

Why you should read this article

- To build an understanding of research methods associated with grounded theory
- To develop critical awareness of how different approaches in grounded theory might tackle literature reviews
- To learn how to review the literature, depending on the stage of your grounded theory study

Evidence & practice | qualitative research

Approaches to reviewing the literature in grounded theory: a framework

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Abstract

Background There is considerable debate about how to review the literature in grounded theory research. Notably, grounded theory typically discourages reviewing the literature before data are collected and analysed, so that researchers do not form preconceptions about the theory. However, it is likely researchers will need to review the literature to show they intend to address a gap in knowledge with their research. This might confuse novice researchers, especially given that different approaches to grounded theory can have contrasting positions concerning how and when literature should be reviewed.

Aim To provide an overview of grounded theory and how different approaches might tackle literature reviews.

Discussion A framework is presented to illustrate some of the commonalities between grounded theory approaches, to guide novice researchers in reviewing the literature. The framework acknowledges some of the tensions concerning researchers' objectivity and sketches three phases for researchers to consider when reviewing the literature.

Conclusion Reviewing the literature has different meanings and implications when using grounded theory compared with other research methodologies.

Implications for practice Novice researchers must be attuned to the different ways of reviewing the literature when using grounded theory.

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Introduction

Grounded theory is useful in nursing research as it can generate theories related to health concerns. However, there is controversy about how researchers should deal with extant literature when conducting a study, as reading the literature beforehand may result in researchers developing preconceptions about the phenomena being studied, which could taint how they conceptualise a theory (Giles et al 2013). There are also disputes about when to start a literature review, with various different points in the study suggested (El Hussein et al 2017). This can confuse novice researchers about how and when to begin a literature review, particularly as most studies will require a preliminary literature review to determine if they will address a gap in knowledge in the relevant field.

This article presents a critical overview of the different ways of approaching literature reviews in grounded theory and proposes a framework showing how review methods vary depending on the stage of a study. This non-partisan framework draws on grounded theory literature to guide novice researchers about considerations they should make when engaging with the literature and involves three phases: verifying there is a gap in the knowledge in the relevant field, to justify the study; reviewing the literature when the data are being analysed; and comparing the generated theory to current literature from the investigated area to assure its usefulness (Martin 2019).

Background

A literature review is intended to provide background and context to a study. It can occur before researchers start a study, to show the lay of the land of the investigated field and so they can obtain an awareness of the area their studies will investigate. Researchers use the review to critically analyse the literature to demonstrate there is a gap in knowledge and so justify their studies, as institutions such as universities require evidence that they will generate new knowledge (Lipscomb 2019). A literature review may also be required for a study to receive ethical approval, as the review will demonstrate if it will benefit the research area and participants (Newson and Lipworth 2015). Research grant applications may require literature reviews as well, particularly to substantiate that the methodology selected for a study is based on a solid foundation of research (Hart 2018).

While preliminary reviews are likely to be needed, literature can be reviewed at different points during a study. Notably, researchers can review what is published during their study to keep abreast with the latest literature and can compare their study's findings to relevant literature to show its implications for the field (Hart 2018).

Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the early 1960s (Birks and Mills 2015). It is used to craft a theory that reveals patterns inherent in social relationships and group behaviours (Birks and Mills 2015). It produces a substantive theory for a specific area of social concern or a formal theory that is further developed and which has application to and beyond the substantive area (Holloway and Galvin 2017).

Grounded theory studies are not conducted to test hypotheses but to generate theories that directly capture and explain processes, actions or interactions involving real-life social phenomena (Holton 2009). Thus, they tend to investigate unexposed or insufficiently reported social situations (Charmaz 1995).

A theory evolves through the delicate interplay of data collection and data analysis. The former can involve textual threads from interview transcripts, which the researcher uses to cultivate a theory involving a network of relationships that can – but is not limited to – be organised around one core concept (Timonen et al 2018). The data can also include the theoretical sensitivity that arises from reviewing the literature, the literature informing the researcher's understanding of how the data collected links together to shape the categories of the theory (Chun Tie et al 2019).

The theory is intended to have some utility, generating insights that help those who encounter the explored social situation (Bryant 2017). For instance, Glaser and Strauss (1967) wanted to develop compassionate end of life care, and their first grounded theory concerned how clinicians and patients' awareness of the dying process affected healthcare.

Grounded theory approaches

Four genres of grounded theory are prevalent in the literature (Evans 2013).

Classic grounded theory

The aim of classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) is to reveal a theory that sits in one definitive social reality, in that existence can be viewed in one fixed way (Charmaz 2014). It is renowned for its 'constant comparative' method – one of the main features of most grounded theory studies (Hood 2007) – which involves comparing data with data to identify similarities and cluster them to create 'codes' (Fram 2013). Codes are interpretive labels assigned to concepts, ideas or themes that arise from the data, and become the units to conceptualise a theory (Saldaña 2016). Researchers simultaneously use theoretical sampling, which surrounds the data analysis, informing them which data to collect next and where these might be found (McCrae and Purssell 2016).

Classic grounded theory also involves 'emergence' – a process in which properties that arise from collecting and analysing data gives new insights into the theory's composition (Charmaz 2008). Glaser (2005) argued that emergence happens without preconceived ideas using unstructured coding. However, this led to some division between Strauss and Glaser, with Strauss going on to shape a more systematic approach.

Straussian grounded theory

Straussian grounded theory offers additional prescriptive measures for unearthing the theory, as well as instructions for achieving three layers of coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990). It argues that an absolute reality might not be possible, as there are different ways to interpret the world. It therefore advocates that researchers should be familiar with the substantive area before the study to enable them to adopt a particular focus about what will be investigated, notably something researchers have perhaps experienced in their area of practice (Giles et al 2013).

Constructionist grounded theory

The latitude given for interpretation in Straussian grounded theory laid the foundation for the constructionist approach (Morse et al 2009). This methodology, explicated by Kathy Charmaz (2014), focuses on the importance of the meanings that people attribute to the phenomenon being investigated. It enables researchers to generate their own understanding and construction of the theory from the data, rather than discovering the theory in the data as classic grounded theory and Straussian grounded theory propose (O'Connor et al 2018). The constructionist approach also recognises that researchers tend to produce meaning and experiences with participants to create a shared understanding of the explored social situation (Charmaz 2014).

Feminist grounded theory

Feminist grounded theory involves generating a theory about the status of women or other subjugated social groups (Plummer and Young 2010), to highlight emancipatory action that could alleviate the oppression they experience (Keddy et al 1996). It uses the research methods of other grounded theory approaches to illuminate feminist theory, while recognising that there are multiple interpretations of reality (Wuest 1995).

Ways to tackle literature reviews

Classic grounded theory

Classic grounded theory generally prohibits preliminary literature reviews (McCallin 2003), arguing that they might affect emergence. Emergence assumes what is important in the research area will materialise without presumptions, with the researcher open to what the data represent according to the participants (Glaser 1978). If the researcher is aware of existent concepts, found in the literature, these might contaminate the theory, distorting its social reality (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

To reduce contamination in classic grounded theory, the researcher tends to conduct the 'preliminary' review when generating the theory, to compare it with current literature and test its application to the research field (Christiansen 2011). Glaser (2005) suggested that when the researcher is analysing how the data link to create codes, the literature reviewed should be outside the field of study, to ensure conceptualisation remains original. However, the researcher should be aware that preconceptions may impair the theoretical sensitivity needed to generate an accurate theory (Heath and Cowley 2004).

Straussian grounded theory

In contrast, Straussian grounded theory suggests a preliminary literature review helps to contextualise the phenomenon that a study will investigate, aided by the researcher having some familiarity with what will be explored (Corbin and Strauss 2015). For example, the researcher's motivation to conduct the study could be closely tied to witnessing a thought-provoking social situation.

The Straussian approach also notes that familiarity with relevant literature enables researchers to understand subtle differences found in the data and thus helps them to generate a theory, as well as to analyse more critically ideas arising from the data using their background knowledge (Corbin and Strauss 2015). This does not imply that what researchers find familiar are indisputable facts – 'relevant literature can enhance sensitivity to subtle nuances in data, just as it can block creativity' (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Hence, Straussian grounded theory is cautious about preliminary reviews, in that open-mindedness is required so that existent theories in the literature do not overly influence the researcher (Thornberg and Dunne 2019).

Constructionist grounded theory

Charmaz (2014) recommended that researchers do not go into depth with preliminary literature reviews, to reduce the likelihood they will force data into preconceived categories related to existent theories in the research field (Boychuk Duchscher and Morgan 2004). However, Charmaz (2014) also recognised that researchers might have rich experiences of the study area.

Reflexivity has therefore become prevalent in the constructionist approach, to account for these preconceived ideas rather than ignore them. Researchers scrutinise their subjective responses to the data and question their influence in deciding what data represent (McGhee et al 2007). This can generate a broadmindedness to analysis, so the whole study is not defined by relevant theories found through prereading. Constructionist methodology, like classic grounded theory, also advocates using a literature review when the

theory is being generated (Giles et al 2013). This is so the theory can be positioned in the field of research while clarifying its contribution to knowledge.

Feminist grounded theory

Feminist grounded theory uses the research methods of the three other approaches, but Allen (2011) suggested it also shares philosophical assumptions with the constructionist approach – constructionists argue that multiple interpretations can shape reality. With both approaches, the views of subjugated group members may vary but the role of the researcher is to illuminate their voices, depending on the context of the study (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019).

Reflexivity therefore ensures researchers are open to hearing these voices while acknowledging their own bias (Pomrenke 2007). There is a paucity of literature concerning feminist grounded theory that addresses how to undertake reviews, perhaps because it uses other approaches' methods.

The literature review framework

Different philosophical assumptions underpin the four grounded theory approaches but there are some similarities in how they tackle literature reviews. The following framework presents these similarities and the views of grounded theorists, to guide novice researchers about aspects to consider when reviewing the literature at different points in the study. The framework is principally for generating substantive theories, but Bryant (2007) and Rieger (2019) suggested substantive and formal theories review literature similarly, as they involve weaving together knowledge from the literature and the data through constant comparison.

Preliminary phase

Despite Glaser (2005) advocating against conducting preliminary literature reviews, there is growing support for them. Martin (2019) proposed that researchers use the findings of a literature review to choose what to explore, rather than base their studies on them. Researchers need to be (self) aware, as what they investigate may develop beyond their current knowledge, and they should use language that enables participants to delve into their experiences and not be stifled by existent theories (Nathaniel 2006). Questions linked to established theories might limit the richness of the data they collect, as participants may shape their accounts to fit well-known concepts (Glaser 2005).

To avoid being led by existing theories, researchers can limit how deeply their preliminary reviews explore existent concepts while identifying significant findings that can direct the study (Corbin and Strauss 2015). The review results in a cursory examination of what theories are established, while identifying underexplored areas of social concern (Martin 2006).

Integrative phase

Thornberg and Dunne (2019) suggested that once researchers start to collect and analyse data, the literature review should become more of a way to develop theoretical sensitivity. For example, the researchers could analyse what the data might signify, find similarities and generate codes.

There is a debate about what researchers should read to develop theoretical sensitivity. Classic grounded theory tends to explore literature outside the investigated field (Glaser 2005). Although it is important that the grounded theory produced does not follow the well-trodden path established by previous theories, the literature selected to analyse data cannot be so alien that the theory has little relevance to the field of study (Giles et al 2013).

To avoid being overly influenced by established theories while still querying the data's relevance requires reflexivity, so researchers must have intellectual dialogues with themselves about what their data represent and reveal about the social concern being studied (Charmaz 2014). This reflexivity can occur through writing memos that record how the researchers reflected on their preconceived ideas and show the steps they took to defend how they generated their theories (Martin 2006, 2019), including reflections on the way they analytically interpreted the collected data to shape theoretical sampling and sensitivity (Lempert 2007).

However, memo-writing can be fraught with difficulties for novice researchers, who may write too little or too much or create several unrelated memos. Researchers frustrated with the memo-writing process may also conceptualise their theories prematurely (Holton 2010). Persistence is therefore vital in memo-writing and researchers should only collect additional data if they can only write a few memos (Birks and Mills 2015).

Validation phase

Urquhart et al (2010) suggested that a final literature review is crucial, to contextualise the generated theory in the research field by comparing it to established theories and findings relevant to the social concern being explored. To demonstrate the utility of the theory, the researcher has to articulate how it resonates with the substantive area, although the wider reading associated with theoretical sensitivity may result in the researcher being surprised by some of the properties that develop in the theory (Glaser 2005). Dunne

(2011) proposed this form part of the discussion section of any published article or thesis resulting from the research, in which the researchers debate the benefits and limitations of the theory.

The generated theory might be relevant beyond the research area (Cooney 2011), suggesting there is scope for a formal theory. However, it is likely this will require further weaving of the data through constant comparison, to ensure that while the formal theory develops beyond findings from the substantive area, the researcher can outline the boundaries of what the theory can report on (Rosenbaum and Russell-Bennett 2019).

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of grounded theory and how different grounded theory approaches navigate literature reviews. There are degrees of similarities between the methodologies, but there are differences between them, particularly the timing of reviews. Preliminary reviews are typically required to justify conducting any study, so the researcher must be mindful that these support the research, while they limit the influence on the research of existent theories.

To help inform novice researchers, the article has presented a framework drawn from the approaches discussed showing what to consider when conducting a literature review, depending on the stage of the study. This includes generating a cursory examination to justify the study, while limiting preconceived ideas. The framework explains how reviews can be used to integrate and test a theory. It is hoped the article clarifies for novice researchers how to engage analytically with the literature when conducting grounded theory research, while being attuned to different review methods at study intervals.

Key points

- ***In grounded theory, reviewing the literature is about more than generating evidence to justify the study – it includes methods to shape data together and test the usefulness of the theory once generated.***
- ***Despite different views from grounded theorists, a preliminary literature review is likely required before commencing a study.***
- ***Reflexivity is vital to challenge preconceptions, yet the researcher has to ensure that the theory produced will be useful to the explored field.***

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