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A Guide for Applying Grounded Theory in Qualitative Research

Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

Grounded theory (GT) has been applied numerous times in qualitative research across disciplines. Yet, challenges remain in applying it. The challenges are attributed to its complexity, particularly because of its diversity as a research design and data collection method. Consequently, researchers, particularly emerging researchers and postgraduates, are drifting away from the theory. Primarily, the complexity arises from two fronts: (1) confusion, not being able to differentiate between its use as a design strategy and data collection technique, and (2) standardisation, a lack of understanding of when to stop in its iterative process. This study provides a structured, simplistic guide for applying the theory by following a step-by-step approach. Significantly, the study addresses the challenges often encountered with the iterative process. The study highlights the implications for researchers. It thus reignites the application of GT in research across various disciplines, including business and education.

Keywords

Grounded theory, qualitative research, research design, research methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Grounded theory (GT) is a qualitative research approach, associated with the inductive approach, which allows new theories to be derived and added to the basket of knowledge. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first conceptualised GT as an approach to studying phenomena by building a theory grounded in data. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) explain that GT enables a systematic way of conducting qualitative research that guides data collection and analysis. Although it is within the qualitative paradigm, GT is a generative and emergent methodology that does not require preconceived ideas, based on the fieldwork, about the problem under investigation (Holton, 2009; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). In GT, data collection and analysis are not separable but rather carried out simultaneously.

Simultaneous data collection and analysis help researchers to focus on developing concepts about the data steadily and to gather further data that flesh out their nascent concepts (Charmaz & Thornberg,

2021, p.307). According to Stough and Lee (2021), GT has commonalities with other qualitative approaches in terms of coding, categorisation, and inductive analysis, but its distinction lies in theory generation. Holistically, GT is an inductive process aiming to develop rather than test a theory (Turner & Astin, 2021). With an inductive approach, researchers embark on the fieldwork without any preconceived ideas about the study and remain open-minded (Turner & Astin, 2021). One of the characteristics is open-mindedness, which allows researchers to focus and gather emerges while thinking, constructing, and interacting with the data during the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

GT is applied across academic disciplines, including information systems (IS), education, social science, business management, and medicine (Koleva, 2023; Manuj & Pohlen, 2012). Mahajan and Mohajan (2022) assert that whether the researcher is an expert or novice, they can rely on GT to develop a new theory that is grounded in data. Muller and Kogan (2012) shared that GT can be employed to explore a new domain or a domain without a dominant theory and construct a theory in a new field. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), GT not only provide meaning, understanding and description of a phenomenon but also allows for theory development. Stough and Lee (2021) noted that GT is widely applied, which could be attributed to (1) its compatibility with a variety of data sources, including verbal data, observations, and test results, and (2) its analytical methods are compatible with qualitative methodologies, including ethnography, case studies, narrative, and phenomenology.

Despite the benefits, challenges persist in applying GT in qualitative research. Two of the fundamental challenges are confusion and a lack of standardisation. Firstly, GT can be confusing, especially to emerging researchers, as it's both a method and a methodology (Turner & Astin, 2021). Secondly, during the analysis of data, there are no standard rules to follow when identifying categories (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Shaanika, Nyikana and Iyamu (2025) emphasised that GT is ambiguous and does not provide a guide on when to reach the point of saturation. These challenges overwhelm many emerging researchers and influence them to drift away from using the theory in their research. This is irrespective of GT's appropriateness for the research. This study proposes a step-by-step approach that imbues a formulaic process for addressing the challenges in applying GT in research across disciplines.

This paper is organised into six main sections to ensure logical flow and ease of understanding. It began with an introduction which provides a synopsis of the study and a review of the literature that establishes the existence of gaps in the phenomenon being studied. Thereafter, cohesive guidelines on how to apply GT are presented and discussed in detail. Next, the implications of the study for researchers across disciplines are covered. Limitations for further consideration that could lead to future research are highlighted before a conclusion is drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The simultaneous data collection and analysis is regarded as a hallmark of GT. It is believed that separating data collection and analysis, as is done in other qualitative approaches, leads to a lack of data depth and richness, which is often noticed after the data collection and returning to the site could be challenging (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) argue that the analysis of the data immediately as it is collected allows for the new insights generated to be incorporated into subsequent data collection. Additionally, GT is a generative and emergent method that requires researchers to go into the field without preconceived ideas about the problem under investigation (Holton, 2009; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022).

However, researchers often fail to remain open to the emergence of theory due to their worldviews and preconceived notions (Holton, 2009). Consequently, this blocks the researcher's ability to notice novel ideas as they manifest from constant data collection and analysis. Thus, Muller and Kogan (2012) argue that GT is an excellent method that prevents researchers from making premature conclusions about a phenomenon under study. Birks and Mills (2015) describe methods as practical procedures used to generate and analyse data, and methodology as a set of principles and ideas that inform the design of research. Fortunately, due to its dual properties, GT challenges persist as there is a lack of clarity about its practical application (Manuj & Pohlen, 2012; Turner & Astin, 2021). Koleva (2023) argued that researchers using GT are often confused, not knowing whether they are applying GT correctly or whether they are using it to its full potential.

Also, various types of GT are found in the literature, contributing to more confusion (Manuj & Pohlen, 2012; Stough & Lee, 2021; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). A study by Stough and Lee (2021) reports on some of the GT challenges, which include: (1) researchers not knowledgeable about GT essential elements, which results in confusion and misinterpretations of terms; (2) when GT is used as a methodology, researchers fail to detail steps used for data analysis and (3) when used together with other qualitative approaches studies, researcher are unclear which approach was used as research design.

The theory requires strict procedures using empirical materials towards achieving the study's objective (Ma, Zhang & Wang, 2022). There are multiple ways of applying GT (Sosa-Díaz & Valverde-Berrocoso, 2022). Glaser and Strauss' (1967), a more orthodox approach, insists on the generation of theories based on the collected data. In Strauss and Corbin's (1990), the interpretive approach of data description, axial coding, diagrams, and matrix is added. From a constructivist perspective, Charmaz (2014) focuses on allowing data topics to emerge organically. This enables the integration of the subjective experience of the researcher (Bonilla & López, 2016). Owing to the growing popularity of the qualitative paradigm in IS research, this paper is centred on the subjective aspect of applying GT, focusing on context, relevance, and content.

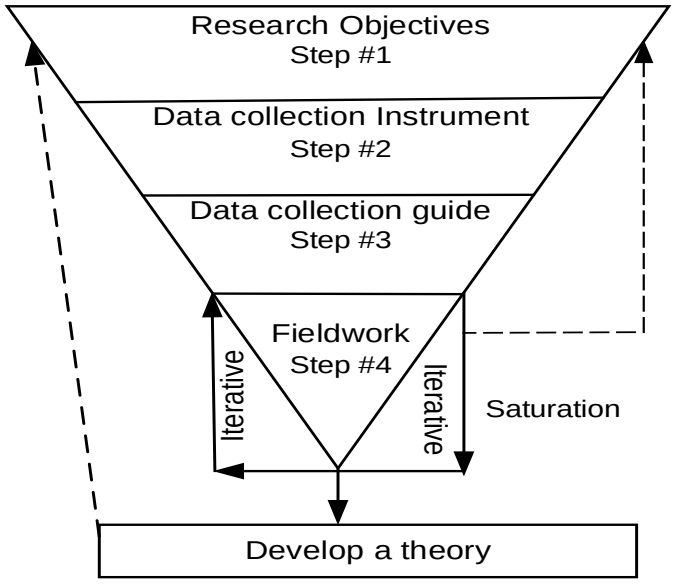
Therefore, although there has been an important development of this qualitative methodology, However, even though GT is widely known by qualitative researchers, in practice, difficulties persist (Murphy, Klotz & Kreiner, 2017). The complexity hampers applying GT in IS research. Congruently, Prigol and Behrens (2019) argued that GT carries some substantial vagueness and uncertainty.

GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING GROUNDED THEORY IN RESEARCH

We propose a guideline for applying GT in qualitative research. It is a holistic set of guidelines which consists of five steps, as shown in Figure 1. The first step is concerned with the research objectives and questions. In the second and third steps, a data collection technique is selected, and the data collection guide is developed, respectively. The fourth step focuses on the fieldwork, which is a complex step due to the iterative nature of data collection involving analysis. In the fifth step, the theory, which is grounded in data, is developed.

Figure 1

GT guide for research



Step 1: Research Objectives

In research, the objective is critical, and it is the first aspect that must be stated. However, it is not always simple with researchers, particularly emerging researchers and postgraduates. With GT design, a researcher should refrain from having preconceived ideas about their study. However, this does not mean the objective is not required. Shahapur et al. (2022) advise that research objectives should be developed before the researcher embarks on any study.

The research objective must be concise for three reasons. Firstly, it defines what the study intends to achieve. Subsequently, the methods and approaches that enable achieving the objective are selected. Secondly, based on the objective, the focus of the study is shaped, leading to a better understanding of the object or subject involved. Thirdly, the objective defines the scope of the study. This provides boundaries and shapes the direction of the study. Based on the significance of conciseness, Shahapur et al. (2022) proposed a SMART approach: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-defined. Another important usefulness of the objective is that it guides the selection of the data collection instrument or technique.

Step 2: Data Collection Instrument

An instrument or technique must be selected for the data collection, in GT or any other research design approach. This is crucial to ensure that the objective of the study is achieved. Therefore, the most appropriate instrument must be selected. Selecting a suitable technique for data collection can be a daunting task, especially for emerging researchers. It is highly recommended that the selection of the data collection technique be driven by the study objectives. Hence, in some studies, a set of criteria is used to select the instrument for data collection. Although this study does not prescribe an instrument or instruments, it does highlight those that align with GT and posit commonly used ones from a qualitative perspective. In GT, observation and interview are commonly applied (Clarke et al., 2023; Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017). Based on the literature, we posit that the semi-structured technique is commonly used in IS studies (Hakkak et al., 2023; Ghaffari et al., 2020).

Step 3: Data Collection Guide

Before data collection, the researcher must develop a data collection guide. A data collection guide is a set of questions that helps the researcher not to divert from the focus of the study by wandering with random questions during the collection process. According to Furidha (2023), the data collection guide facilitates the collection process by helping the researcher get on the correct way in gathering statements during the interview process. Like steps 1 and 2, the data collection guide is developed according to the research objectives. This is to ensure alignment between the objectives and the data that will be collected.

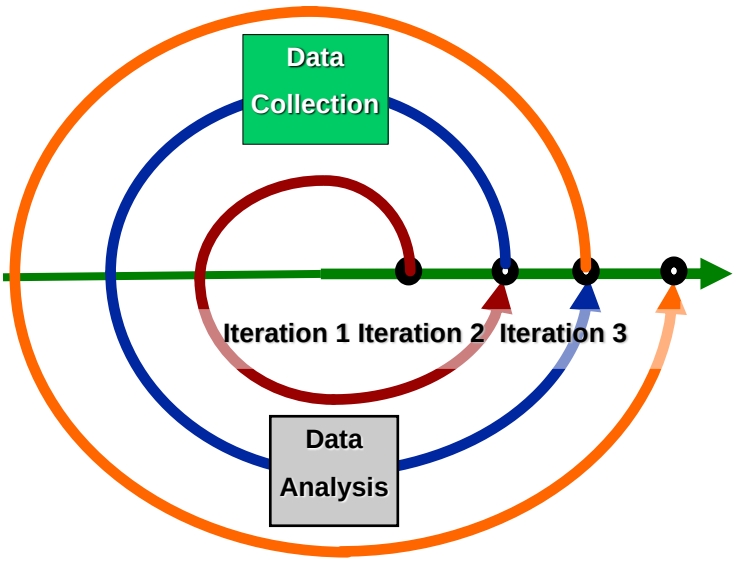
Having a data collection guide does not imply that the researcher should only stick to the questions as stated in the guide. Instead, the researcher should listen aggressively to probe as the conversation evolves. Thus, the questions in the guide can be modified during the interaction to accommodate the direction of the insights being discussed.

Step 4: Fieldwork

In GT, firstly, data collection and analysis are not a once-off, but iterative. Secondly, both data collection and analysis are intertwined activities. This means that the two activities cannot be separated; one informs the other, and they are carried out iteratively. This is primarily because subsequent data collected is informed by insights gathered from the analysis. Holt et al. (2022) asserted that the absence of the iterative process would make it possible to claim that the basic methodological requirement of GT is followed. The data collection and analysis processes entail several iterations, as diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 2 and discussed below. Sosa-Díaz and Valverde-Berrocoso (2022) explained that the principle of emergence or data identification allows the researcher to remain open to new realities during data collection and analysis.

Figure 1

Data collection and analysis iteration process



Iteration 1: Data collection and analysis

As explained in step 1, the data collection is informed by the research objectives, which must align with the research questions. Thus, the first iteration of the data collection process ensures that the study's objectives are meticulously covered. This is primarily because it sets the foundation for the entire iteration process.

Data collection: In the first round of the iterative process, the researcher collects data from the first group of participants who were selected based on a set of criteria. The researcher collects the data using the most appropriate technique and a set of guidelines as discussed in steps 2 and 3 above. The researcher does not have preconceived ideas about the phenomenon under study in doing so. This enables the researcher to openly interrogate the subjects and allows free expression of thoughts and views. After this first iteration of data collection, the researcher starts with data analysis. The analysis of the data must begin immediately. The immediate commencement of data analysis allows the evolution of the study as indicated by the data rather than analysing at the end of data collection (Turner & Astin, 2021).

Data analysis: During the analysis process, the researcher engages with the collected data by reading back and forth and creating codes. In a qualitative study, creating codes means assigning labels to the data. Turner and Astin (2021) explain that coding is about breaking down data into smaller components and labelling them to capture the essence of the data. The codes are created according to the study objectives. After data coding, the researcher moves on to creating categories. Categories are created because of themes and commonalities that arise from the coded data. Once the categories are created, discussion begins. In the discussion, details about each category are provided. This includes defining, describing, and discussing each category of the study objectives based on the interrogation of the data collected. In the first iteration, the categories formed are often not saturated. Categories are considered saturated only when the analysis of data returns codes that fit within existing categories that have been sufficiently explained (Birks & Mills, 2022). Otherwise, the analysis provides new insights, based on which iteration 2 is undertaken.

Iteration 2: Data collection and analysis

The categories identified and discussed in the analysis during iteration 1 raise new questions. This means that the point of saturation was not reached. This is because the researcher notices that some categories are not sufficiently explained and need more clarification, in terms of factors such as the functions of objects and relationships between subjects. These gaps indicate that there are insights that need to be revealed. The GT offers a flexible, iterative approach, allowing the researcher to move backwards and forwards during data collection and data analysis (Contreras et al., 2020).

> *Data collection:* As a result of the insights that need to be revealed, the researcher embarks on another round (iteration 2) of data collection. According to Holt et al (2022), because of the new insights generated from the 1st iteration, the researcher needs to approach new people and settings to advance the categories. Based on the gaps identified from iteration 1, a new set of questions (guidelines) is articulated for the data collection. Foley et al. (2021) advised that the guiding questions should not be approached as definite, but rather the guides evolve as insights in further inquiry. A new set of criteria is formulated to select the participants.
>
> *Data analysis:* Similarly to iteration 1, the researcher immediately starts with data analysis after data collection. Starting with data analysis immediately aids the researcher in (1) identifying and

correcting possible weaknesses in the data collection process, (2) adjusting the data collection guides to better capture the phenomenon of interest (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). However, during this iteration, the collected data is analysed to support categories that were identified in the first iteration. In addition to supporting existing categories, during this analysis phase, new categories could also emerge, which necessitates another round of data collection. This is to ensure that the process is comprehensive and the completeness of the study.

Iteration 3: Data collection and analysis

The categories identified in iterations 1 and 2 are still not saturated, as new insights and new categories keep manifesting from the analysis. GT allows the continuation of collection and analysis of data until the researcher deems it no longer possible to find new information relevant to the study (Sosa-Díaz & Valverde-Berrocoso, 2022; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The new insights are critical findings that have implications for the phenomenon under study.

Data collection: As a result of emerging insights, the researcher continues with data collection. This includes collecting data to support both old and new categories. Till to this iteration, the researcher remains open to new data, but also searching for and clarifying key processes and patterns in the data calls for extensive probing and modification of the interview guide (Foley et al., 2021). Consequently, like in iteration 2, new guidelines are articulated and used for collecting data. Also, a new set of criteria is formulated for selecting participants. As was done in iterations 1 and 2, the researcher proceeds to analyse the data that was collected.

Data analysis: The analysis aims to support and ground the existing categories with the empirical data that was recently collected. It focuses on covering the gaps that were identified in previous analyses of data in iterations 1 and 2. As data analysis progresses, questions become more focused, viz., aimed at understanding emerging events, incidents, behaviours, and processes in the data that are shaped by context and constitutive of categories (Foley et al., 2021). During this iteration, new insights are expected to emerge. If there are still areas that require clarification, elucidation, or investigation, another round of data collection is conducted.

Iteration n+^{1}: Data collection and analysis

The iterative process of data collection and analysis continues to take place until a point of saturation for the developed categories is reached. Saturation refers to a point at which the researcher finds out that all the needed data have been collected and there is no new relevant data that can be collected from the respondents or about the subjects of the study (Fusch et al., 2018). Mwita (2022) explains that the saturation point promotes the validity and credibility of the data and prevents the researcher from collecting the same data. The data collection and analysis cease after reaching the categories' theoretical saturation. At this point, all key categories are contextualised and put into various dimensions to substantially explain the emergent theoretical construct (Foley et al., 2021).

Step 5: Theory development

Once the data collection and analysis cease, the researcher starts to develop a theory. A theory is a set of organised statements and assertions, systematically connected, which can be empirically tested when its statements are transformed into operationalised hypotheses (Tarozzi, 2020, p.5). The theory could be (i) a model, (ii) a framework, or (iii) an instrumentation. A model can be described as a theory with a more narrowly defined scope of explanation due to its descriptive nature (Nilsen, 2020). A framework is regarded as a set of components and the relationships among them that are presumed to account for a set of phenomena (Walsh-Bailey, 2021). An instrumentation is a system that is built up from a serial linkage

of distinguishable building blocks, whereby each block can be represented by a conceptual model (Hansman, 2017).

At this step, the researcher should have gained a good understanding of the phenomenon through the comparative data collection and analysis process. The understanding gained from insights helps to develop a theory. The process of developing a theory begins by associating meanings with the findings from the analysis. The findings are associated with meanings that resonate with the objectives of the study. Associating meanings with the findings happens through subjective interpretation. According to Pervin and Mokhtar (2022), subjective interpretation involves understanding the meaning of the participants' experience to provide a rich narrative of the phenomenon of interest, which can explain why the participants acted as they did.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

There are implications for both emerging and established researchers who select GT as a research design and intend to apply the guidelines developed in this study. As discussed below, the implications are qualitative nature, duality of fieldwork, and a process for theory development.

i. Qualitative nature

The guidelines developed in this study are for the application of a GT in qualitative research. Therefore, before applying the guidelines, it's recommended that the researcher be acquainted with various qualitative methods and approaches. These methods and approaches include qualitative research designs, data collection and analysis techniques. The researcher needs to be acquainted with these methods and approaches in terms of their characteristics, as well as their advantages and disadvantages. Makri and Neely (2021) explain that to understand which approach best fits a study, it is important to understand not only its history but also the main arguments within the literature. Understanding the nature and characteristics of qualitative methods leads to the selection of techniques that align with the study's objectives, as the researcher implements the steps outlined in the guidelines. GT is differentiated from other qualitative designs due to its iterative data collection and analysis.

ii. Duality in Fieldwork

The duality of fieldwork refers to the two different, simultaneous activities: data collection and analysis. This duality implies that data collection and analysis are interdependent and mutually enabling activities of fieldwork. Consequently, when applying the guidelines, there is a need for researchers to understand (1) what each activity entails and (2) how the two activities are interconnected to enable rich data collection. Ligita et al. (2020) emphasise that simultaneous data collection and analysis is an essential feature of GT, but there is little practical direction on how to implement it effectively. When a researcher does not understand how to apply data collection and analysis simultaneously, it often creates confusion during the fieldwork process, resulting in the collection of poor data. This negatively impacts the development of a theory, which is supposed to be data grounded.

iii. Theory development process

With a GT design, a researcher is expected to develop a theory. However, step 5 of the guideline, which is theory development, does not explicitly discuss "what" or "how" the theory emanating from the study should be developed. This is because the primary focus of the study is the application of GT in qualitative studies and not necessarily about the development of the theory. Therefore, the type of theory and how it should be developed must be guided by the study's objectives.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF FURTHER STUDY

The developed guidelines have not been validated or tested. As a result, guidelines for applying a GT in qualitative studies remain theoretical. When the guidelines remain theoretical, the researchers continue to have limited knowledge and an understanding of their application. According to Turner and Astin (2021), theoretical concepts contribute to the lack of clarity about the practical application of GT. Iyamu and Shaanika (2022) asserted that the validation of concepts from theory to practice allows for measurement of value. This is important in understanding the opportunity that exists for further research.

For further study, we recommend that researchers validate the guidelines to test their usefulness and enhance their practicality. Otherwise, engaging in a GT study continues to be challenging for most researchers doing qualitative studies.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the pretence of contributing to the body of knowledge. Within this context, two fundamental challenges have been addressed by this study. Firstly, we have attempted to address the confusion and a lack of standardisation that have overwhelmed some researchers for many years, particularly emerging researchers, in their attempt to apply GT. Through the step-by-step approach, the construct provided by the study reaffirms GT as a research design and data collection technique. There is a thin line between the two approaches. Secondly, the challenges arising from a lack of formula have been addressed. The study provides a structured process using GT. The approach can help researchers in tracking their thought process as the GT iterative process progresses. Thus, the study contributes from three main perspectives.

The study contributes from both practical and theoretical standpoints. The step-by-step approach can be used as practical guidelines in qualitative research. The study adds to the literature on GT. Additionally, the study can be used as a material in research methodology courses.

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