# Constructing Grounded Theory

## 2nd Edition

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# *9*
# Reconstructing Theorizing in Grounded Theory Studies

Grounded theorists talk much about theory and about constructing theory, but what do they mean? In this chapter, we pause to contemplate what theory means and how grounded theorists engage in theorizing as a practice. I begin with an example of theorizing in grounded theory research and then step back and ask, what is theory? By viewing general definitions of theory from two distinct traditions, the antecedents of objectivist and constructivist grounded theory become clearer. We move on to compare objectivist and constructivist grounded theory, so you can assess where you stand in relation to them. Reconsidering critiques of grounded theory helps to refresh our thinking and reaffirm our theoretical tasks. To encourage your development of theoretical sensitivity, I suggest ways you might plumb the depth of your ideas while expanding the reach of your theory. We close by inspecting how three different grounded theory studies demonstrate theorizing in practice and reflecting on how grounded theorists are part of their theorizing.

To begin thinking about reconstructing theorizing in grounded theory research, consider the excerpt below from my analysis of losing and regaining a valued self (Charmaz, 2011a). In this excerpt, I begin theorizing what intentional reconstruction of self entails when a person has experienced loss of self. The explicit theoretical logic builds on conceptualizing a changing self. The implicit theoretical logic links the self to perspectives about temporality and subjective experiences of time. The narrative states:

> At 30, Teresa's clear reflective voice amplifies the story of losing her singing voice and, therefore, herself. Her loss of voice was involuntary, uncontrollable, and irrevocable. She felt like she had lost control of her life. Teresa's cancer, surgery, and lost voice merge into an existential crisis that forced loss of self and resulted in enormous suffering (Charmaz, 1983b, 1999, [2002c]). The past shaped the force of the crisis and the life-changing spiraling events that rapidly followed and still echo through her life today. An ominous cancer lurked in the background of her life, ever present, usually quiescent, but there. Yet Teresa had gained both a stance and skills in the past that turned a tragic narrative into a tale of hope, courage, and positive growth.
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> Meanings of time permeate Teresa's story. She looked back at the past through the prism of the present (Mead, 1932; Ross and Buehler, 2004). As Teresa's story unfolds, the past,

present, and future take on intensified meaning. Her story also teaches us about meanings of moments. Telling moments mark and symbolize tumultuous changes. Teresa had earlier recounted how her ordeal unfolded before she made the stunning statement about losing her self. The moment when Teresa learned that she could lose her voice became the defining event in her life. The news separated the present from her past. This moment marked the shattering of Teresa's self. What could life be without singing? …

A social psychological analysis of Teresa's story illuminates the process of losing a valued self, an embodied self, and suggests ways of regaining a valued self while living with uncertainty. For analytic clarity here, my rendering of her story (1) treats losing and regaining self as two ends of a continuum of reconstructing self, (2) emphasizes the conditions under which loss of self develops, (3) describes those conditions necessary to effect *intentional* reconstruction of self and (4) links intentionality with meanings of moments. When I use similar data to trace biographies over time, I find that these processes are seldom singular and linear. Instead people move between, through, and around these processes, depending on the vicissitudes of health and life (Charmaz, [1995a]). (Charmaz, 2011a, pp. 177–178)

The above narrative sets the stage for analzing losing and regaining a valued self. Consistent with the structure of the demonstration project (Wertz et al., 2011), I emphasized Teresa and Gail's stories when writing the analysis but conducted further comparative research with my own data.[1] Through analyzing the shared project data, I focused on *intentional* reconstruction of a valued self. Both Teresa and Gail made concerted efforts to make a comeback after loss of physical function. Not everyone approaches losses from illness or injury in such systematic ways. Both young women struggled with how their respective situations affected who they could be and how other people identified them. Their identity goals were clear.

My analysis traces the course of intentional reconstruction of self under conditions of relative uncertainty and certainty (see Figure 8.1). Gail would recover – eventually. Her initial fears of looming surgery and possible reduced function quelled. Uncertainty for Gail raised these questions: Would recovery occur soon? Could she regain strength, endurance, and precision in time to participate on the team? For Teresa, questions about uncertainty loomed in the foreground and continued to lurk in the background. Despite Teresa's determined efforts to regain her voice, it did not occur during the months following her surgery. She spoke of her beloved voice teacher saying to her, '"Why don't you just stop coming?" And I said, "You're right." And that's the last time I went to the studio' (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 118). She relinquished her hopes of becoming an opera singer and sought a valued self through new pursuits. Was relinquishing her hopes as simple as Teresa's statement implies? Not only did her career hopes crumble but she soon realized that she also lost her voice teacher and ally, the life she had known, and herself. She recalled:

As soon as the voice was gone, I had to find something or I was going to die. I really felt that I was going to have to die, or kill myself… or hold my breath until it ended. Anything but feel like that. It was miserable and painful, and terrible… I can't explain in words how awful it was.…I lost my identity. I lost myself. (p. 119)

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1 In keeping with the structure of the psychology demonstration project, the source of this excerpt, the analysis focused on data from Teresa and Gail. For more information on the project, see Chapter 5, p. 109, in this volume.

The magnitude of Teresa's loss and the continued uncertainty she faced made losing and regaining a valued self far more problematic than Gail's injury. Note the objective and subjective elements for each young woman. Teresa's life-threatening illness came with a foreboding prognosis. Gail's injury and current debility were temporary. Of course Gail felt crushed about misjudging her move to the high bar during her new routine and crashing to the ground. The accident undermined Gail's identity as a gymnast. But the accident did not end it.

Through comparing the conditions of experiencing uncertainty and certainty, I accounted for different types of losses, which in turn held different implications for self. I constructed a major category, experiencing a disrupted self that spoke to Gail's narratives and analyzed the processes of losing and regaining a valued self that Teresa's story reflected. Both Gail and Teresa aimed to recapture their earlier selves and identities. When comparing their actions with my earlier concept (1987) of an identity hierarchy[2] consisting of gradients in identity levels, they each aimed for a restored self. Both women strove to make a comeback. Yet even extraordinary effort did not permit Teresa to restore her earlier self. Relinquishing her dream meant abandoning her earlier identity goals. It took finding a new place in another social world to transform enormous loss into regaining a valued self.

These excerpts theorize a process of regaining a valued self. Do they constitute a theory? Not yet, but through my comparative analysis using other data, they do move toward theory construction. What makes a line of analysis theory – or theoretical? What kind of presuppositions about theory does a grounded theory analysis assume? How can we reconcile the creative – and often messy – process of theorizing and constructing grounded theories with their measured presentations in finished reports and published articles? How might we write grounded theory from a constructivist approach? To make theorizing transparent, we need to see how grounded theorists construct their theories, but first we need to think further about theory.

## What Is Theory?

As grounded theorists, what do we define as a 'bona fide' *theory*? How do we make our grounded theory analyses theoretical? How do we move from analytic processes to producing grounded theories? Which directions do our grounded theories

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2  The identity hierarchy reflects ill people's different preferred identities that mirror their dreams and goals. The levels in the identity hierarchy include: (1) the supernormal social identity, an identity demanding extraordinary achievement in conventional worlds; (2) the restored self, a reconstruction of previous identities predating the illness; (3) contingent personal identity, a hypothetically possible, though uncertain, identity because of further illness; and (4) the salvaged self, retaining a past identity based on a valued activity or attribute while becoming physically dependent. All levels of the identity hierarchy represent how chronically ill people separate themselves from being identified as an invalid and thus an invalid person. Some people gradually move down the identity hierarchy while others plummet down or move up and down depending on their health and situations. Reducing identity goals amounts to aiming for a less valued identity. (Charmaz, 1987, p. 285)

typically take? To assess whether, how, why, and when grounded theory studies offer actual theories first requires taking a step back and asking, what is theory?

To think about meanings of theory in grounded theory, it helps to look at broader definitions of theory in the social sciences. We can use this definition of theory as a starting point: 'A theory states relationships between abstract concepts and may aim for either explanation or understanding' (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012 p. 41).

The term 'theory' remains slippery in grounded theory discourse and mirrors ambiguities about what theory means throughout the social sciences and professions. Many grounded theorists talk about theory but few define it. Numerous grounded theorists claim they construct theory, but do they?

Disagreements among grounded theorists about how to use the method and what a completed theory should look like may arise from unsettled notions about what theory means (see also Abend, 2008). These disagreements resonate with grumblings – and ideological clashes – throughout the social sciences (see also Abend, 2008). Grounded theorists echo these disagreements without always recognizing their epistemological underpinnings. Disputes may be played out and intensified in discussions and directions about how to construct grounded theory.

In this chapter, I touch upon the two general orientations to theory, positivist and interpretivist, which exert most influence on grounded theory. Theoretical perspectives in classical sociological theory and cultural studies help us to clarify major themes in these orientations to theory, so I discuss them briefly. If we look beneath the surface, we can discern different definitions of theory among grounded theorists, depending on whether their definitions assume positivist or interpretivist theories. Some defining points remain firm, others are elastic. Rather than viewing positivist and interpretivist theories as separate either/or definitions, budding grounded theorists may find it more useful to view them as located on a continuum. That way you can clarify where you stand in regard to theory.

Theories try to answer questions. Theories offer accounts for what happens, how it ensues, and may aim to account for why it happened. Theorizing consists of the actions involved in constructing these accounts. Addressing *why* questions about observed actions often raises existential issues such as those of meaning and moral value, as my excerpt above suggests. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (1997) propose that qualitative researchers could address 'why' questions 'by considering the contingent relations between the *whats and hows* of social life' (p. 200). Hence, we treat accounting for *what* people do in specific situations and linking it to *how* they do it as contingent relationships. This form of analysis poses possibilities for learning why subsequent actions and events occur. Jack Katz (2002) adds that answers to 'why?' are always about dimensions of social life that inspire transcending situated action. Grounded theory provides both a way of analyzing situated action and of moving beyond it. In contrast, most qualitative research involves 'what?' and 'how?' questions and sticks to the immediate action.

Grounded theory has had a long history of raising and answering analytic 'why?' questions in addition to 'what?' and 'how?' questions. Our answers to why questions range from explanatory generalizations that theorize causation to abstract understandings that theorize relationships between concepts. To show how grounded theorists address why questions and engage in theorizing, I conclude this chapter by taking several grounded theory studies apart and reconstructing their logic with you.

**228**

## Positivist Definitions of Theory

Perhaps the most prevalent definitions of theory derive from positivism. In general, positivist definitions of theory treat it as a statement of relationships between abstract concepts that cover a wide range of empirical observations. This definition of theory coincides with Abend's (2008) first of six definitions of theory. In this case, theory means 'a general proposition, or logically-connected system of general propositions, which establishes a relationship between two or more variables' (p. 177). Positivists view their theoretical concepts as variables and focus on observable facts. They construct operational definitions of their concepts for hypothesis testing through efforts to achieve accurate, replicable, empirical measurement. Thus, positivism is rooted in empiricism but by no means is limited to induction.

This definition of positivism exerts considerable influence for two reasons: it reaches across fields; and authors of research textbooks widely adopt and disseminate it, often as the only meaning of theory and approach to theorizing.

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In this view, the objectives of theory stress *explanation* and *prediction*. Positivist theory aims for parsimony (short, precise explanations), seeks causes, looks for explanations, and emphasizes generality and universality. In short, positivist theories consist of a set of interrelated propositions aiming to:

- Treat concepts as variables
- Identify the properties of concepts
- Specify relationships between concepts
- Explain and predict these relationships
- Systematize knowledge
- Verify theoretical relationships through hypothesis-testing
- Generate hypotheses for research.

The logic of positivism rests on separating fact and value. Positivists try to keep their values out of their research to avoid contaminating the results. This fact–value separation supports researchers' claims of impartiality and objectivity and, thus, positivists predicate the strength of their research designs and findings on the separation. Similarly, many positivists, particularly of the twentieth century, eschewed theories that took a value position.

With their emphasis on parsimony, positivistic theories aim to be elegant in form and direct in their statements. In the social sciences, however, these theories can result in narrow explanations with simplistic models of action such as theories that leave out emotions and cultural contexts when explaining individuals' economic behavior. In such cases, researchers may build their theories on concepts that they can reduce to quantifiable variables. Jonathan A. Turner (2006), a proponent of positivism who has long explicated its tenets, provides an important corrective. He observes that critics often wrongly accuse positivists of aiming to transform *all* concepts into variables and numbers. Turner enjoins positivists to establish generic and universal properties of social life and to 'formulate laws about their dynamic properties; whether these laws are stated in words or mathematics makes much less difference than formulating

**229**

abstract laws about the operative dynamics of some domain of the social universe' (p. 452). Turner's position about formulating abstract laws maintains a clear connection with classical social scientific works of the nineteenth century. Not all researchers who subscribe to positivistic assumptions would pursue formulating abstract laws, including most grounded theorists who theorize from a positivistic perspective. Instead, they aim to construct generalizations about a limited empirical problem.

Positivism of various sorts profoundly influenced twentieth-century social science when the divide between quantitative and qualitative research had sharp boundaries. Both quantitative methodologists and qualitative researchers of yesteryear attended to positivism's premises and promise of accumulated knowledge, albeit in different ways. Quantitative methodologists who were informed by positivism pursued research problems that they could make amenable to quantitative measures. Hence, they moved toward reducing empirical objects and events to indicators that they could subsume under operationalized concepts. Qualitative researchers immersed themselves in data collection and often emphasized overt behavior in efforts to protect their work from charges of bias and of failing to meet traditional quantitative standards of reliability and validity. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers attempted to minimize subjectivity and remain dispassionate, neutral observers.

Do positivistic assumptions still influence grounded theory? Yes. Perhaps more than other types of qualitative research, premises and perspectives emanating from positivism may be more transparent in grounded theory. Does this transparency indicate that questions have been resolved in other forms of qualitative research? No. Yet because of its transparency, Karen Henwood and Nick Pidgeon (2003) point out that grounded theory provides a useful nodal point around which issues in qualitative research can be addressed.

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Turner (2006) concurs with a frequent criticism. He writes: 'There is a legitimate concern that when laws are derived from empirical regularities at particular points in time and place, they do not address generic and universal processes but, instead, make time-bound events sound more universal and generic than they actually are' (p. 453). Like Antony Bryant (2002; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b), Adele Clarke (2005), and others, I share this concern about decontextualized grounded theory studies.

## Interpretive Definitions of Theory

An alternative definition of theory emphasizes interpretation and gives *abstract understanding* greater priority than explanation. Proponents of this definition view theoretical understanding as gained through the theorist's interpretation of the studied phenomenon. Interpretive theories allow for indeterminacy rather than seeking causality and aiming to theorize patterns and connections.

Although interpretive threads in the social sciences have long been evident, interpretive theories often arose as alternatives to positivism. These theories include a range of perspectives including symbolic interactionism and social constructionism as well as a number of others such as phenomenology, feminist theory, cultural theory, and some post-structuralist approaches. Interpretive theories aim to understand meanings and actions and how people construct them. Thus these theories bring in the subjectivity of the actor and may recognize the subjectivity of the researcher. Interpretive theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon. This type of theory assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual. Thus, theorizing from interpretive perspectives is an emergent process and fully compatible with George Herbert Mead's philosophical pragmatism that informs symbolic interactionism. Mead takes a sophisticated view of action as the starting place for analysis that includes the person's imagined understanding of the other person's role and response during interaction.

From an interpretive approach, we interpret our participants' meanings and actions and they interpret ours. The interpretive turn in theory has gained attention as social constructionist principles gained advocates among diverse scholars, particularly since the 1960s. This theoretical approach emphasizes practices and actions. Rather than explaining reality, social constructionists see multiple realities and therefore ask: *What* do people assume is real? *How* do they construct and act on their views of reality? Knowledge and theories are situated and located in particular positions, perspectives, and experiences. In brief, interpretive theory aims to:

- Conceptualize the studied phenomenon to understand it in abstract terms
- Articulate theoretical claims pertaining to scope, depth, power, and relevance of a given analysis
- Acknowledge subjectivity in theorizing and hence recognize the role of experience, standpoints, and interactions, including one's own
- Offer an imaginative theoretical interpretation that makes sense of the studied phenomenon

Table 9.1 contrasts positivism with pragmatism, the interpretive theoretical foundation with which constructivist grounded theory is aligned. Interpretive theories are often juxtaposed against positivist theories, which I do in Table 9.1 and when discussing constructivist and objectivist grounded theory below. But for now, consider that grounded theory as *theory* contains both positivist and interpretivist elements because it

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**231**

**Table 9.1**  Epistemological underpinnings of grounded theory

| Positivist | Pragmatist |
|---|---|
| • Follows *the* scientific method | • Emphasizes problem-solving |
| • Assumes *an* external reality | • Assumes a fluid, somewhat indeterminate reality |
| • Unbiased observer | |
| • Discovers abstract generalities | • Defines multiple perspectives |
| • Explains empirical phenomena | • Studies people's actions to solve emergent problems |
| • Separates facts and values | • Joins facts and values |
| • Truth is provisional | • Truth is provisional |

relies on empirical observations and depends on the researcher's constructions of them.

Cultural studies theorist, Pertti Alasuutari (1996) clarifies this point. He distinguishes between how lay people ordinarily make sense of their worlds and what the concept of theory means. By adopting a sophisticated view of theory consistent with Schutz (1932/1967), Alasuutari argues that theoreticians examine lay persons' rules of interpretation and therefore move beyond lay persons' conceptions.

> One takes a one-step distance from the members' perspective, not by arguing that it is narrower or incorrect, but *by studying how it works* in constituting social realities. Theories are thus deconstructions of the way in which we construct realities and social conditions and ourselves as subjects in those realities. They cannot compete with lay thinking, because their very objective is to make sense of it in its various forms and in different instances. (1996, p. 382, emphasis added)

Alasuutari explicitly departs from definitions of theory as generalized statements about universals from which researchers deduce hypotheses to explain local, specific phenomena. Instead, to him theories provide interpretive *frames* through which to view realities. Although Alasuutari's comment recognizes that lay persons and researchers hold different interpretive frames, we might note that both make sense of lay persons' ideas and actions. Alasuutari theorizes.

Alasuutari's work gains theoretical reach and depth by combining careful explanation with theorizing of local scenes and specific incidents.. His work combines the sensibilities of a skilled ethnographer with the kind of theoretical sensitivity possessed by the best grounded theorists. Thus, through his exquisite awareness of meanings and actions in situated events, Alasuutari builds on specifics and subsequently constructs general statements that cut across time and space.

Constructivist grounded theory adopts a similar logic. We build from specifics and move to general statements while situating them in the context of their construction.

## The Rhetoric, Reach, and Practice of Theorizing

Whether positivist or interpretive, theories are rhetorical – although interpretive theorists more often acknowledge this point than their positivist counterparts. A

theorist attempts to convince readers that certain conclusions flow from a set of premises (Markovsky, 2004). Thus, theories present arguments about the world and relationships within it, despite sometimes being cleansed of context and reduced to seemingly neutral statements. Earlier positivist notions of objectivity assumed that such cleansing and neutrality added to a theory's persuasiveness. Interpretivists strongly disagreed.

When we consider either positivist or interpretive theory, we need to think of its theoretical reach and power within, beyond, and across disciplines. A persuasive theory is compelling. Randall Collins (2004a) says that 'Theory is what you remember' (see also Davis, 1971). Theories flash illuminating insights and make sense of murky musings and knotty problems. The ideas fit. We agree, for example, when Jennifer Lois (2010) says:

> While all emotions can be felt in the present, remembered in the past, or anticipated in the future, there are a few – such as nostalgia, regret, disillusionment, ambition, hope, optimism, and dread – that cannot be felt without bridging the present to either the past or the future. (p. 441)

Phenomena and relationships between them become visible that you only sensed beforehand.

Still, theories can do more. A theory can alter your viewpoint and change your consciousness. Through it, you can see the world from a different vantage point and create new meanings of it. Theories have an internal logic and more or less coalesce into coherent forms.

My preference for theorizing – and it is for theorizing, not theory – is unabashedly interpretive. Theorizing is a *practice*. It entails practical activities of engaging the world and of constructing abstract understandings about and within it. The fundamental contribution of grounded theory methods resides in guiding interpretive theoretical practice, not in providing a blueprint for theoretical products.

Interpretive theorizing arises from social constructionist assumptions that inform symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, cultural studies and phenomenological discourse, narrative analysis, and other approaches. Such theorizing is not limited to individual actors or micro situations. Nor should it be. Rather, interpretive theorizing can move beyond individual situations and immediate interactions to include collectivities and institutions. Maines (2001) makes this argument about symbolic interactionism, and Alasuutari's (1995, 1996, 2004, 2010) vantage point in cultural studies points to one way to theorize at the collective level.

Anselm Strauss devoted much of his career to theorizing the study of action, particularly at the organizational level. His concepts of social worlds and social arenas animate numerous studies and have particularly influenced Adele Clarke and her students. Strauss's analyses of negotiated orders (e.g. 1978b; Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, Ehrlich, & Sabshin, 1963) and social worlds (1978a) initiate interpretive inquiry at organizational and collective levels. Rather than studying the structure of the hospital as static, Strauss et al. (1963) revealed its dynamic, processual nature by analyzing negotiations within and between people and departments at varied organizational levels in the hospital. Their interpretation of the hospital as a negotiated order and analysis of this order assumed considerable significance because Strauss

**233**

et al. showed how researchers could study the construction of individual and collective action and the intersections between them.

Speaking from the classical theorists' camp, Collins (2004b) argues for situations rather than individuals as starting points for theorizing continuities between classical nineteenth-century theory and contemporary theoretical questions. He views the social in the individual and explores how the varied intensity of rituals shape forms of social participation and ideas at local levels that collectively involve larger social structures.

Interpretive theorizing can infuse network analysis with the tools to bring meanings into view. Both Collins (2004b) and Clarke (2003, 2005, 2007, 2012) suggest methodological strategies for studying meso and macro levels of analysis. Collins endorses using network analysis to study situations, although grounded theorists would find that Clarke's methods offer them more access to specific contexts and types of interactions. When researchers use both methods, they may find that Clarke's situational analysis and positional mapping can broaden network analysis and make it more interpretive.

## Objectivist and Constructivist Grounded Theory

Throughout this book, I treat using grounded theory methods and theorizing as *social actions* that researchers construct in concert with others in particular places and times. In addition to our research participants and immediate colleagues, institutional review committees and intended audiences may live in our minds and influence how we conduct our studies. We interact with data and create theories about them. But we do not exist in a social vacuum.

Our conceptions of theory and research have social origins that influence what we do and the allegiances we forge, as well as disagreements we may develop. As I have implied, a number of the disputes among grounded theorists and criticisms from other scholars result from differences about where various authors stand between positivist and interpretive traditions.

Differences about where various authors stand vis-à-vis positivist and interpretive traditions surface in objectivist and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000a, 2001, 2008a), which I juxtapose here. In practice, researchers may draw from both objectivist and constructivist positions. Numerous scholars define Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) immensely popular first and second editions of *Basics of Qualitative Research* as representing post-positivist grounded theory, a third major form of the method that lies in between objectivist and constructivist poles. Many current researchers still use the earlier editions of *Basics* to conduct their studies despite Corbin's substantial move away from post-positivism in the third edition and move toward explicit constructionism (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Because of the continuing influence of the first two editions of *Basics*, it may help to recall the stance that Strauss and Corbin expressed in 1998 and to mention several major shifts Corbin made in the third edition. Their 1998 book contains some positivist leanings but emphasizes relationships among concepts. At that time, they defined theory as 'a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship,

which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena' (p. 15). Strauss and Corbin's (1998) stance toward constructing theories, however, also acknowledges their adherence to symbolic interactionism and an emphasis on positioning grounded theory as a way of thinking about data. Yet at that time they offered an ambivalent stance toward interpretive theorizing. In a 1998 article, for example, Corbin mentions that analysis means that researchers interpret data but implies that such interpretation is an unavoidable limitation (p. 123).

By 2009, however, Corbin writes about multiple realities and building knowledge through making sense of multiple viewpoints but states that researchers construct concepts and theories. She places the researcher squarely within the research situation and views data as co-constructed with participants. In these ways, Corbin presents a way of conducting grounded theory consistent with methodological developments during the past few decades. This revision places her current view in much closer alignment with the constructivist position.

Corbin (2009, pp. 36–37) states that a methodology is a living thing and changes occur over the years among methods and to researchers. She maintains the philosophical roots of grounded theory in symbolic interactionism and pragmatism but now views the methodological premises influencing the earlier editions of *Basics of Qualitative Research* as outdated. Essentially, Corbin's rethinking of her methodological position has brought her further into social constructionism and more clearly into interpretive theorizing.

Constructivist grounded theory is part of the broader interpretive tradition and objectivist grounded theory derives from positivism. I juxtapose these approaches in Figure 9.1 for clarity. However, whether you judge a specific study to be constructivist or objectivist depends on the *extent* to which one tradition or the other informs its key characteristics.

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## Objectivist Grounded Theory

Objectivist grounded theory is most represented by Barney Glaser and his colleagues. One of its major spokespersons, Vivian B. Martin (2006), defines theory in this tradition as 'an integrated series of concepts integrated by a core concept' (p. 126)

Glaser's (1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2009) treatment of theory contains strong positivist leanings. He emphasizes the development of theoretical categories that serve as variables, assumes an indicator-concept approach, seeks context-free but modifiable theoretical statements, and aims for 'the achievement of parsimony and scope in explanatory power' (1992, p. 116). Glaser stresses the work of using comparative methods and attributes the analytic development of theory to emergence from this comparative work. However, he treats emergent categories almost as its automatic result. The place of interpretive understanding remains less clear in his position than the positivist elements.

Do researchers whose position falls under objectivist grounded theory adopt all tenets of positivism? No, what they adopt and how they conduct their studies locates

## Comparisons and Contrasts

| Objectivist Grounded Theory | Constructivist Grounded Theory |
|---|---|
| **Foundational Assumptions** | **Foundational Assumptions** |
| • Assumes an external reality<br>• Assumes discovery of data<br>• Assumes conceptualizations emerge from data analysis<br>• Views representation of data as unproblematic<br>• Assumes the neutrality, passivity, and authority of the observer. | • Assumes multiple realities<br>• Assumes mutual construction of data through *interaction*<br>• Assumes researcher constructs categories<br>• Views representation of data as problematic, relativistic, situational, and partial<br>• Assumes the observer's values, priorities, positions, and actions affect views. |
| **Objectives** | **Objectives** |
| • Aims to achieve context-free generalizations<br>• Aims for parsimonious, abstract conceptualizations that transcend historical and situational locations<br>• Aims to create theory that fits, works, has relevance, and is modifiable. (Glaser) | • Views generalizations as partial, conditional, and situated in time, space, positions, action, and interactions<br>• Aims for interpretive understanding of historically situated data<br>• Specifies range of variation<br>• Aims to create theory that has credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. |
| **Implications for Data Analysis** | **Implications for Data Analysis** |
| • Views data analysis as an objective process<br>• Sees emergent categories as forming the analysis<br>• Sees reflexivity as one possible data source<br>• Gives priority to researcher's analytic categories and voice. | • Acknowledges subjectivities throughout data analysis<br>• Views co-constructed data as beginning the analytic direction<br>• Engages in reflexivity throughout the research process<br>• Seeks and (re)represents participants' views and voices as integral to the analysis. |

**Figure 9.1** Objectivist and Constructivist Grounded Theory: Comparisons and Contrasts

Adapted and expanded from Kathy Charmaz. (2007). "Reconstructing Grounded Theory." P. 470 in P. Alasuutari, L. Bickman, and J. Brannen (eds.), *Handbook of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage

their work. Consistent with positivism, objectivist grounded theory is fundamentally empirical. This form of grounded theory attends to data as real in and of themselves and does not attend to the historical, social, and situated processes of their production. Thus, objectivist grounded theory erases the social context from which data emerge, the influence of the researcher, and often the interactions between grounded theorists and their research participants. Note that most interview excerpts in published reports before 2005, including mine, do not give you a sense of how interviewers and their research participants produced the data. An objectivist grounded theorist assumes that data represent objective facts about a knowable world. The data already exist in the world; the researcher finds them and 'discovers' theory from them.

In this approach, grounded theorists make conceptual sense of data from rigorous analysis of these data. They understand meaning as inhering in the data and the grounded theorist as discovering it (see, for example Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This view assumes an external reality and an unbiased observer who records facts about it. Objectivist grounded theorists contend that careful application of their methods and trust in the emergence of theoretical ideas will lead to theoretical explanations. Their role requires conducting the research process in accordance with directives embedded in their approach. Given these assumptions, objectivist proponents would argue for a stricter adherence to grounded theory steps than constructivists do.

Objectivist grounded theorists remain separate and distant from research participants and their realities, although they may adopt observational methods. Their claims of neutrality paradoxically assume a value position. Consistent with their assumption of neutrality, these grounded theorists treat their depictions of research participants as unproblematic. They assume the role of authoritative analysts who bring an objective view to their research. In her critique of the first edition of this book, Martin (2006) writes: 'The daily worlds of nursing, management, information systems, and other fields, I would argue, very much privilege an "objective" reality where phenomena are defined and measured' (p. 20). She states that the fast-moving worlds of professional practice rely on this conception to manage problems.

Glaser (see, for example, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2009) articulates central aspects of an objectivist position, despite his disdain for quests for accurate data and insistence that grounded theory is not a verification method. I agree with Glaser on the issue of verification. Checking hunches and confirming emergent ideas, in my view, does not equal verification, particularly if one defines verification as entailing systematic quantitative procedures that presuppose establishing firm definitions of the phenomena before studying them.

Objectivist grounded theorists aim to conceptualize the data without taking an interpretive stance. Their emphasis is on variable concepts. In several places Glaser implies that interpretive renderings remain at descriptive levels but theoretical conceptualizations do not. He writes: 'All knowledge is not perspectival. Description is perspectival; concepts that fit and work are variable' (2001, p. 48). Hence, his view suggests that description arises from value standpoints but because concepts are variables, they transcend perspectives. Constructivists disagree.

Glaser (2002) treats data as something separate from the researcher and implies that data are untouched by the competent researcher's interpretations. If,

perchance, researchers somehow interpret their data, Glaser argues that then these data are 'rendered objective' by looking at many cases. This point seems inconsistent with his vigorous defence of small samples and early use of theoretical sampling when discussing saturation. Granted, the number of 'cases' may not always equal the sample size, but in many grounded theory studies they come close and are miniscule.

Studying many cases is crucial, in part because researchers may become aware of their preconceptions about their topics. Yet such study may not challenge their fundamental assumptions about the world, ways of knowing it, or actions in it. Here, researchers' entrenched assumptions grind the lens for viewing the world and filter their resulting images of it. *What* we define as data and *how* we look at them matters because these acts shape what we *can* see and learn. Without engaging in reflexivity, researchers may elevate their own tacit assumptions and interpretations to 'objective' status. Our assumptions, interactions – and interpretations – affect the social processes constituting *each* stage of inquiry.

Looking at many cases benefits theorists, including those whose unexamined assumptions predetermine what they see, because they can strengthen their grasp of the complexities of empirical worlds and discern variation in their categories. Surely we learn as we proceed, particularly when we strive to find out what our research participants say and do and what their worlds are like.

An overall goal of the objectivist approach is to develop theoretical generalizations abstract from particularities of time, place, and situation. Nonetheless theorizing – grounded or otherwise – occurs under particular historical, social, and situational conditions. In a rare first-hand example of using each major form of grounded theory – objectivist, post-positivist, and constructionist – Jacqueline Fendt and Wladimir Sachs (2008) raise major criticisms of objectivist versions through examining Fendt's experience of completing a grounded theory dissertation and Sachs's view of becoming her dissertation advisor after she had completed much of her work. In addition, they address the researcher's situation of conducting a grounded theory study while navigating European forms of conducting dissertation research in management. Fendt brought a wealth of managerial experience to her study of how European chief executive officers dealt with conflicting demands following corporate mergers (p. 433). She began with Glaserian positivism, next attempted to follow Strauss and Corbin's coding schemes, and finally came across constructivist grounded theory late in the research process. After listing numerous criticisms, Fendt remarks:

I also had a certain philosophical malaise with the terminology of GTM [grounded theory method]. A 'theory' that was 'grounded' in the data would 'emerge' or be 'discovered.' All these terms implied that there was an objective, underpinning truth lying somewhere in this mountain of data. This again contradicted my own constructionist epistemological stance. It also, as I understood it, contradicted the very raison d'être of the authors of GTM, namely, to offer an alternative to the testing of some 'objective grand theory.' This became irritating to me, given that the method also promised to make qualitative inquiry legitimate, to stand and speak up for the validity of phenomenological, interpretative, and hermeneutic research. The results that emerged from my research were clearly constructed by me, however carefully I documented the process and however much I checked the original data and the different abstraction levels with members and respondents. There was no doubt in my mind that the constructed truth was

idiosyncratic and that any other researcher going on the same journey was bound to discover another truth. And, if so, what was wrong with that? Were these formulas and scientific-sounding, objectifying terms simply remnants of a time when qualitative inquiry needed justification in a positivist-dominated environment – or did they stand for an epistemic inconsistency in the method itself? Similarly, I had some doubts as to whether the results emerging from my research qualified as theory. However, I decided that they did, given the wide plurality of definitions of theory in qualitative research that include explanation, argument, reflection, orienting principles, crafted knowledge, epistemological presuppositions, and more (e.g., Cicourel, 1979; Martindale, 1979; Thomas & James, 2006). Wlad and I had more serious doubts about the GTM claim that such theory would be built on by others, that it represented a building block to some grand unified theory of management. (pp. 440–441)

Fendt and Sachs (2008) identify and argue against 'methodological ethnocentrism' (p. 447) in grounded theory that leads to rigid methodological procedures and an unquestioned epistemology. Fendt asks whether the objectifying terms in grounded theory represented remnants from past justifications or an epistemic inconsistency in the method. The answer speaks to a divide between Strauss and Glaser. For Strauss, much of the *Discovery* book represented a justification for conducting inductive qualitative research. For Glaser, the book articulated a method that he was working out. Fendt and Sachs's argument focuses on methods but also suggests that theorizing may take fluid, idiosyncratic directions. And that, after all, can carve a path to theory construction.

## Constructivist Grounded Theory

Like other interpretive responses to positivism, constructivist grounded theory arose as an alternative to objectivist forms. Consistent with my stance in earlier chapters, a constructivist approach places priority on the studied phenomenon and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data (see Bryant, 2002, 2003; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b; Charmaz, 1990, 1995b, 2000a, 2001; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996).

Constructivists study *how* – and sometimes *why* – participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations. We locate our studies in the conditions of research as we develop abstract analyses. A constructivist approach means more than looking at how individuals view their situations. It not only theorizes the interpretive work that research participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000a, 2002a, 2008a, 2009b).

The theory *depends* on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it. Adele Clarke (2005, 2006, 2007, 2012) fully develops this point. She views the research reality as a situation that includes who and what is in that situation and what affects it from the broader environment in which it dwells. Granted, different researchers may come up with similar ideas, although how they render them theoretically may differ.

Grounded theorists may borrow an insight from Silverman's (2004) observation of conversational analysis. He contends that only after establishing how people construct meanings and

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actions can the analyst pursue why they act as they do. Certainly a fine-grained inductive analysis of how people construct actions and meanings can lead grounded theorists to theorize answers to 'why' questions, although the 'why' might emerge with the 'how'.

The logical extension of the constructivist approach means learning how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden structures, networks, situations, and relationships (e.g. Clarke, 2005). Subsequently, differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions. A constructivist approach means being alert to conditions under which such differences and distinctions arise and are maintained. Having enough material to anchor the experience takes rich and ample data and entails having sufficient knowledge so one can see and articulate differences and distinctions. Extremely small grounded theory studies risk being disconnected from their social contexts and situations. Thus, researchers diminish the potential power of their analyses when they treat experience as separate, fragmented, and atomistic.

Constructivist grounded theorists take a reflexive stance toward the research process and products. We consider *how* our theories evolve, which involves reflecting on my earlier point that both researchers and research participants interpret meanings and actions. Constructivist grounded theorists assume that both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect the conditions of their production (see also Bryant, 2002, 2003; Charmaz, 2000a, 2008a; Clarke, 2005, 2007, 2012; Hall & Callery, 2001; Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, & Sandelowski, 2004). In this view, we construct research processes and products, but these constructions occur under pre-existing structural conditions, arise in emergent situations, and are influenced by the researcher's perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations. Similarly, standpoints and starting points matter, and likely shift during inquiry. All these conditions inhere in the research situation but in many studies remain unrecognized, unmentioned, or ignored. Which observations we make, how we make our observations, and the views that we form of them reflect these conditions as do our subsequent grounded theories. Conducting and writing research are not neutral acts.

> We construct research processes and products, but these constructions occur under pre-existing structural conditions, arise in emergent situations, and are influenced by the researcher's perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations.

The constructivist view of facts and values as linked leads to acknowledging that what we see – and do not see – depends on values. Hence, we constructivists attempt to become aware of our presuppositions and to grapple with how they affect the research. We aim to avoid inadvertently importing taken-for-granted values and beliefs into our work. Thus, constructivism fosters researchers' reflexivity about their *own* interpretations and the implications of them as well as those of their research participants.

Realities are multiple in the constructivist view and a multiplicity of perspectives results. Viewers remain embedded in their worlds rather than separate from them. The viewer may see a world from multiple standpoints and hold views that conflict with research participants' standpoints and realities and, of course, participants' actions may reveal sharp differences among them.

Constructivists emphasize entering participants' liminal world of meaning and action. What we see, when, how, and to what extent we see it are not straightforward. Much remains tacit; much remains silent. We exist in a world that is acted upon and interpreted – by our research participants and by us – as well as being affected by other people and circumstances. We also try to locate participants' meanings and actions in larger social structures and discourses of which they may be unaware. Their meanings may reflect ideologies; their actions may reproduce current ideologies, social conventions, discourses, and power relationships. Of course, if we are not reflexive, our research analyses may also reproduce current ideologies, conventions, discourses, and power relationships. We look for the assumptions on which participants construct their meanings and actions. Assumptions of individual responsibility for health, for example, often lie beneath how people account for becoming ill. This assumption can lead to blame and to further beliefs that individuals can – and should – ameliorate their own problems. Hence, social causes of illness and collective solutions for handling them remain invisible. By locating our participants' meanings and actions in this way, we show the connections between micro and macro levels of analysis and thus link the subjective and the social.

Increasing our awareness of the relativity in the empirical world and in our analyses fosters taking a reflexive stance while we are engaged in research and writing. Does reflexivity mean that researchers must publicly disclose intimate details of their lives? No. But it means we need to take these details into account. Emily Martin (2007), who describes her own bipolar condition, had wondered if she should forewarn her audiences of the harm that rash disclosures can do. She concludes that the best alternative to secrecy and fear is a local guardianship by those who witness the disclosure (p. xviii), which means protecting the discloser and keeping the disclosure within the confines of the group who heard it. However well intentioned, such commitments are easily ruptured. Public disclosures have a way of spreading. Esteemed professors in prestigious secure positions can disclose a risky personal connection to their research with fewer negative consequences than other scholars.

The constructivist approach fosters renewal and revitalization of grounded theory by integrating methodological developments with the original statement of the method. This approach challenges the assumption of creating general abstract theories and leads us to situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991), while simultaneously moving grounded theory further into interpretive social science.

# Theorizing in Grounded Theory
## Critique and Renewal

Where is the theory in grounded theory? Although more researchers claim to have used grounded theory methods than profess to have constructed substantive or formal theories, most hold some sort of conception of theory. If you peruse articles whose authors claim allegiance to grounded theory, you might identify such varied assumptions that theory means: 1) an empirical generalization, 2) a category or core variable, 3) a predisposition, 4) an explication of a process, 5) a relationship between variables, 6) an explanation, 7) an abstract understanding, and/or 8) a description. In

**241**

recent years, Glaser (2001, 2005) continues to emphasize analysis of a core variable but also describes grounded theory as a 'theory of resolving a main concern' that can be theoretically coded in many ways. An emphasis on variables positions him in positivism, a theory of resolving a main concern fits pragmatism.[3]

Assertions abound about what theory should mean for a grounded theory, and that, of course, complicates assessing the extent to which grounded theorists have produced theories. Some observers look at what researchers have done in the name of grounded theory (see, for example, Becker, 1998; Charmaz, 1995b; Silverman, 2001) and find that most studies are descriptive rather than theoretical. Granted, description entails conceptualization but a theoretical rendering of the data is also analytic and abstract.

Other observers address the logic of grounded theory. Numerous critics (see, for example, Atkinson et al., 2003; Bendassolli, 2013; Bulmer, 1984; Charmaz, 2000a, 2008a, 2009b; Clarke, 2007; Dey, 1999, 2004, 2007; Emerson, 1983, 2004; Kelle, 2005, 2014; Layder, 1998; Locke, 2007; Strübing, 2007; Thomas, 2010; Thomas & James, 2006; Thornberg, 2012) identify and challenge presuppositions and prescriptions in grounded theory concerning preconception, induction, and procedures. Richard Swedberg (2012), for example, implies that grounded theory muddies discovery and justification in theorizing and subsequently can lead to errors in theoretical sampling and result in such errors as those of misplaced attribution. Of course, grounded theorists from different variants have critiqued each other's approaches, as is evident throughout this book (see, for example, Birks & Mills, 2011; Bryant, 2002, 2003; Charmaz, 2000a, 2001, 2005; Clarke, 2005, 2007, 2012; Corbin, 1998; Glaser, 1992, 2002, 2003a; Melia, 1996; Robrecht, 1995; Stern, 1994a; Stern & Porr, 2011; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996).

What criticisms of grounded theory as *theory* have arisen? Keep in mind that some critics base their remarks on the earliest works and may only address the *Discovery* book (see, for example, Burawoy, 1991, 2000; Layder, 1998; Reed, 2010). Critiquing the early works as starting points or as now historical statements of an evolving method makes more sense. Similarly, critics often attack assumptions and approaches that pertain to one version of grounded theory but not all. One notable example that no longer uniformly applies is the criticism that grounded theory produces empirical generalizations abstracted from time and place (Burawoy, 1991, 2000). Moreover, of course, objectivist grounded theorists see this point as a laudable goal, not a weakness. In every version of grounded theory, a major strength resides in theorizing across substantive areas. Still, we should assess *how* and *when* to move our analyses across areas, and ask whether we have gained intimate familiarity with the phenomenon before transporting an analysis.[4]

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3   Focusing on a main concern raises some problems. Whose main concern? Cheating clients, for example, may not pose problems for those financial consultants who assume they will not be caught. Their actions, however, can impose huge problems for their targets. On a much larger scale, white racism is not a problem for those whose words and actions assume racism unless their words and actions are made problematic. Yet studying how those who are stuck with the problem deal with it shifts the focus of the research and reduces scrutiny of the powerful.

4   My point here complements Silverman's (2001) argument cited above.

Several critics see induction as dicey because we cannot know if a recurring observation will continue to occur (Bendassolli, 2013; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, 2007b; Haig, 1995). True, but inductive theorizing opens the possibility of novel understandings, and, increasingly, researchers acknowledge that 1) their observations include how they see and define the observed phenomenon, 2) they move between creating inductive categories and making deductions about them, and 3) explicitly invoke abductive reasoning.

Grounded theory has been criticized for focusing on individuals, and producing astructural analyses (Burawoy, 1991, 2000). Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans (2009) contend that Burawoy's criticism emanates from divergent assumptions about what theory is and its place in qualitative research. They are correct that Burawoy's approach begins theorizing from extant theory defining the parameters of the studied case and, in contrast, grounded theory begins from the narratives (I would say the situations) of the participants. In short Burawoy's approach begins as structural and deductive whereas grounded theory begins as inductive and processual.

Lars Mjøset (2005) argues that grounded theory solves Burawoy's problem of firm connections to the macro context, rather than Burawoy's 'extended case method' solving problems of grounded theory. In addition to using prior theory to inform ethnographic studies, the extended case method aims to locate microanalyses in larger units of analysis, particularly their global and historical contexts. Notions that grounded theory cannot move beyond microanalysis are wrong. Grounded theory can and does move up to or begin with larger units of analysis, as is increasingly evident (see, for example, Clarke, 1998; Clarke & Montini, 1993; Michel, 2007; Rivera, 2008; Santos & Buzinde, 2007; Sheridan, 2008; Star, 1989, 1999).

In his analysis of job loss, Roy Garrett-Peters (2009) began with a micro analysis but placed it in its structural context. He found that displaced workers bolstered damaged feelings of self-efficacy by: '(1) *redefining the meaning of unemployment*, (2) *realizing accomplishment*, (3) *restructuring time*, (4) *forming accountability partnerships*, and (5) *helping others*' (p. 453). Garrett-Peters started by looking at self and identity after suffering job loss but moved on to theorizing how and why meso-level structures and social capital can result in differential vulnerability to economic insecurity.

A contextualized grounded theory can begin with being attuned to sensitizing concepts that address larger units of analysis such as global reach, power, and other sites of difference. This approach can end with inductive analyses that theorize connections between local worlds and larger social structures. Grounded theorizing does not preclude constructing meso and macro analyses.

The issue of decontextualized analyses raises further concerns. Grounded theorists may unwittingly produce decontextualized analyses when they disattend to context or are unaware of or unclear about it. Such analyses mask the significance of constructivist elements in grounded theory. When grounded theorists construct decontextualized analyses through moving across fields, they may ironically force their data into their early generalizations because they lack sufficient contexts with which to ground new data. Similarly, seeking decontextualized generalities also can reduce opportunities to create theoretical complexity because decontextualizing fosters oversimplification and can abbreviate the comparative process. Premature analyses are a problem in grounded theory studies.

**Critics of grounded theory commonly miss five crucial points about the method: 1) theorizing is an on-going activity; 2) grounded theory methods provide constructive ways to proceed with this activity; 3) the method involves abduction as well as induction; 4) the research problem and the researcher's unfolding interests can shape the content of theorizing, rather than the method presupposing the content; and 5) the products of theorizing reflect how researchers acted on these points.**

At what point are decontextualized generalizations granted theoretical status? Who grants them theoretical status – or does not? For what purposes? The stress on theorizing leads to consideration of who does the theorizing and with what sort of claims of authority or of conferred authorization.

Critics of grounded theory commonly miss five crucial points about the method: 1) theorizing is an on-going activity; 2) grounded theory methods provide constructive ways to proceed with this activity; 3) the method involves abduction as well as induction; 4) the research problem and the researcher's unfolding interests can shape the *content* of theorizing, rather than the method presupposing the content; and 5) the products of theorizing reflect how researchers acted on these points. Critics' reifications about the nature of grounded theory also spawn further reifications about its presumed limits and thus influence other interpreters, practitioners, and students of the method. Such mistaken notions about what grounded theory can address also spawn reifications about boundaries circumscribing the content of grounded theory studies, such as the belief that grounded theorists cannot use their methods to theorize power. Limited ideas about the form of inquiry that grounded theory takes also produce other kinds of reifications. Treating grounded theory as only a variable analysis, for example, can lead to reductionist frames and encourage favoring those 'variables' within ready grasp. Hence, the resulting study may skirt the borders of a category without explicating it.

Theory generation continues to be the unfilled promise and potential of grounded theory. What Dan Miller (2000, p. 400) stated over a decade ago still holds: 'Although grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is often invoked as a methodological strategy, ironically too little grounded theory is actually done.'

## Developing Theoretical Sensitivity through Theorizing

Like other grounded theory texts (see Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1998; Goulding, 2002; Locke, 2001; Oktay, 2012; Stern & Porr, 2011), this volume clarifies the logic and sequence of grounded theory methods. Early grounded theorists predicated constructing theory on developing 'theoretical sensitivity' (Glaser, 1978), but how might grounded theorists acquire it? Which clues can we discover through studying grounded theorists' actions? What do acts of theorizing entail?

Theorizing means stopping, pondering, and thinking afresh. We stop the flow of studied experience and take it apart. To gain theoretical sensitivity, we look at studied life from multiple vantage points, make comparisons, follow leads, and build on ideas. Because you chart your direction through acts of theorizing, you may not be able to foresee endpoints or stops along the way.

The acts involved in theorizing foster *seeing* possibilities, *establishing* connections, and *asking* questions. Grounded theory methods give you theoretical openings that avoid importing and imposing packaged images and automatic answers from extant

theories. How you practice theorizing and how you construct the content of theorizing vary depending on what you find in the field. When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience. The content of theorizing cuts to the core of studied life and poses new questions about it.

> When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience. The content of theorizing cuts to the core of studied life and poses new questions about it.

Although tools may help, constructing theory is not a mechanical process. Theoretical playfulness enters in. Whimsy and wonder can lead you to see the novel in the mundane. Openness to the unexpected expands your view of studied life and subsequently of theoretical possibilities. Your hard work reins in those ideas that best fit the data and brings them to fruition.

Throughout this book, I have stressed using gerunds in coding and memo-writing to the extent that they fit your data. Adopting gerunds fosters theoretical sensitivity because these words nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes. Gerunds prompt thinking about actions – large and small. If you can focus your coding on analyzing *actions*, you have ready grist for seeing sequences and making connections. If your gerunds quickly give way to coding for topics, you may synthesize and summarize data but the connections between them will remain more implicit. Thus, I strongly suggest renewed emphasis on actions and processes, rather than on viewing individuals as discrete units of analysis, as a key strategy in constructing theory and moving beyond categorizing types of individuals.

Taking a closer look at other grounded theorists' processual analyses may aid your efforts to construct theory.[5] Studying a process fosters your efforts to construct theory because you define and conceptualize relationships between experiences and events. Then you can define the major phases and concentrate on the relationships between them. Major events and often the pacing may be clear when you study an identifiable process, such as becoming a member of a profession. The patterns of other processes, such as being selected for layoff from work or developing innovative software may not be so clear – to research participants and the researchers who study them. If so, you may have to do considerable observational and analytic work to define phases and categories that make empirical and theoretical sense.

In their substantive grounded theory of bereavement, Hogan, Morse, and Tasón (1996) outline processes of surviving a death of a close family member. They present their theory as somewhat sequential major processes that may overlap or re-emerge:

1  Getting the news
2  Finding out
3  Facing realities
4  Becoming engulfed with suffering
5  Emerging from the suffering
6  Getting on with life
7  Experiencing personal growth.

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5  Many grounded theory studies offer insightful observations of subjective experience and/or organizational processes (see, for example, Hogan, Morse, & Tasón, 1996; Jacob & Cerny, 2005; Jacobson, 2009; Kolb, 2011; Lempert, 1996; Leisenring, 2006; Melia, 1987; Schrock & Padavic, 2007; Thulesius, Håkansson, & Petersson, 2003; Tweed & Salter, 2000).

These authors qualify the process according to whether the deceased person had experienced an illness or sudden death. Survivors of a person who suffered a sudden death entered bereavement at the second major phase, finding out, while those whose loved one died of an illness experienced the shock of the terminal diagnosis and a caregiving process. Hogan et al. connect descriptions of grief to specific phases in the process, and to sub-processes that constitute a particular phase. Thus they treat 'enduring hopelessness,' 'existing in the present,' and 'reliving the past' as part of the 'missing, longing, and yearning' that characterizes how bereaved people experience being engulfed in suffering.

If grounded theorists possess methods to construct theory, why do many studies remain descriptive? Coding for themes rather than analyzing actions contributes to remaining descriptive. We have the tools for explicating actions that constitute a process, as Clarke demonstrates in *Disciplining Reproduction* (1998). She persists in analyzing these actions in her treatment of each phase of the two-edged process of scientists establishing their field as a legitimate discipline and exerting controls over women's bodies. Such works maintain *analytic momentum* and establish a theoretical direction. Thus these studies extend their theoretical reach further than those that identify a process, outline its phases, and then only describe them. One hazard of grounded theory approaches is constructing a list of connected but under-analyzed processes.

To maintain analytic momentum, try to remain open to theoretical possibilities. Recall that Glaser (1978, 1998) advises you to begin the analytic process by asking, 'What is this data a study of?' (1978, p. 57). If we ask the question at *each* stage of the analytic process and seek the most fundamental answer that fits, we might discover that particular meanings and actions in our studied world suggest theoretical links to compelling ideas that had not occurred to us. As we pursue theoretical possibilities, we may make connections between our theoretical categories and ideas concerning the core of human experience. If so, our study may be about fundamental views and values such as those concerning human nature, selfhood, autonomy and attachment, moral life and responsibility, legitimacy and control, and certainty and truth. For example, my study of struggling for self in the identity hierarchy linked selfhood, autonomy, legitimacy, and control.

Any field contains fundamental concerns and contested ideas, whether or not they have been theorized. As we code data and write memos, we can think about which concerns, if any, our materials suggest and how our completed theories address them. In my field of sociology, such concerns include:

| | |
|---|---|
| Embodiment and consciousness | Positions and networks |
| Individual and collective action | Power and prestige |
| Cooperation and conflict | Structure and process |
| Choice and constraint | Opportunities and inequalities |
| Meanings and actions | Rights and resources |
| Standpoints and differences | Moral life, moral action, and moral |
| Ritual and ceremony | responsibility |

Discerning connections to such concerns opens possibilities for theorizing. What deflects them? Analytic starting points matter. Looking for a single basic process or overriding problem that participants attempt to resolve can pose problems when you

identify numerous processes or problems occurring in a setting. While I had no difficulty defining loss of self (Charmaz, 1983b) as more basic than 'managing illness' or 'disclosing illness' in my early studies of experiencing chronic illness, I could not define a single basic process that unified everything I was learning. For several years I wrestled with this problem. I finally realized that collapsing multiple different processes into one would be over-simplifying. People experienced many different processes ranging from learning to live with chronic illness to experiencing time in new ways to recreating or re-establishing a self they could accept. Ultimately I wrote about all of these processes and thereby revealed the complex variations of experiencing major illness.

Once the analytic work begins, all the potential problems mentioned above may arise. Thus, some grounded theories suffer from what John Lofland (1970) calls 'analytic interruptus' in qualitative research. The analytic work begins but comes to an abrupt ending. A disjuncture arises between the analytic level in these grounded theory studies and the broader goal of theorizing. Cathy Urquhart (2003) attributes this disjuncture in her field of information systems to subjective elements in coding. She states: 'Experience with using GTM shows that it is essentially a "bottom up" coding method. Therefore, it is not unusual for researchers to find that GTM gives them a low level theory which they find difficult to "scale up" appropriately' (p. 47).

Urquhart's astute assessment applies to many grounded theory researchers who code at a descriptive level, cease comparative analysis after coding, and construct elementary categories. In contrast to Urquhart, however, I argue that the bottom-up approach gives grounded theory its strength, *when the researcher asks analytic questions of the data*. The researcher's subjectivity provides a *way* of viewing, engaging, and interrogating data.

> **The bottom-up approach of grounded theory gives the method its strength, *when the researcher asks analytic questions of the data*. The researcher's subjectivity provides a way of viewing, engaging, and interrogating data.**

Instead of arresting analysis at the coding stage, researchers can raise their main categories to concepts.

Categories are major and minor. Which categories does a researcher raise to theoretical concepts? Consistent with grounded theory logic, you raise the categories that render the data most effectively. Cathy Urquhart, Hans Lehmann, and Michael D. Myers (2010) recommend scaling higher-level categories up into broader themes (p. 369). To the extent possible, I recommend comparing and then constructing a more abstract but telling category that subsumes these higher-level categories. Subsequently you can explicate its properties and connections to the categories and data it subsumes. If conducted with precision such scaling up contributes to the scope of the theory.

Clarke (personal communication, February 28, 2005) views these high-level categories as having 'carrying capacity' because they carry substantial analytic weight. The choice of words is crucial. Clear, evocative words have much more carrying capacity than vague, bland terms. Such strong categories contain crucial properties that make data meaningful and carry the analysis forward. We choose to raise certain categories to concepts because of their theoretical reach, theoretical centrality, incisiveness, generic power, and relation to other categories. Raising categories to concepts includes subjecting them to further analytic refinement and involves showing their relationships to other concepts. For objectivists, these concepts serve as core variables and hold explanatory and predictive power. For constructivists, theoretical

concepts serve as interpretive frames and offer an abstract understanding of relation-ships. Theoretical concepts subsume lesser categories with ease and by comparison hold more significance, account for more data, and often make crucial processes more evident. We make a series of decisions about these categories after having com-pared them with other categories and the data. Our actions shape the analytic pro-cess. Rather than discovering order *within* the data, we create an explication, organization, and presentation *of* the data (Charmaz, 1990).

## Scrutinizing Grounded Theories

While keeping meanings of theory and theorizing practices in mind, we can take a fresh look at theory construction in several grounded theories. Each theory bears the imprint of its author's interests and ideas and reflects its historical context as well as the historical development of ideas – and of grounded theory – in its par-ent discipline. The following three studies represent three different kinds of grounded theorizing. In her article, 'Distancing to Self-Protect: The Perpetuation of Inequality in Higher Education through Socio-relational Dis/engagement,' edu-cational researcher Elaine Keane (2011b) constructs a complex substantive theory that offers multiple implications for policy and practice as well as developing a useful category that can move across substantive areas. Sociologist Michelle Wolkomir develops a theoretical concept, ideological maneuvering, in her article, 'Wrestling with the Angels of Meaning: The Revisionist Ideological Work of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men' (2001). Her concept extends understandings of ide-ologies and how they work. In the third study, Susan Leigh Star focuses on how a contentious coalition of interested parties established theoretical dominance about brain functioning and, furthermore, she subsequently addresses the nature of scientific theorizing itself in her (1989) book, *Regions of the Mind: Brain Research and the Quest for Scientific Certainty*. Each of these grounded theories portray their respective authors' disciplinary and professional interests. Although a brief analysis cannot re-create these studies, you may gain a sense of their respective authors' theorizing as well as the logic and significance of the resulting grounded theories.

## Developing a Category for Substantive Theorizing: Elaine Keane

Elaine Keane's reflection in Box 9.1 charts her analytic path to a major category in her three-year study of low-income, working-class white students called 'school leaver-aged access' (SLA) students and traditional entry (TE) undergraduates in an Irish university (Keane, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Both types of students strategized to make the most of their university experience, so strategizing became her main core category. But how did they do it? Keane focuses on their strategies, which also say something about differential meanings of getting an education and being at the university.

## BOX 9.1

### Elaine Keane's Reflection on Distancing/Distancing to Self-Protect

My research focused on academic and socio-cultural experiences of two groups of undergraduate students at an Irish university, 'school leaver-aged access' students from low income backgrounds who completed a pre-entry preparation course and traditional entry students who came from more affluent families. My participants' main concern was maximizing, or 'making the most' of their higher education experience. They achieved maximizing through *strategizing,* my core category. This reflection describes how I developed the concept of 'distancing', a sub-category of strategizing.

My data consisted of two rounds of semi-structured interviews and several email updates. All data were transcribed verbatim. Analysis consisted of informal analysis and memoing during the interviewing and transcription stage, immersion, manual open and focused coding of Round One Interviews, memoing and design of the theoretical sampling and participatory stage (Round Two Interviews), coding of both rounds of interviews within NVIVO [a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program], further memoing, diagramming, and conceptual memoing.

### Initial Analysis: Coding and Provisional Categories

During and following the manual coding stage, I developed memos from significant and frequent codes. Through subsequent memoing, and free-writing I constructed a provisional category based on these codes, 'seeing a [social] class thing', that encompassed 'making friends', students being/staying in their groups, 'getting "dressed up"', 'seeing college as a social thing (or not)', and 'disclosing access.' I saw evidence of class-differentiated behaviour: the participants revealed a lack of integration between student groups and evinced some defensiveness about it.

### The Theoretical Sampling and Participatory Stage

To fill the gaps within and between provisional categories, I engaged in theoretical sampling. I also wished to discuss my emerging analysis and interpretation with the participants and to involve them in the analysis, as is consistent with constructivist grounded theory. During Round Two Interviews, I summarized the main findings from the initial analysis and asked all participants for their reactions to the summary and several emerging interpretations. I raised further questions and sought clarifications to close 'gaps' in the emerging analysis. Next, I coded all data from both rounds of interviews within NVIVO, through which I confirmed, clarified, and strengthened the significance of the elements, i.e. properties, of my provisional category of 'seeing a class thing'. These elements included: (1) 'disclosing access', (2) 'making friends, mixing with others (or not)', (3) 'seeing social class differences', and (4) 'seeing groups/cliques and "dressing up"'/'Plastics'. However, I found that naming the category 'seeing a class thing' to be inappropriate, so I lacked an overarching concept that integrated what was going on with these elements.

### Descriptive and Conceptual Memoing, and Diagramming

Throughout this process, I raised descriptive (summaries of all relevant data, with key properties and dimensions identified, similarities and differences) and conceptual memos

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

**(in which key points from the descriptive memos were raised through free-writing and diagramming to a more abstract, conceptual, level). In the conceptual memos, I developed possibilities, questions, and 'hypotheses' about potential relationships between properties of a category, and between categories. Questions typically asked of the data within memos included: 'What factor(s) may have led to this happening?' and 'what seems to have happened as a result of this?' Such questions initially focused on possible cause and effect type conceptualisations (including some of Glaser's (1978) '6 Cs' – causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, co-variances, and conditions). To consider such questions, I again revisited the raw data…. I also used diagramming to consider possible conceptual relationships germane to the emerging theory. It proved to be an excellent aid in thinking and writing more conceptually. Memoing and diagramming essentially bridged the gap between coding and conceptual development.**

    **Through free-writing in the conceptual memos about the four elements above, 'distancing' emerged as a way to describe and conceptualise my participants' statements. I noted access students distancing themselves from the access course, the physical and symbolic distancing of groups of students (through grouping/'clique-ing' and 'dressing up'), distancing through compartmentalizing university and non-university lives, and even distancing from the concept of social class itself through denying its existence.**

Keane (2011b) explains that one strategy consisted of self-protective distancing and shows how both privileged and disadvantaged students enacted it. Her other strategies include 'differential prioritising,' 'negotiating the transition,' 'figuring out and enacting academic practice,' and 'memorising.'[6] Keane defines distancing as:

A deliberate movement away from something that is perceived as different to oneself, or from something from which one seeks to differentiate oneself. It also involves positioning oneself as either lower or higher than an other/others, based on perceived relative social positioning. (p. 453)

Keane's analysis of distancing uncovers the significance of perceived social position for students to hide or flaunt their social class origins. A study that only addressed low-income students would likely have missed the self-protective distancing strategies of affluent students. Keane (2011b) argues that distancing behaviors reduce the ability of working-class students to build needed social capital and thus limit the effectiveness of policies aimed to widen their participation and increase their access to equal opportunities. (p. 441)

    Pivotal theoretical insights may arise at any stage of the research process. Note that in her reflection, Keane states that her original overriding category, 'seeing a class thing,' was not appropriate for the elements (or properties) she had defined. Through continuing to write conceptual memos and doing freewriting as she proceeded,

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6  Should Keane publish her analysis in book form, each strategy could serve also as a chapter. Keane's reflection relates the chronicle of an engaged researcher who interacts with her data and analysis in multiple ways.
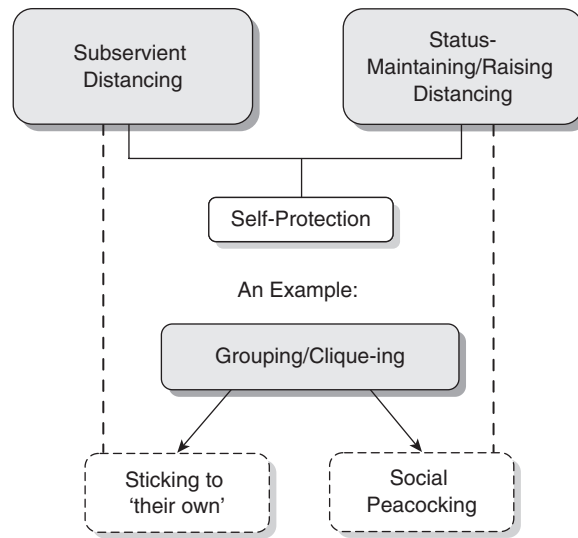
**Figure 9.2**    The Logic of Distancing to Self-Protect — Elaine Keane

Reprinted from Elaine Keane, 2009. *'Widening participation' and 'traditional entry' students at an Irish university: Strate-gising to 'make the most' of higher education*. PhD Dissertation, School of Education, National University of Ireland, Galway. Permission granted by Elaine Keane.

Keane first defined distancing as a major strategy that students used to handle their university experience. She states:

> I came to see that the various distancing behaviours (which themselves were continually expli-cated through memoing and diagramming) could be grouped into two types, based on per-ceived social positioning, which I named 'subservient distancing' and 'status-maintaining/ raising distancing'. Further analysis led me to identify that the underlying motivation for the various types of distancing behaviours was that of self-protection, and this was activated when some sort of threat was perceived within a particular context. An example of both can be seen through the concept of 'clique-ing', through which certain students from similar social class backgrounds grouped together in particular ways. An example of subservient distancing was that of the access students 'sticking to their own', while the 'social peacocking' behaviours of the 'wealthy' 'snobby' students constituted an example of status-maintaining/raising distanc-ing. (Personal communication, April 16, 2012)

Through conceptualizing what distancing involved and how students enacted it, Keane accounts for her data and brings theoretical direction and centrality to her emerging analysis. She (2011b) weaves together a dense analysis that preserves her participants' actions and simultaneously presents their motivations for these actions. Thus her analysis details what participants did and how they did it, and goes a fur-ther step to theorize for why they acted in these ways. Keane shows how students' hierarchical positioning of self affected the form of distancing that their actions revealed. Both types of students seek similar others who share the same class back-ground and thus form cliques. Keane (2011b) provides data that nicely illustrate her categories. She writes:

**251**

Feeling subserviently positioned was a common experience for most of the SLAs. Gemma (3SLA) claimed it was a 'different class of person that went to university' and said she 'felt a bit below them' and 'intimidated'. There was a consciousness that their family backgrounds were different, as Jamie explained:

> … a huge proportion of the college are from a different background to myself …. You feel uncomfortable … out of your depth. You're in with people that … are a lot more comfortable in their surroundings. (Jamie, 2SLA)

> … Further evidence that they [SLAs] felt 'below' other students is seen in the way in which the SLAs initially distanced themselves from the access programme. They worried that they would be seen as 'a charity case' (Duncan, 2SLA) or 'not capable of being there' (Brenda, 3SLA) if they disclosed their entry route. The few who did so encountered negative reactions:

> … there's a lot of, em, resentment … towards Access students … a lot of the girls can be very bitchy towards it … (p. 455)

An array of emotions lurk underneath the concept of distancing. The SLA students fear revealing their entry status and hide it to avoid embarrassment and shame. The privileged students exude pride in their identities and show confidence in their ease and ability in navigating the university scene. Keane contends that, at least from access students' perspective, privileged students may have deliberately exhibited their wealth to display their higher social position. Thus, Keane theorizes that they aimed to demonstrate status-differentiating. Her data support this contention:

> Deirdre (3SLA) felt that those '… who have all the lovely clothes and the labels and who are definitely from a higher class … *like to let people know that*'. Eileen (3TE) spoke of 'your very obvious upper class people' wearing 'all designer clothes … *as badges*'. (p. 459)

Keane's reflection documents the exacting course of her research path. Her sustained involvement and interaction with her data and developing analysis are evident. Note that when her preliminary category, 'seeing a class thing,' did not hold up as the major category, she kept writing conceptual memos and diagramming – and she engaged in freewriting for her conceptual memos, which led to her conceptual breakthrough. Then pieces of the analysis fit together as Keane shows in Figure 9.2.

From her comments, we can discern that Keane's focus on class fits the data. However, by analyzing precisely how students manifested it, she refused to settle for a superficial if accurate analysis. Keane's approach of continuing to analyze the data is consistent with the logic of abduction. When a theoretical interpretation does not hold up or lacks thoroughness and depth, grounded theorists seek other ways of theorizing their data to deepen the analysis. In Keane's case, going deeper into analysis revealed contradictions in the access program. She shows that acting on feelings elicited by participating in the SLA program can undermine the very policies set forth to increase these students' opportunities and promote gaining equality.

The concept of distancing to self-protect can travel. You can find instances of it in varied relationships ranging from intimate partners to corporate entities. Keane's definition and analysis of distancing has generic applicability and thus represents a generic process (Prus, 1987; Schwalbe et al., 2000). Hence, this concept can give other studies theoretical centrality and direction. Keane points out that she collected

her data during the height of the 'Celtic tiger' era in Ireland and that her participants were mostly women in liberal arts fields. Although she tells readers that they must place her analysis in these contexts, she also observes that self-protective distancing merits further study within and beyond other types of educational institutions. As Keane (2011b, p. 462) suggests, this concept can help us understand situations in which individuals and collectivities perceive differential status. Thus, distancing to self-protect may also occur in subtle, unstated forms such as when athletic supply companies quietly cancel advertising contracts with athletes accused of using drugs. As Keane's analysis shows, acting on such feelings can undermine the very policies set forth to increase opportunities and promote gaining equality.

In addition, I believe Keane's analysis allows us to distinguish distancing to self-protect from distancing due to either dismissal or disdain. These two other forms of distancing also occur at multiple levels ranging from interaction between individuals to between governments. Thus, the kind of theorizing in which Keane engages can lead to further research, theoretical sampling, and theorizing. Her analysis can generate further comparative inquiry to illuminate various forms of distancing as well as how distancing to self-protect compares with her other emergent categories. Significantly, Keane demonstrates how grounded theorists can develop a sophisticated analysis from readily identifiable actions in everyday life.

## Extending Extant Theory with a New Concept: Michelle Wolkomir

In her study of fundamentalist Christian men's gay and ex-gay support and Bible study groups, Michelle Wolkomir (2001) conceptualizes how the men engaged in 'ideological maneuvering' (p. 407). This maneuvering allowed them to evade and subvert the Christian ideology that condemned their sexuality and viewed them as 'egregious sinners' (p. 408). She argues that such ideological revision requires sustained effort, particularly when conducted by marginalized groups without power. She begins her article with the following assertion and explanation:

> Ideologies stabilize our cultural terrain. They give meaning and order to identities, to the relationships on which identities depend, and to the larger social world. Further, as Fine and Sandstrom (1993: 24, 29) point out, the shared beliefs and attitudes that constitute an ideology have both an evaluative component that allows us to interpret people and what they do as good or bad and an affective component that helps us to choose lines of action that 'feel right.' Ideological change can thus be threatening and difficult, entailing periods of cognitive and emotional disruption as people relinquish old ideas and wrestle with new ones. Under what conditions is such change likely to occur, and how is it accomplished? (p. 407)

Consistent with a grounded theory emphasis on analyzing social and social psychological processes, Wolkomir's major conceptual category, 'ideological maneuvering', is a process. This concept not only makes sense, it gives her work theoretical centrality and direction. She developed her analysis of ideological maneuvering through starting with the men's concerns and perspectives and studying their views and actions about the tensions they faced. How could they avoid stigma and claim moral Christian identities when their churches condemned homosexuality? By raising questions about

the conditions under which change occurs and how the men accomplish it, Wolkomir brings analytic precision to her analysis. Moreover, her work challenges conceptions of ideologies as reified belief systems that remain impervious to change.

Wolkomir's article reveals the underpinnings of her grounded theory while simultaneously providing an insightful analysis of the overall process and major conceptual category. She shows that the process of ideological maneuvering consists of three sub-processes: '(1) selective dismantling of existing ideology to open new interpretive space; (2) constructing a new affirming ideology; and (3) authenticating new self-meanings' (p. 408). She treats these sub-processes as analytic categories and then demonstrates the actions constituting each one. Note that Wolkomir's categories are active, specific, and rooted in the data. Her categories depict how the men dealt with the Christian ideology that condemned and excluded them. Wolkomir found that for one support group, dismantling the existing ideology explicitly included 'redefining sin' (p. 413). These men discovered new Scriptural reasons to believe that the significance of homosexual sin had been exaggerated and 'concluded that their homosexual sin was no worse than selfishness or gossip' (p. 414).

In her analysis, Wolkomir first demonstrates how these men challenged and shifted reigning ideas and hierarchical relationships and then she specifies the conditions under which changes occur. Wolkomir's analysis does not end with successful ideological maneuvering. Instead she positions her analysis in relation to the larger implications of her study. She observes that inequalities limit such ideological revision and, in turn, ideological maneuvering paradoxically reproduces inequality because it allows the larger oppressive ideology to remain intact. Wolkomir (2006) finds that her gay and ex-gay research participants' ideological maneuvering enabled them to resolve their Christian beliefs with their homosexuality but at the cost of leaving the structures that oppressed them unchanged. She writes:

> If marginalized groups retain their beliefs in the legitimacy of dominant ideas, then they are apt to use these ideas as building blocks in their attempts to revise oppressive ideologies. Doing so might remodel outer appearance, but the fundamental dominant structure remains intact. Using the master's tools to facilitate social change is thus likely to result in the building not of a new house but of more comfortable servants' quarters, albeit with perhaps better amenities than previous structures. (p. 197)

In short, Wolkomir's grounded theory analysis advances our understanding of how ideological change can occur through micro processes while simultaneously specifying how macro structures limits its progress.

Wolkomir's processual analysis demonstrates grounded theory in practice. Her approach reveals how people confer meaning on their situation and enact ideological stances. Yet Wolkomir's analysis does more. It moves from substantive theorizing toward formaI theory because of its generality and contribution to an abstract concept. Wolkomir's analysis contains strong links between detailed ethnographic description, substantive processual categories, and development of an emergent theoretical concept: ideological maneuvering. Subsequently, she situates her concept and frames her article in the larger theoretical discourse on ideology. By doing so, Wolkomir offers a dynamic analysis of relationships between agency and structure, as her conclusion states:

The ideological work that begins, to paraphrase Goffman, in the cracks, in the mortar of meaning, between the bricks of society, can thus drive social change on a large scale.

Working between the bricks, the members…created what they came to see as a higher form of Christianity. In doing so, they generated new ideas, created corresponding images, and developed new rhetorics. The making of these symbolic resources allowed the creation of more cultural space for self-definition, that is, multiple ways to signify a creditable Christian self. In this sense, the struggle between elites and subordinates for control of cultural meanings is one of the processes that alters our cultural terrain, creating niches for selves that might otherwise never exist. (2001, p. 423)

Perhaps like her participants working between the cracks in the mortar of meaning, Wolkomir constructs theoretical meaning as she works between the 'what' and 'how' questions surrounding the men's situations. Her analysis excavates the contingent relations between the 'what' and 'how' questions in these men's lives and answers 'why' questions that account for their actions. Yet answers to such questions emerge within larger contexts. The ideological manuevering in this study occurred just before shifts in public response to the quest for gay rights in the US and elsewhere. Wolkomir's analysis affirms the significance of locating specific grounded theories in the social and historical conditions of their emergence.

Wolkomir's nuanced theoretical account contributes to knowledge in a substantive area, theoretical ideas in her discipline, and useful understandings for social justice scholars and activists as well as of organizational power dynamics. She provides a theoretical concept that can be transported and tested in other empirical studies as well as entering theoretical discourse about ideologies. Her concept of ideological maneuvering not only extends our understanding of how ideologies are enacted but also expands our awareness of the conditions under which they shift or are reproduced.

## Challenging Extant Theory: Susan Leigh Star

Susan Leigh Star's (1989) book, *Regions of the Mind: Brain Research and the Quest for Scientific Certainty*, offers an analysis that moves from answering 'what' and 'how' questions to addressing 'why' questions. In this sense, Star's book exemplifies a grounded theory study that not only invokes theorizing, but also creates a transparent process of moving from a compelling analysis to theorizing. She studied how a small faction of nineteenth-century brain researchers, 'localizationists,' established theoretical dominance in the contested field of brain function despite invoking questionable evidence to support their theory. Localizationists maintained that the brain was divided into areas that controlled specific functions, such as the speech function. In sharp contrast, diffusionists contended that the brain functioned holistically. By examining such documents as patient records, laboratory reports and notebooks, letters, journal submissions and reviews, as well as other archival documents and books from 1870–1906, Star reconstructs what happened, how it happened, and ultimately answers 'why' questions. In short, she constructs a theoretical explanation not only of how scientific theorizing occurs but also why we need to rethink the nature of scientific theorizing.

**255**

Star pieces together how the localizationists constructed certainty about their theory. Consistent with the grounded theory emphasis on studying processes, Star defines a process, 'creating and maintaining certainty' (p. 87), and identifies sub-processes constructed through individual and collective actions that constitute the major process. Localizationists transformed the uncertainty that they witnessed in their laboratories and clinics to what Star calls 'global certainty at the institutional level' (p. 87). She addresses 'what' and 'how' questions here: what happened and how it happened. Through examining the mechanisms of transformation, Star scrutinizes what localizationists did – a process – and how they did it – actions. Thus, she analyzes how localizationists' ordinary actions accomplished this institutional transformation and, simultaneously, rendered local contradictions invisible.

The grounded theory emphasis on studying data undergirds Star's research. From her examination of data, Star defines a set of actions that, taken together, accomplished the domination of localization theory of the brain. To create and maintain certainty, localizationists engaged in such actions as: 1) borrowing evidence from other fields, 2) evaluating their operational procedures rather than actual technical failures, 3) substituting ideal clinical pictures for anomalous findings, 4) generalizing from limited case results, and 5) reducing epistemological questions to debates about technique (pp. 87–93). Star's depiction of how localizationists substituted ideal types for irregular cases reveals key dimensions of her reconstruction of their emergent constructions of views and actions. She points out that medical researchers and clinicians demanded accurate textbooks and atlases of typical neurological conditions. Star writes:

> In the process of resolving taxonomic uncertainty, researchers thus created *typical* pictures of diseases that were eagerly adopted by the medical community. These representations include functional anatomical maps – such as maps that could indicate the anatomical point in the brain that was the source of loss of speech. These maps became substitutes, in the building of localization theory, for case data stated that contained irregular or anomalous findings. The demand for functional anatomical representations in medical education, diagnosis, and texts represented a market intolerant of ambiguity and of individual differences. The theory became unambiguously packaged into the atlas. The ideal types represented in such maps were presented as context-independent (that is, as *the* brain, not *a* brain). (pp. 89–90)

In the excerpt above, the relationship between interaction and action with the subsequent result is clear. The demand came first, followed by a neurology textbook with functional atlases that erased anomalies, ambiguities, and differences. The subsequent widespread adoption of the textbook made the localizationists' views the standard in the field – the gold standard. The localizationists' idealized type had become more than a source of comparison; it became the only serious measure. Thus, Star implies that these early neurologists had accomplished significant boundary work that prevented other theories of brain function from being entertained.

Star's attention to the sequencing of action reveals the interconnections between knotty work problems and localizationists' attempts to resolve them. Establishing an ideal typical clinical picture through the textbook atlas is just one kind of action the localizationists undertook. Star similarly traces how localizationists routinely constructed each kind of the above actions in which they engaged. These actions arose

in the exigencies of problem-solving at work. Localizationists' other actions reflected how they acted on their professional ideologies by explicitly constructing strategies to defeat brain diffusionists' opposing theory of brain function.

Note how Star moves from action to outcome in the excerpt. Earlier in the book, she provided the historical, professional, and work contexts in which the reader can situate the actions she describes in this section. Hence she can move directly to delineating the conditions under which actions arose and theorize their meanings and consequences. Clinicians urgently needed to make definitive diagnoses. Brain researchers needed to categorize diseases accurately. Both groups sought certainty. The lack of tolerance of ambiguity made localization theory appealing. Later, Star tells us that localizationists' financial sponsors also pressed for generality and standardization. When the sponsors' referees discovered irregular findings in localizationists' experimental reports, they requested that the localizationists standardize their existing results rather than redo the experiments. Here, significant external bodies buttressed the construction of particular 'facts.' Subsequently, their imprimatur on the written reports served to reify this construction and likely fostered gaining further funding and support for studies taking the same research direction.

Star makes a strong case for accepting her interpretation of what localizationists did and how they did it. She weaves specific evidence and telling incidents through her narrative that support her assertions. The range and thoroughness of her evidence make her argument compelling. Star specifies how actions construct processes and answers what and how questions. Her use of grounded theory logic and construction of categories is explicit at this level. However, Star does not stop with 'what' and 'how' questions.

Instead, Star merges processes into major categories and chapter titles, as she brings the reader back to her major topics and places them on center stage. Subsequently, the grounded theory style and logic recede to the backstage. Rather than provide a parsimonious statement of relationships between abstracted categories, Star synthesizes what localizationists did and how they did it in one clear, direct statement: 'Localizationists eventually intertwined questions about the nature of phenomena, the strategies for organizing information and resources, and political commitments' (p. 196). Then to end her book, she raises 'why' questions and answers them in the following discussion of the implications of analyzing science as a type of work:

> Research on scientific theories has rarely taken into account the processes in dimensions described above, especially the degree with which these complex multiple dimensions are interactive and developmental. What are the implications of looking at theories in this way? A conversation with Anselm Strauss provided a partial answer to this question. As I was describing to him the many participants in the debate about localization, and the various kinds of work and uncertainties faced by participants, I began to frame the concept, 'inertia.' I saw the questions becoming extraordinarily complex and, at the same time, taken for granted by participants. In the middle of explaining this, and when I was feeling overwhelmed with the complexity and interdependence of all the issues, Strauss asked me: what would it have taken to overthrow the theory? (p. 196)

By addressing what overthrowing the theory would have taken and when it could have occurred, Star answers why it did not. Moreover, by showing how localization

**257**

became and remained entrenched, she offers a new explanation for change and stability in scientific theorizing. Star's strong answers to how questions fortify the foundation for advancing 'why' questions. Throughout the book, she pieces together diverse sources of evidence that permit her to trace chronology and to make connections between actions, incidents, and outcomes.

Star presents an analysis thoroughly grounded in data. Her sorting and categorizing of data make sense. She creates simple, direct, but intermediate categories such as 'diplomacy' (p. 134), 'compiling credibility' (p. 138), 'manipulating hierarchies of credibility' (p. 140), 'organizational tactics' (p. 144), 'controlling the focus of the debate' (p. 145), and 'modes of debate and tacit debates' (p. 152) to build an abstract analysis. Star describes and explains each category and often details a series of actions that constitutes the category as outlined above under 'creating and maintaining certainty.' Most of these intermediate categories are gerunds; they depict actions. As such, her categories not only give the reader a sense of people's intentions and concerns, but also specify and anchor the analysis. When Star uses gerunds, her categories provide more information and a clearer point of view than her topical categories. They enliven her narrative and inform the reader of its direction. Taken together, Star's intermediate categories outline her chapters, organize her argument, and form the foundation for theorizing.

Star traces the localizationists' growing power as she records their actions and creates her category, 'manipulating hierarchies of credibility'. Localizationists used their rising status to make their *ad hominem* arguments stick as they dismissed competing scientists' arguments as well as anomalies in their own research. Their status and power conferred authority through which they could ignore, censor, and, in turn, sarcastically dismiss other researchers and their reports.

As Star builds the structure of this category, she shows how localizationists built the architecture of their argument. Hence, she reaches down into the data and demonstrates how localizationists established that they were 'more scientific than thou,' as one tactic supporting the more general category of 'manipulating hierarchies of credibility.' Subsequently, she fits being more scientific than thou together with other localizationist tactics that support and specify the larger category, including 'arguments from authority' and 'ignoring, censorship, and sarcasm.' In each case, she shows how localizationists used these tactics and gave reasons why they invoked them. Simultaneously, localizationists strengthened their organizational connections and control over the focus of the debate. Star notes that if diffusionists had had generous funding from well-respected sponsors, the debate might have taken a different turn. With the added help of their sponsors, however, localizationists manipulated hierarchies of credibility more effectively than diffusionists and steadily gained professional and theoretical clout in medicine and physiology.

Like other qualitative researchers, grounded theorists are often deservedly criticized for moving too quickly from the specific study to a general level. Star's analysis demonstrates how a grounded theorist's measured theorizing can move to increasingly general levels. The strength of Star's analysis with its foundation in data permits her to move from the particular case of localization theory to theorize how and why scientific theories do or do not change. Star challenges Thomas S. Kuhn's (1970) explanation that a critical mass of anomalous findings forces a paradigm change. He

RECONSTRUCTING THEORY

argues that at certain critical points, scientists can no longer ignore must confront numerous anomalous findings that their current theory cannot explain. For Kuhn, these anomalous findings force a paradigm change that overthrows the reigning scientific theory. In contrast, Star shows that scientists' routine actions in their everyday work lead to theories gaining more or less currency. In opposing Kuhn's theory, she states: 'By contrast with Kuhn, … practical negotiations with and about anomalous events are constitutive of science at every level of organization' (p. 64). Star closes her book with the following explanation of the significance of her study:

> The study of how theories take hold and become seen as 'natural' is important in answering some basic questions in the sociology of knowledge and epistemology. This book argues that problems/theories/facts/perspectives are a form of collective behavior, and I have provided some data about the processes and conditions of that behavior. Implicit in this approach is an equation between knowing and working. These two kinds of events do not proceed in parallel: they are the same activity, but differently reported. (p. 197)

Star's analysis brought her to forming a new explanation for change and stability in scientific theorizing. In this sense, Star's analysis presages Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) advice to look for the contingent relationships between the what and how of social life. Moreover, she demonstrates strengths that grounded theorists can bring to structural analysis.

Throughout her research, Star remained alert to implicit processes and posed larger questions about them. As a result, she steadily scaled up the theoretical significance of her analysis. Both the properties and consequences of a process or category may remain implicit until theoretical sampling, comparative analysis, and interpretive rendering make them explicit. The further we go into implicit experience, the longer it may take to make such empirical and conceptual leaps. Part of your interpretive task is being alert to possibilities for moving the analysis beyond the definitive evidence you currently have and beyond its most discernible application.

## Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this chapter, I have drawn lines between positivist and interpretive inquiry, constructivist and objectivist grounded theory, and the subsequent distinctions and directions they suggest. In research practice, however, the lines are not so clear. Positivist researchers may explore elusive topics with ephemeral meanings and seek to understand them. Constructivist grounded theorists may investigate overt processes in painstaking detail and offer explanatory statements. In research practice, theorizing means being eclectic, drawing on what works, defining what fits (see also Wuest, 2000).

Fendt (Fendt & Sachs, 2008) asks whether theory construction is idiosyncratic. From a constructionist perspective, theories reflect what their authors bring to their research as well as what they do with it. Yes, some theories in similar areas, particularly those without much abstraction, may resemble each other. However, theories that explicate tacit phenomena and construct abstract categories of them can generate unique interpretations. The results of theoretical sampling and an interpretive

**259**

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rendering can give the reader, as well as the researcher, a moment of joy in savoring original ideas.

Neither objectivist nor constructivist researchers may intend that readers view their written grounded theories as *theory*, shrouded in all its grand mystique, or acts of theorizing. Instead they just are doing grounded theory in whatever way they understand it.

Like Star's early brain researchers, however, grounded theorists sometimes invoke a 'more theoretical than thou' form of invidious comparison. An elegant parsimonious theory may offer clear propositions but have limited scope. An imaginative diffuse theory may spark bursts of insight but offer interpretive frames with porous borders. Each presupposes different objectives and favors certain ways of knowing and types of knowledge. A theory allows us to cut through ordinary explanations and understandings and to attend to some realities and not to others. Theories cannot be measured like bank statements, although we can establish criteria for different kinds of theorizing. The balance of if–then theoretical propositions and the number and density of abstractions depends on a grounded theorist's audience and purpose as well as on his or her theoretical proclivities. As the above discussions of theorizing in grounded theory imply, theories serve different purposes and differ in their inclusiveness, precision, level, scope, generality, and applicability.

The subjectivity and ambiguity I portray in constructivist grounded theory permeate objectivist approaches as well. But these approaches mask subjectivity and ambiguity through shared assumptions about the world and established formats for conducting and reporting research. In the end, inquiry takes us outward, and yet reflecting on it draws us inward. Subsequently, grounded theory leads us back to the world for a further look and deeper reflection – again and again. Our imaginative renderings of what we see and learn are interpretations, emanating from dialectics of thought and experience. Whether we adhere to positivist or interpretive traditions, we do not gain an autonomous theory, albeit one amenable to modification. Rather we are *part* of our constructed theory and this theory reflects the vantage points inherent in our varied experiences, whether or not we are aware of them.