

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# UNDERSTANDING CLASSIC, STRAUSSIAN, AND CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY APPROACHES

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## Abstract

Grounded theory has been utilized in nursing research in order to develop theory from data. Since there are three approaches in the grounded theory methodology that consist of Classic grounded theory, Straussian grounded theory, and Constructivist grounded theory, thus understanding about perspective of each approach is needed. Those approaches have different points of views regarding the philosophical position, role of literature review, and coding process in data analysis. This review provides an understanding about the grounded theory approaches for researchers particularly the novice researchers, and selects an appropriate approach in their study.

## KEYWORDS

Classic grounded theory; Straussian grounded theory; Constructivist grounded theory; literature review

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## INTRODUCTION

Grounded theory is one of research methodologies in qualitative research that is widely known in a variety of disciplines such as education, economic, politic, psychology, and also nursing ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)). This methodology is used to explore, develop, and describe social processes using the perspectives of the people experiencing the social problem or the phenomena being studied ([Birks & Mills, 2012](#)).

Grounded theory has been utilized in nursing research since Glaser and Strauss developed the original grounded theory. It was first introduced around the 1960s in the School of Nursing, University of California by two sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. They studied about dying in hospital and collaborated to publish 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory in 1967'. Glaser is a sociologist who graduated in the doctoral program at the University of Colombia, which is

known to have a quantitative tradition. He was influenced by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton who are known as innovators of quantitative methods. In contrast, Strauss graduated from Chicago University and was influenced by famous sociologists such as George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. Therefore, he had a strong tradition in qualitative methods and was influenced by the writings of pragmatists and symbolic interactionists ([Birks & Mills, 2012](#); [Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#); [Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)).

After published their book, they decided to work independently due to their different perspectives in the application of methodology approaches. Glaser worked alone and developed grounded theory approach that is common called Classic grounded theory, while Strauss asked Juliet Corbin (a nurse researcher) to work together. In 1990, Strauss and Corbin

published “Basic of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques”. Strauss and Corbin have been known as the second-generation grounded theorists and developed Straussian grounded theory approach. Over the year, Kathy Charmaz, a student of Glaser and Strauss from the University of California, has her own perspectives. Charmaz has been known as the third-generation grounded theorist since she developed a new approach of grounded theory, which is called as Constructivist grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2012; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Given the multiple approaches of grounded theory among the experts, it potentially leads to confusion and debate in novice researchers to understand the theory. Therefore, this paper aimed to discuss the differences of three-grounded theory approaches by describing the philosophical position, role of researcher, place of literature review, research questions, and coding process.

### Philosophical Position

Symbolic interactionism is a philosophical root of grounded theory (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011). Symbolic interactionism is an empirical social science perspective that studies human group life and human conduct, and focuses on human behavior. This philosophy emphasizes on seeing the world by interpreting human interaction, which uses symbols to give meaning or value (Blumer, 1986). Therefore, in a grounded theory study that uses a philosophy of symbolic interactionism, the researcher needs to understand how the social interaction and the meaning that the participants give to their experiences shape their behaviors (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011).

Blumer (1986) specified three basic premises to clarify the application of symbolic interaction. First, humans act toward things on the basis of the meaning that they hold and “things” can be defined as everything a person interacts with during her/his life. Second, the meaning of things is developed from social interaction with other people. The source of meaning for symbolic interaction is collective and not intrinsic to objects (Blumer, 1986). Mead (1962) as cited in Blumer (1986) stated that people do not only imagine their position in other people, but also in the objects and places that interact with them. Consequently, inanimate objects can influence human responses and interactions (Pascale, 2011). Third, the meanings are modified by an interpretive process. Everyone’s reality differs and how they define specific meaning depends on the consensus among people and processes of interpretation. Also, perceptions of symbols can change and impact either negatively or positively on a person’s reaction to health problems. Pascale (2011) stated that a sense of meaning involves an interpretive process during an individual’s communication with him/herself. He/she may suspend, re-form or change meanings.

Over the year, grounded theorists show a variety of philosophical beliefs and differentiate their studies. Their differences of philosophical position were in the way to understand about reality (ontology) and how to get the knowledge (epistemology) (Singh & Estefan, 2018).

Consequently, their philosophical viewpoints influence on their grounded theory perspective (Singh & Estefan, 2018).

Glaser (1978) considers going further with positivist philosophy in Classic grounded theory approach. He believes that a phenomenon of study should reflect a social process (Glaser, 1978). Positivists view the reality exists in the field, and also adopt an objectivist epistemology that emphasize independently of human interaction (Hall et al., 2013). This perspective leads Glaserians view that the reality is independent of researchers, and the researchers should do a passive approach. The researchers can understand the reality by remaining their objectivity and letting the data manifest itself. Glaser (1978) believes that the personal bias of researcher will contaminate the data.

Strauss’ background led the philosophical position of Straussian grounded theory approach, which was influenced by interactionism and pragmatism. Pragmatists believe that the truth is temporary, conditional, and an evolutionary action. The truth lives, but it is not ready-made and is waiting to be discovered. Pragmatism emphasizes on practice as consequences to determine the meaning or truth (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Pascale, 2011). Therefore, Strauss and Corbin viewed that the reality needs to be constructed, and it is asserted the possibility of multiple perspectives. However, to develop theory that describes knowledge, the researchers’ ability is needed, which should use systematically approach in order to avoid subjectivity of researchers and maintain an objective view (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The epistemological position encourages the researcher is not separated from the method, thus, the researchers actively involve and develop the theory together with the focus of the inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Constructivist grounded theory approach also has a distinct philosophical position from both of Glaser and Strauss’s perspectives. Charmaz (2006) offered a Constructivist perspective that believed in the possibility of multiple perspectives of reality. Reality is change over time and as an outcome of researchers’ interpretation (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory approach maintained much of Classic grounded theory approach (Hall et al., 2013). However, Charmaz (2006) has different views on how to get the knowledge of reality. She encourages the researchers to engage with the multiple views of phenomenon and make multiple interpretations. Therefore, this approach is based on previous experiences of researchers (Charmaz, 2006).

Since the three grounded theory approaches have derived from the root of grounded theory’s philosophy, they have similarities of common origin of methodology, such as obtaining data from natural setting, applying theoretical sampling as an analytic tool, and doing data collection and analysis simultaneous (Singh & Estefan, 2018). However, each philosophical position also influences their opposing methodological approach, such as the role of the researchers, the place of the literature review, the research questions formulation, and the coding process, as discussed in the following sections.

### **Role of Researchers**

The three grounded theory approaches have their own philosophical position, and those approaches will guide each grounded theorist in positioning the role of researchers to work with participants, approach to data and analysis, and formulate theory in order to gain knowledge about the reality ([Birks & Mills, 2012](#)). According to philosophical orientation of Glaserian grounded theory, Glaserian positioned the role of researcher as a distant observer and independent researcher. It reflects the view that the researcher and participants' relationship should be objective, and Glaser encouraged the researcher to find 'true meaning' ([Glaser, 1978](#)). This approach leads to a theory emerging directly from the data to avoid any bias or the researcher's interpretation ([Hall et al., 2013](#); [Lauridsen & Higginbottom, 2014](#)).

Contrarily, Strauss and Corbin viewed the truth is a result of interpretation and construction by a researcher. Thus, the analysis of data requires the involvement and interpretation of the researcher, or the researcher is a part of the method ([Hall et al., 2013](#); [Strauss & Corbin, 1998](#)). In other words, the Straussian approach encourages interactive relationship with participants and the intensive involvement of the researcher in the development of the theory. However, the researchers should maintain their objective view by keeping a distant from data and analysis through systematic approach ([Strauss & Corbin, 1998](#)).

For Constructivist grounded theory approach, [Charmaz \(2008\)](#) stated that the generated theory is co-constructed data collected by the researcher from the constructions of the participants from interaction. Researchers should take an active role by engaging passionately in the process of theory construction. Therefore, researchers cannot be separated from their research. The reality will be discovered by mutual relationship between the researchers and the participants ([Charmaz, 2006](#)).

### **Place of Literature Review**

In terms of the place of the literature review, the Glaserian approach warns the researchers not to review literatures in the substantive and associated area before collecting data to avoid their ideas that influence the data. Additionally, reading the literature can restrict the freedom needed to discover a theory ([Glaser, 1998](#); [Walls et al., 2010](#)). [Glaser \(1978\)](#) encouraged researchers to be open and trust in emergence of theory. However, [Glaser \(1998\)](#) recommended to review literatures in the substantive area and link it into the theory to a constant comparison when the last stage of grounded theory or in the stage of writing up the study.

Contrarily, the Straussian grounded theory approach suggests using the appropriate literatures before going into the field and every stage of the study. The researchers must be familiar with and have a clear understanding of the substantive knowledge ([Strauss & Corbin, 1990](#)). Therefore, this approach encourages the researchers to review the literatures and extant theories before collecting data as part of the preparation of the research, particularly for novice researchers ([Hall et al., 2013](#); [Lauridsen & Higginbottom, 2014](#)). Early and on-going review of

literatures is useful to enhance theoretical sensitivity, provide secondary sources of data, provide an inspiration to make some questions for interview, guide in determining of theoretical sampling, and facilitate a supplementary validation ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#); [Strauss & Corbin, 1990](#)). However, [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#) cautioned that "we do not want to be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even stifled in terms of creative efforts by our knowledge of it".

Similar with Straussian grounded theory, [Charmaz \(2006\)](#) also encouraged the researcher to do literature review. However, review should be done in a specific literature and compiled in a short section of paper. Furthermore, [Charmaz \(2006\)](#) recommended holding a comprehensive literature review after data analysis to facilitate the openness and creativity of researcher. The short section is needed to give the researchers a foundation to discuss with the area of study ([Charmaz, 2006](#)).

### **Research Question**

In regards to the formulation of research question, [Glaser \(1978\)](#) stated that the research questions should comprise of the six-Cs, which are causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions. In Classic grounded theory, the research questions should be based on general sociological perspective and general subject or problem area ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)). In Straussian grounded theory approach, the research question should explain about the specific topic area ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#)). In addition, its form should identify the phenomenon and subject of the study ([Strauss & Corbin, 1990](#)). In Constructivist grounded theory, its research question is similar to Straussian that focuses on particular topic area. However, [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#) mentioned that this specific issue can be generalized in broader context, while [Charmaz \(2006\)](#) mentioned that this local topic area is for local context only.

### **Coding Process**

In the data analysis process, coding is the essential analytical process that is used to develop a theory. Actually, the three grounded theory approaches use the same terms in the coding processes. However, the performance of each process is conducted in different ways.

Originally, [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#) described two levels of coding: substantive coding and theoretical coding. [Glaser and Holton \(2004\)](#) collaborated and presented the coding procedures of Classic grounded theory with increasing lucidity while maintaining the original coding procedure. They described that substantive coding is comprised of open and selective coding ([Glaser & Holton, 2004](#)). With this coding procedure the theory will be naturally emerged from the content of data. Therefore, the essential attitudes of the researchers during the coding procedure are being patience, trust that the theory will emerge, and careful and rigorous to employ the constant comparison technique, which make the data will be objective ([Kenny & Fourie, 2015](#)).

[Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#) proposed different level of coding procedures that consist of open coding, axial coding, and

selective coding. These procedures are more specifics that provide step-by-step fashion. In axial coding, researchers are required to generate categories and connections between them by using the paradigm model as guidance. The paradigm model consists of causal conditions as sets of events or situations that influence a phenomenon, action/interactional strategies as the tactics of a person to handle situations, problems, and issues; and consequences as the outcome of strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kenny & Fourie, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). But, this complex structure is criticized by Glaser (1992) due to the researcher is forcing the data and lost its nature. Charmaz (2006) also criticized that Strauss and Corbin changed the coding guidelines from original flexible to immutable rules. However, Strauss and Corbin (1990) clarified that the application of coding procedure should be flexible. They also argued that this paradigm model would guide and facilitate an accurate and systematic data analysis to create the theory.

Moreover, Charmaz's Constructivist approach also resists Straussian grounded theory approach to the coding processes. Charmaz (2008) argued that Straussian's coding process stifles and suppresses the researcher's creativity. She emphasized that the principle of flexibility is that the researcher has to learn to tolerate ambiguity and become receptive to creating emergent categories and strategies. The coding procedure of this approach consists of initial coding and focused coding. It emphasizes on interpretative of researcher based on intensive interviews. These interviews are analyzed and presented in the form of telling as the conceptualization and conclusion of the research (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser (2002) criticized that the Constructivist approach more emphasizes on description of participant's experiences, and facilitate the researcher to recast the participant's experiences, which contradicts the true conceptual nature. However, Charmaz (2006) argued that we are part of the world we study and the data we collect, thus it is impossible to avoid the interaction of researchers on data.

## CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist grounded theory approaches. These three approaches have different perspectives regarding to the philosophical position. In consequence, each grounded theory has divergent methodological approach, such as the role of researchers, the place of the literature review, the formulation of research question, and the coding process of data analysis. According to this review, researchers can select the three approaches and methods of grounded theory underpinning their study.

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### Author Contribution

This is the original work of the corresponding author.

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