category led to discovery of the basic social psychological process (BSPP) and the basic social process (BSP). The BSPP is a problem shared by participants in the study sample, but may not be articulated by them (Hutchinson 1986). The BSP is similar to a core category,
except it must have at least two distinct stages or phases to account for process, change, and movement over time (Glaser 1978). Eleventh, mini-theories were generated from the core categories. Lastly, explanatory frameworks were developed and these led to the derivation of a substantive theory, in Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) language, but are referred to as a model in the current study. Figure 5 is a diagrammatic representation of the model derived from this synthesis technique to data analysis that was adhered to in the current study.

Throughout the entire process of data analysis, memos were written to: (a) interpret in-vivo material, (b) articulate metaphors, (c) examine the relationships among code categories, (d) explain major code categories, (e) explore methodological issues and (f) generate theory. Memos are written explorations of ideas about the data, codes, categories, or themes (Charmaz 1983).

Discussion of synthesis technique

This study elaborated on and modified GT analysis techniques by deriving and using a synthesis approach to analysis. This synthesis approach was based on the work of Charmaz (1983), Chesler (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990), and the constant comparative method put forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Specific steps from each author were chosen based on clarity, then organized in a manner to enhance logical flow. Sub-steps were added to flush out major steps. This was extremely useful for a novice researcher because it was easy to become lost in-between major steps. For instance, during actual analysis it was difficult to move from line-by-line in-vivo coding to shorter code phrases ‘codes that create order’; (Charmaz 1983) or to ‘concepts’ (Strauss & Corbin). However, inserting steps from Chesler ‘underlining key terms in the text’ and ‘restating key phrases’ lead to the development of shorter code phrases. Hence, it is useful for the novice grounded theorist to have enough structure and guidance in regard to analytical steps (technique) to arrive accurately at the next level of data emergence. Without such adherence to detailed analytical steps it is more likely that the novice will fall prey to pitfalls and methodological mistakes (Becker 1993, Wilson & Hutchinson 1996).

Memo writing was particularly helpful in finalizing data analysis and developing the synthesis approach put forth in this paper. Specifically, memos that discussed methodological and analytical issues and concerns aided in both the identification and determination of meanings of steps for the synthesis technique to data analysis. On some occasions the author e-mailed her memos to mentors and asked questions of them or asked their perspective on certain methodological issues. The analytical memos raised some important issues for the novice. The language of these memos uncovered a degree of hesitancy, doubt, and lack of confidence in the novice’s ability to perform GT analysis. For instance, one memo stated ‘...my major concern is determining if I have performed GT the way it is supposed to be conducted.’ The novice questioned whether she had conducted certain analytical steps correctly. Did she sufficiently understand the language of the analytical method (for example, BSP, BSPP, core category/variable)? Did she choose names/labels for concepts and categories that depicted accurately the situation under study (meaning, they were actually derived from the data)? Or, were general, preconceived labels attached? The novice also questioned her interpretation of some published literature, especially that concerning the current debates
about the GT method. Finally, and perhaps most importantly (to her) the novice wondered about others' criticism of her synthesis technique to GT analysis, and how the results and rigor of the study would be received.

The content and subsequent meanings (expressed in the previous line of questioning) contained in the analytic memos put forth demonstrate that GT analysis and interpretation is a difficult and painstaking yet, scholarly activity. The novice seemed to go around and around certain issues and analytical steps. At each turn there was a search for adequacy and accuracy in adhering to the tenets of the GT method and carrying out GT analysis. This suggests that just as the GT method and GT analysis is cyclical (nonlinear) in nature, in essence, the process of understanding, learning, and becoming proficient in GT methods is a circular process. This process involves learning, questioning and evaluating.

In discussing criticisms of GT, Charmaz (1990), noted, 'that weaknesses in using the method may have become equated with weaknesses inherent in the method' (p. 1164, italics added). According to Charmaz, such weaknesses include: premature commitment to analytic categories, unnecessary jargon, and a lack of clarity about key terms (for example, theory, category, and saturation). Thorne (1997) suggested that the 'democratization of the scholarship process' (p. 290) has contributed to a tolerance for ' sloppy' scholarship. Thorne noted the acceptance of abbreviated methods sections in recent qualitative articles as a case in point. Such methods sections do not require authors to discuss explicitly the underlying assumptions of the qualitative method they have employed. According to Thorne this
‘may have prevented some neophyte qualitative researcher from grasping the epistemological distinctions between a subjective and an objective truth’ (p. 290). Therefore, it is crucial that qualitative researchers explain clearly the methods that they have used, especially as ‘grounded theorists bring to their studies the general perspectives of their disciplines, their own philosophical, theoretical, substantive and methodological proclivities, their particular research interests, and their biographies’ (p. 1170).

Another salient issue in the literature has to do with GT lineage, or from whom and where did you learn GT. Wilson and Hutchinson (1996) raise a concern that nurse scholars who were not directly mentored by GT’s originators or their students, have invented rules for judging the value of GT studies that were inconsistent with the ‘creativity inherent in and the philosophy of pragmatism under girding the original GT method’ (p. 123).

Along another vein, Morse (1997) asserted that many are going about learning qualitative research methods inappropriately, by reading manuals. Morse argued that understanding techniques of analysis without understanding a method’s underlying assumptions is insufficient. According to Morse some research texts are nothing more than ‘lists of technical qualitative techniques’ and using such texts ‘will not assist neophytes to become qualitative researchers nor facilitate the conduct of their research’ (p. 182). The key, instead, is first knowing how to do research. Where others simply instruct what not to do or what methods and techniques not to follow, Morse gives suggestions on how to ‘become’ a qualitative researcher. These suggestions include: (a) finding a mentor, (b) taking classes, (c) saturating oneself by reading critically and widely, (d) becoming theory smart, (e) learning to type, listen, think, focus and laugh, (f) participating in workshops that focus on the foundations of qualitative inquiry, then on the specific qualitative method one wants to use, (g) attending conferences and (h) developing a support system of colleagues with whom you can discuss ideas and issues.

Becoming a qualitative researcher must inevitably mean knowing how to do qualitative research, for the two cannot be separated. It is both the ‘becoming’ and the ‘doing’ with which the novice in this paper struggled. Perhaps, the novice was not aware of her ‘becoming’. She did, in fact, have a primary mentor (who was himself mentored by one of Glaser and Strauss’ early colleagues). In addition, the novice had taken two qualitative courses taught by her mentor, a yearlong course on GT by a second mentor who was a sociologist, and a course on Heideggerian Hermeneutics taught by a recognized qualitative nurse scholar. Moreover, the novice worked with her primary mentor for 3 years on phenomenological research studies. This information is provided so the reader may evaluate or determine the adequacy of the novice’s instructional lineage and preparation in regard to qualitative methods.

The ‘doing’ of the actual research resulted in the technique outlined in this paper. At this point, however, the author had ‘become’ a qualitative researcher (albeit a novice), so the synthesis technique developed was consistent with the underlying tenets of the original GT method.

In discussing the future of GT Strauss and Corbin (1994) envision that: (a) researchers in a variety of substantive and professional areas and countries will experiment with and use or adapt the methodology, (b) adaptation will include combining GT with other methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative and (c) researchers will expand on and make specific revisions to procedures outlined in the current GT literature in order to increase the utility of the method for a wider range of phenomena.
Conclusion

In summary, the debate over current and future issues in regard to the GT method is likely to go on for quite some time. The novice is reminded of some words of wisdom from past mentors. ‘The issue is not who is right about GT and whether you agree with Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1990), or Glaser (1992). (The issue is) what you will take from them and do with it and how you will argue for, advocate, and defend your own position’ (M. Chesler, personal communication, August 19, 1996). Moreover, ‘no one is excused from the possibility of being criticized. What you need from your doctoral study is the language to join the debate. For, in scholarship, the ongoing debate creates discourse and from discourse forms of knowledge (agreements) emerge from time to time’ (D.L. Kahn, personal communication, August 19, 1996). Perhaps Strauss and Corbin (1994) summed up the current status of the debate about GT best when they stated: ‘No inventor has permanent possession of the invention.. a child once launched is very much subject to a combination of its origins and the evolving contingencies of life. Can it be otherwise with a methodology?’ (p. 283).

In line with these perspectives Charmaz (1983) holds that every researcher who uses the GT method will tend to develop his or her own variations of technique. In fact, Charmaz admitted that she has developed her own style of using GT, although within the framework of the original methods put forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978). So it is with the synthesis approach explicated in this paper. Indeed, it would be beneficial to the discourse if more qualitative scholars would publish their techniques of using GT. Two years ago this author attended an International Qualitative Conference to present a poster session of this paper (Eaves 1999). Surprisingly, many conference attendees stopped to read the poster and to ask questions. Several persons inquired if the information contained on the poster was published. Still others, doctoral students and academic faculty alike, tried to copy down all the information on the poster, especially the diagrammatic representations of GT analysis. This suggested that discourse on GT analysis is sorely needed. It is not enough, nor is it fair, to merely caution novice researchers to ‘become’ a qualitative researcher, to learn the original method only, or to reprimand when one has not adhered to the original method adequately. A cookbook approach to GT analysis is not being advocated here, however, grounded theorists must be open and honest about their methods, and should publish them so that they are open to both scrutiny and adoption. Furthermore, it is improbable that all future novice grounded theorists will have the opportunity to work with someone who was personally mentored by one of GT’s originators. It is more likely that the novice researchers of tomorrow will learn from the originators of the method and their students only through published writings. This is not to say that future researchers should attempt to learn qualitative research solely from texts. We must, however, adequately preserve our research methods by publishing and simultaneously remain open to the advancement of methods.

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