CHAPTER 20

Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method

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In the introduction to this *Handbook*, James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium suggest that a social constructionist approach deals best with *what* people construct and *how* this social construction process unfolds. They argue that the constructionist vocabulary does not as readily address the *why* questions that characterize more positivistic inquiry.[1] In their earlier methodological treatise, *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), they proposed that naturalistic qualitative researchers could address *why* questions "by considering the contingent relations between the *whats and hows* of social life" (p. 200). To date, however, most qualitative research has not addressed *why* questions.

In contrast, the grounded theory method has had a long history of engaging both *why* questions and *what* and *how* questions. What

is grounded theory? The term refers to both the research product and the analytic method of producing it, which I emphasize here. The grounded theory method begins with inductive strategies for collecting and analyzing qualitative data for the purpose of developing middle-range theories. Examining this method allows us to rethink ways of bringing *why* questions into qualitative research.

A social constructionist approach to grounded theory allows us to address *why* questions while preserving the complexity of social life. Grounded theory not only is a method for understanding research participants' social constructions but also is a method that researchers construct throughout inquiry. Grounded theorists adopt a few strategies to focus their data gathering and analyzing, but what they do, how they do it,

and why they do it emerge through interacting in the research setting, with their data, colleagues, and themselves.

How, when, and to what extent grounded theorists invoke social constructionist premises depends on their epistemological stance and approach to research practice. From its beginnings, grounded theory has offered explicit guidelines that promise flexibility and encourage innovation. Paradoxically, these guidelines also provided sufficient direction such that some researchers have treated the method as a recipe for stamping out qualitative studies. These researchers emphasize *application* of the method—often a narrow and rigid application at that. Such application limits the potential of grounded theory and fosters the production of superficial studies. In contrast, a social constructionist approach encourages *innovation*; researchers can develop new understandings and novel theoretical interpretations of studied life. The value of social constructionism for grounded theory studies has only begun to be mined.

Distinguishing between a social constructionist and an objectivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2006) provides a heuristic device for understanding divisions and debates in grounded theory and indicates ways to move the method further into social constructionism. The form of constructionism I advocate includes examining (1) the relativity of the researcher's perspectives, positions, practices, and research situation, (2) the researcher's reflexivity; and (3) depictions of social constructions in the studied world.[2] Consistent with the larger social constructionist literature, I view action as a central focus and see it as arising within socially created situations and social structures. Constructionist grounded theorists attend to *what* and *how* questions. They emphasize abstract understanding of empirical phenomena and contend that this understanding must be located in the studied specific circumstances of the research process.

Objectivist grounded theory (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998) has roots in mid-20th-century positivism. It explicitly aims to answer *why* questions. Objectivist grounded theorists seek explanation and prediction at a general level, separated and abstracted from the specific research site and process. Unlike my version of grounded theory, which I have previously called constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2006), 20th-century constructionism treated research worlds as social constructions, but not research practices.

The two respective emphases on understanding and explanation are not entirely mutually exclusive. An abstract understanding of particular sites and situations can allow social constructionists to move from local worlds to a more general conceptual level. The close attention that social constructionist grounded theorists give their research problems builds the foundations for generic statements that they qualify according to particular temporal, social, and situational conditions.

In this chapter, I show how a grounded theory informed by social constructionism can lead to vibrant studies with theoretical implications that address *why* questions. To provide a backdrop for the discussion, I outline the development of grounded theory and delineate distinctions among proponents. By distinguishing between objectivism and constructionism in grounded theory, I explicate their underlying assumptions and point out the tensions between explanation and understanding. How might grounded theorists resolve these tensions? How might the ways in which they construct their studies foster developing explanations *and* understandings and thus attend to both the particular and the general? What principles might researchers adopt? To address these questions, I offer several guidelines and look at how two grounded theorists, Susan Leigh Star (1989) and Monica Casper (1998), constructed their respective analyses.

Reconstructing Contested Logics of Grounded Theory

Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss's (1967) original conception of grounded theory assumed a social constructionist approach to the empirical world. Like other social scientists of the time, they adopted a more limited form of social constructionism than what I advocate here. Glaser and Strauss did not attend to how they affected the research process, produced the data, represented research participants, and positioned their analyses.[3] Their research reports emphasized generality, not relativity, and objectivity, not reflexivity.

Nonetheless, Glaser and Strauss laid the foundation for constructing sound methods, as well as analyses. By adopting a few flexible guidelines, grounded theorists could construct their specific methodological strategies, as well as the content of their research.[4] Both method and content then emerge during the research process rather than being preconceived before empirical inquiry begins.

Until 1990, most scholars saw grounded theory as a single method based on a shared logic. As both the originators and their students worked with the method, changes emerged and debates ensued about what grounded theory entails, whose version is "correct," and which direction the method should take. How did these discussions unfold? What are their implications for a grounded theory founded in social constructionism? To understand these issues, I take a brief look back at the emergence of contested logics of the method(s).

Glaser had supplied much of the original logic and form of grounded theory. *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978) depicted his concept-indicator logic and focus on core variables. Beyond Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original statement, however, Strauss's *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987) and Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990, 1998) brought grounded the-

ory tools to researchers who had not studied with either Glaser or Strauss or their students.[5] Many qualitative researchers relied solely on the justificatory ammunition that Glaser and Strauss (1967) had fired in defense of qualitative research; however, other researchers sought specific analytic guidelines. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) did not simply offer guidelines; they prescribed procedures as a path to qualitative success. *Basics of Qualitative Research* became something of a bible for novices, who often interpreted the method in concrete ways that muted the social constructionist elements in the method.[6]

Meanwhile, the "qualitative revolution" that Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. ix) proclaimed had grown exponentially in and across fields. As I (Charmaz, 2000, 2006) have argued previously, the entire qualitative revolution owed much to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) initial statement. Glaser and Strauss made qualitative research defensible—even respectable—at a time when quantitative researchers had controlled the framing definitions of what counted as research: that is, only what these methodologists could count. Glaser and Strauss provided a strong justification for inductive qualitative inquiry that many researchers seized to legitimize their own work; but these researchers only loosely adopted the strategies, if at all.

Still, Glaser and Strauss (1967) inspired the democratization of qualitative research—and of theorizing itself. No longer must a qualitative researcher have the analytic acumen of an Erving Goffman or Anselm Strauss. No longer must qualitative research be a mysterious endeavor conducted by anointed elites. Qualitative research could spread beyond the confines of Chicago and its reach. Moreover, all qualitative researchers could aspire to theorizing and achieve their goals by following a handful of flexible guidelines.

Because grounded theory was decidedly inductive, scholars commonly viewed it as a

social constructionist method. Yet was it? Certainly its emphasis on building an analysis, studying processes, and attending to how people create and view their worlds had strong social constructionist leanings. Strauss's Chicago roots made the method compatible with symbolic interactionist, social constructionist currents in the discipline. Both Glaser and Strauss emphasized emergence, but subtle differences between them may be discerned. Glaser emphasized the emergence of the grounded theorist's ideas through studying the data. Strauss's use of the term also suggests the influence of George Herbert Mead's (1932) analysis of time. Fundamentally social and temporal processes result in the present emerging as new and different from the past.

By 1990, grounded theory had become something of an orthodoxy (see Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) book fostered an orthodox view—but it differed from Glaser and Strauss's original statement and undermined Glaser's emphasis on emergent codes and categories and, in his view, diminished his considerable contribution to the classic statement of grounded theory. Glaser (1992) objected and asked for retraction of the book. Other scholars framed the differences between Glaser and Strauss and Corbin as a debate, although the latter two did not respond publicly to Glaser's charges. No debate followed from Strauss and Corbin. To date, perhaps the closest statement to a response came from Corbin (1998) after Strauss's death. Other scholars (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003; Charmaz, 2000; La Rossa, 2005; Locke, 1997; Kelle, 2005), however, gave the differences between the two versions substantial discussion and debate from the 1990s to the present, particularly in nursing (see, e.g., Boychuk Duchscher & Morgan, 2004; May, 1996; Melia, 1996; Stern, 1994; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996).

Although Glaser's version of grounded theory differed from that of Strauss and Corbin in conception and concrete strategies, they shared basic premises about an ex-

ternal reality, the discovery of provisional truths in this reality, the role of the observer, and an unproblematic representation of research participants. Neither belabored accuracy, but Strauss's empirical studies with Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1984, 1988) demonstrate thorough description and data collection in the social constructionist tradition.

By the early 1990s, qualitative inquiry in general and grounded theory in particular had gained credibility in numerous disciplines. It was a short-lived victory. Contested views continued to develop as postmodernists challenged assumptions in social theory and qualitative research (see, e.g., Clough, 1992; Daly, 1997; Denzin, 1992). Grounded theory came to exemplify the criticisms these scholars leveled at ethnography and qualitative research more generally. Traditional qualitative research had roots in Enlightenment values, including beliefs in reason, objectivity, scientific authority, and notions of progress through science. Grounded theory became known as the most realist and positivist of the modernist qualitative methods (Van Maanen, 1988). For postmodernists, grounded theory epitomized distanced inquiry by objective experts who assumed their training licensed them to define and represent research participants. Glaser (1992) reappeared in methodological discussions and reaffirmed his objectivist stance; however, his views have exerted more influence in professional disciplines such as nursing and management than in the social sciences.

The postmodernist turn renewed—and intensified and generalized—epistemological critiques that theorists and several qualitative sociologists had made in the 1960s (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bruyn, 1966; Cicourel, 1964).[7] Postmodernist critiques challenged positivist assumptions in classic grounded theory statements and questioned its continued relevance. As a form of "naturalist inquiry" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1995), critics included grounded theory

among those approaches castigated as epistemologically naive, voyeuristic, and intrusive in the lives of the research participants (see, e.g., Clough, 1992). From postmodernist perspectives, the underlying assumptions in earlier grounded theory statements mirrored a modernist epistemology. Simultaneously, the narrative turn theorized and valorized respondents' full stories, unlike the grounded theory strategy of using excerpts of their stories to build theoretical statements. Not surprisingly, some sociologists who had previously adopted grounded theory methods (Ellis, 1995; Richardson, 1993; Riessman, 1990) sought new approaches.

Other critics either misunderstood or rejected grounded theory emphases on theory building rather than storytelling and on a particular process or problem rather than on the whole of research participants' lives. In actuality, few grounded theory studies build theory, but many provide an analytic handle on a specific experience. Still, the growing emphasis on storytelling caused some critics to question grounded theorists' use of data and their representation of research participants, and other critics disdained grounded theory analytic practices and claims to scientific authority.

Most critics could not see beyond Glaser and Strauss's (1967) early statements of the grounded theory method—and other critics still cannot (Dey, 1999, 2004; Layder, 1998). As a result, until recently (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006; Clarke, 2003, 2005, 2006; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003; Willig, 2001) the flexibility and potential versatility of the method remained hidden—and its promise for innovative social constructionist study remained unfulfilled. By fusing grounded theory strategies with the way Glaser and Strauss had used the method, critics had relegated grounded theory to being an outdated modernist method. Discarding grounded theory guidelines, along with Glaser and Strauss's objectivist assumptions, precluded revitalizing the method through social constructionism.

The Constructionist Renewal of Grounded Theory

Postmodern challenges from without combined with positivistic inclinations from within grounded theory spurred efforts to reclaim its strategies for social constructionist inquiry. Those of us who adhered to a relativist epistemology never concurred with grounding grounded theory in Glaser's mid-20th-century positivism. Strauss's students and colleagues (see, e.g., Charmaz, 1991, 2000; Clarke, 1998, 2005; Lempert, 1997; Maines, 1984; Reif, 1975) particularly imbued grounded theory with social constructionism, whether or not they articulated epistemological reasons for their actions. No doubt, for some, grounded theory was inherently social constructionist; yet, paradoxically, Strauss and Corbin's methodological procedures gave grounded theory an objectivist cast.

The Objectivist–Constructionist Dichotomy

Those grounded theorists who endorse a social constructionism informed by recent epistemological critiques have made explicit efforts to distinguish between key grounded theory strategies and their positivist antecedents (see, e.g., Bryant, 2002, 2003; Castallani, Castallani, & Spray, 2003; Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006; Clarke, 2003, 2005; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Seale, 1999). Numerous scholars have merged grounded theory strategies with the positivism inherent in Glaser's (1978, 1992, 1998) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) versions of the method.

Grounded theory strategies are just that—strategies for creating and interrogating our data, not routes to knowing an objective external reality. Objectivist versions of grounded theory assume a single reality that a passive, neutral observer discovers through value-free inquiry. Assumptions of objectivity and neutrality make data selec-

tion, collection, and representation unproblematic; they become givens, rather than constructions that occur during the research process, and they shape its outcome. A naive empiricism results. Objectivists assume that data are self-evident and speak for themselves. Possibilities of partial, limited, or missing data and multiple readings of them remain unseen (see also Clarke, 2005, 2006). Objectivists aim to generalize through abstractions that separate the completed grounded theory from the conditions and contingencies of its data collection and analysis (see Glaser, 1998, 2001). As abstraction increases, so does decontextualization of the research that gave rise to this abstraction. Objectivists seek generalizations that provide explanations and predictions. The completed grounded theory aims for fit, work, relevance, and modifiability (Glaser, 1978).

My constructionist approach makes the following assumptions: (1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions[8]; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched coconstruct the data—data are a *product* of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Clarke, 2005, 2006). In this approach, research always reflects value positions. Thus the problem becomes identifying these positions and weighing their effect on research practice, not denying their existence. Similarly, social constructionists disavow the idea that researchers can or will begin their studies without prior knowledge and theories about their topics. Rather than being a *tabula rasa*, constructionists advocate recognizing prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions and subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny.

The comparative method inherent in grounded theory helps researchers to scrutinize and conceptualize data but does not render the data objective, as Glaser (2003) asserts. From my constructionist view, objectivity is a questionable goal, and what researchers define as objective still reflects partial knowledge and particular perspectives, priorities, and positions. Subjectivities are embedded in data analysis, as well as in data collection. Methodological procedures neither make research objective nor preclude responsibility to locate research relative to time, place, and situation. Grounded theorists' awareness of the relativism in research practice fosters their reflexivity about how they construct their actions. Both constructionist and objectivist versions of grounded theory adopt a realist position, but constructionists view learning about and portraying the studied world as problematic.

This constructionist version of grounded theory redirects the method from its objectivist, mid-20th-century past and aligns it with 21st-century epistemologies (Charmaz, 2000, 2006).[9] Rather than assuming that theory emerges from data, constructionists assume that researchers construct categories of the data. Instead of aiming to achieve parsimonious explanations and generalizations devoid of context, constructionists aim for an interpretive understanding of the studied phenomenon that accounts for context. As opposed to giving priority to the researcher's views, constructionists see participants' views and voices as integral to the analysis—and its presentation.

These differences between objectivist and constructionist grounded theory offer researchers a frame to clarify their starting assumptions and research actions. In practice, however, grounded theory inquiry ranges between objectivist and constructionist approaches and has elements of both. Objectivist grounded theory strategies encourage researchers to be active analysts of their data. The reflexivity and relativity in this constructionist approach fosters taking researchers several steps further through critically examining their construction of the

research process as they seek to analyze how their research participants construct their lives (Charmaz, 2006).

Enacting 21st-Century Constructionist Principles

Reconstructing grounded theory with 21st-century methodological sensibilities can preserve a grounded theory while simultaneously answering varied criticisms of the method. When stripped of their epistemological clothing, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original flexible strategies still make for sound research practice that researchers can invoke to produce useful—and innovative—social constructionist analyses.

A 21st-century social constructionist grounded theory rests on certain principles, as I have implied earlier. Thus grounded theorists who adhere to this position:

- Treat the research process *itself* as a social construction
- Scrutinize research decisions and directions
- Improvise methodological and analytic strategies throughout the research process
- Collect sufficient data to discern and document how research participants construct their lives and worlds.

In brief, the first principle means that using grounded theory involves more than applying a recipe for qualitative research. This principle belies the current notion of treating the grounded theory method as something to apply and then treating the analysis as something a computer program compiles. Using grounded theory strategies means responding to emergent questions, new insights, and further information and simultaneously constructing the *method of analysis*, as well as the analysis. No set of rules can dictate what a researcher needs to do and when he or she needs to do it (see Sanders, 1995).

The second principle follows. To make these kinds of decisions, researchers must think through what they are doing and how and why they are doing it. Such thinking implicates the researcher, who does not stand outside the studied process but is a part of it, as I detail subsequently. Reflexivity is central to this constructionist revision and renewal of grounded theory. The scrutiny that grounded theorists give their method and—by extension—themselves leads to the third principle: improvising their methods and analytic strategies.

The fourth principle assumes that in order to understand how research participants construct their world, researchers need to know that world from their participants' standpoints (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1989). Invoking grounded theory as a "quick and dirty" method impedes gaining this understanding because achieving it includes defining tacit meanings and implicit actions, as well as what is directly observable and explicitly stated. Obtaining thorough, rich data, in contrast, facilitates seeking and seeing tacit meanings and actions and constructing useful grounded theories, as the subsequent research accounts attest.

Social Constructionism in Grounded Theory

Explicating a Basic Social Process

Studying a basic social process is—or was—a fundamental objective of classic grounded theory method.[10] How do grounded theorists go about it? How might a social constructionist approach inform their research? Several studies in the sociology of science exemplify adopting a social constructionist approach in grounded theory (see, e.g., Baszanger, 1998; Bowker & Star, 1999; Clarke, 1998). As a case in point, I analyze Susan Leigh Star's (1989) grounded theory in *Regions of the Mind: Brain Research and the Quest for Scientific Certainty*. In this book, she adopts social constructionist logic in her ar-

gument about how scientific theories become entrenched.

By looking at scientific work in a specific area and era, Star (1989) reconstructs what happened and how it occurred and simultaneously constructs a theoretical argument about scientific theorizing. She pieces together how 19th-century brain researchers, the localizationists, constructed certainty about their theory. These early brain researchers earned the name *localizationists* because they contended that local areas of the brain controlled specific neurological functions. Consistent with classical grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Star defines a process, "creating and maintaining certainty" (1989, p. 87), and identifies subprocesses constructed through individual and collective actions that constitute the major process. Localizationists transformed the uncertainty that they witnessed in their laboratories and clinics into what Star calls "global certainty at the institutional level" (p. 87). She addresses *what* and *how* questions here. In 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.

Through studying her data, Star (1989) defines a set of actions that, taken together, accomplished the hegemony of localization theory of the brain. To create and maintain certainty, localizationists engaged in the following actions: borrowing evidence from other fields, evaluating their operational procedures rather than actual technical failures, substituting ideal clinical pictures for anomalous findings, generalizing from case results, and reducing epistemological questions to debates about technique (Star, 1989, pp. 87–93). Star's depiction of how localizationists substituted ideal types for irregular cases exemplifies 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 (pp. 89–90) 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 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).

In the preceding excerpt, the relationship between interaction and action with the subsequent result is clear. The demand came first; a neurology textbook followed that contained functional atlases, which erased anomalies and ambiguities. The subsequent widespread adoption of the textbook made the localizationists' views the standard in the field. The ideal type had become more than a source of comparison; it became the only serious measure. Thus Star (1989) implies that these early neurologists had accomplished significant boundary work that prevented other theories of brain function to be 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 aforementioned actions in which they engaged. These actions arose in the exigencies of problem solv-

ing 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 (1989) moves from action to outcome in the excerpt. Earlier in the book, she provides 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. Clinicians urgently needed to make definitive diagnoses. Brain researchers needed to categorize diseases accurately. They both sought certainty. The lack of tolerance for ambiguity made localization theory appealing. Later, Star tells us that localizationists' financial sponsors also pressed for generality and standardization. When the sponsors' referees found irregular findings in localizationists' experimental reports, they requested that the localizationists standardize their existing results rather than redo the experiments. Here, significant external bodies buttress the construction of "facts," and subsequently having their imprimatur on the written reports serves to reify this construction.

Star (1989) 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. She specifies how actions construct processes and answers *what* and *how* questions. Star's use of grounded theory logic and construction of categories is transparent at this level. However, Star does not stop with *what* and *how* questions. As she merges processes into major categories and chapter titles, 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 scientific work:

> *The Implications of Analyzing Science as 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 became and remained entrenched, she offers a new explanation of change and stability in scientific theorizing. Star's strong answers to *how* questions provide 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 (1989) presents an analysis thoroughly grounded in data. Her sorting and categorizing of data make sense. She takes simple, direct, but intermediate categories

as her headings and subheadings 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 she did with "Creating and Maintaining Certainty," discussed earlier. Most of these intermediate categories are gerunds; they depict actions. As such, the categories not only give the reader a sense of people's intentions and concerns, but they also specify and anchor the analysis. When Star uses gerunds, her categories provide more information and a clearer point of view than her other categories. They enliven her narrative and inform the reader of its direction. Taken together, Star's intermediate categories outline her chapters and organize her argument.

Like other qualitative researchers, grounded theorists are often deservedly criticized for moving too quickly from the specific study to a general level.[11] The strength of Star's analysis permits her to move from the particular case of localization theory to considering 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. In contrast, she shows that "practical negotiations with and about anomalous events are constitutive of science at every level of organization" (Star, 1989, 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. (1989, p. 197)

Adapting Constructionist Grounded Theory for General Audiences

Grounded theory, particularly in its constructionist versions, can serve audiences in multiple disciplines and beyond the academy. As many critics have observed, authors often claim that grounded theory guided their inquiry, but their work bears no resemblance to it. Other authors use the method but do not claim it.[12] And numerous others adopt a couple of strategies, such as coding and some kind of memo writing, but do not engage in theoretical sampling or explication of a major category.

Monica J. Casper's (1998) book on fetal surgery, *The Making of the Unborn Patient: A Social Anatomy of Fetal Surgery*, acknowledges the influence of grounded theorists Clarke and Strauss, but its grounded theory origins are less clear than Star's. Nonetheless, Casper based her book on her dissertation, which used grounded theory. Like many authors, Casper outlines her diverse sources of data for her multisite ethnography, but she does not claim grounded theory analytic strategies.

The social constructionism stands out in Casper's book, from the title through the analysis. Proponents have created fetal surgery and, with surgical techniques, have created the unborn patient. Making the unborn into viable patients deserving of surgical interventions took sustained effort, which continues to be subject to disagreement and debate. Fetal surgery is not simply a natural sequel of medical progress; rather, it emerges from political advocacy, collective support, creation of a market, and cultural values. The notion of the unborn patient and the legitimacy of fetal surgery are both crafted social constructions that occurred within a particular historical moment and entered into larger public debates about re-

productive politics. Informed consent is not simply signed and documented. The consent form itself is manufactured after many discussions and iterations, but it often implies that the procedure represents the last hope and understates its risks and consequences.

Casper (1998) builds a detailed constructionist story and places herself and her multiple positions and situations in it. She acknowledges multiple actors and contested realities, her struggles with rendering them, and the relativity of her analysis.[13] She began her study as an engaged feminist and argues that no work—whether of fetal surgeons or of sociologists—stands outside of its contexts (p. 20). She states:

> I care too much about the issues raised by fetal surgery and the unborn patient to assume a polite, reasonable distance, and instead embrace a politics of engagement that recognizes my own immersions in the worlds I study. I have been moved and transformed by this research in multiple ways, and fetal surgery is something I shall continue to think and talk about long after this book is published. My politics and intellectual assumptions have been shaken time and again, precisely because fetal surgery evokes persistent debates about fetuses, abortion, women's roles, the health-care system, and rescued technologies. (p. 25)

Note how Casper's statement corresponds with constructivist assumptions. She acknowledges her starting points and continued immersion in this world as a social actor. Yet Casper also became immersed as a researcher and subsequently found her views challenged and changed. Like the studied phenomenon, the research process itself is never neutral or without context. It, too, is an emergent social construction. The political weight of Casper's topic magnified this social construction of the research process. Respondents and gatekeepers alike quizzed her about her views and commitments. Some gatekeepers stalled, limited, or refused access to data. Others welcomed Casper into their worlds knowing that she

took a critical stance toward their work. Contested positions surrounding a topic such as fetal surgery, however, can force the researcher to maintain a problematic view of the data and not uncritically accept one or another position, including one's own.

Several commitments shaped Casper's work. She locates her work as contributing to the dialogue of feminist scholars who had begun to theorize the fetus and to keep women in their theories. Thus this perspective leads her to keep women at the center of attention. As a result she takes into account how fetal surgery affected their lives; she does not reduce women to passive objects who were acted upon. Casper acknowledges that some critics might see her stance as biased. True, but her work implicitly conveys an alternative interpretation of the consequences of her perspective. She did not limit her study to the boundaries of inquiry set by fetal surgeons because theirs erased women as central participants and, by extension, erased questions of the effects of fetal surgery on their health.

Feminist theory and practice gave Casper a series of sensitizing concepts from which to develop. Starting points frame but do not determine the content of constructionist grounded theory. Thus Casper remains attuned to cultural practices, conceptions of personhood, and the place of women's bodies and health in the unfolding scenarios that she witnessed. Casper's feminist perspective no doubt informed her of earlier lengthy debates between prochoice and antiabortion activists about establishing if or when a fetus had human qualities and whose rights—the mother's or the unborn's—took precedence. She detects meanings attached to representations of the fetus as a free agent with its own needs and interests, a unique, autonomous individual, a visible presence, a separate being from the mother, and worthy of protection (Casper, 1998, p. 16). In keeping with sociological treatment of work, Casper aims to show how fetal surgery is a particular type of work that occurred in special work sites.

Casper's book tells a complex tale and involves multiple types of data, ranging from documents to oral histories to firsthand observations. How might its grounded theory underpinnings be discerned? First, Casper sees the history of fetal surgery as a socially constructed process and titles a chapter "Breaching the Womb." Second, she inserts telling *in vivo* codes into the headings and subheadings of her chapters. Among them are: "A Bona Fide Patient" (p. 51), "Not God's Will" (p. 67), "A Spirit of Cooperation" (p. 110), "Folks Are Always Rubbing Shoulders" (p.115), and "It's a Reality Dump" (p.151). Third, Casper shows how actions, conditions, and contingencies contribute to the larger processes of conducting and legitimizing fetal surgery.

Does Casper develop complex grounded theory categories? Does she explain one core variable? Does she offer precise generalizations abstracted from their sources? No. Casper skillfully constructs the social construction of the unborn patient; her theorizing remains embedded in the narrative. She presents a complex analysis of complicated worlds, and does so in accessible terms. Although Casper's use of grounded theory bears little resemblance to objectivist grounded theory, it contains crucial elements of social constructionism consistent with my approach. These elements include (1) the attention to context; (2) the locating of actors, situations, and actions; (3) the assumption of multiple realities; and (4) the subjectivity of the researcher, noted previously. Casper produces an interpretive understanding of the arenas she entered and points out that both her interpretations and the studied scenes could change as emergent contingencies unfold.

We must look at Casper's purposes to understand her strategies. From the start, she aimed to write a book free from the esoteric obscurity of academic discourse. Thus she intended to make her book a vibrant specific sociological story anchored to a larger story of contemporary politics and culture, and she fulfilled her goal.

Summary and Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have built an argument explaining how and why social constructionists can adopt grounded theory guidelines to deepen and broaden their analyses and thus address *why* questions. A social constructionist approach to grounded theory encourages researchers to make measured assessments of their methods and of themselves as researchers. A close attention to *what* and *how* questions builds the foundation for moving to *why* questions, as Star's (1989) analysis demonstrates. Thus social constructionists can invoke the generalizing logic of objectivist grounded theory but do so in full view of their measured assessments, not in absence of them. The result promises to be a nuanced analysis that acknowledges and analyzes positionality and partiality, as Casper's (1998) analysis testifies. The subsequent social constructionist analysis resists the tendency in objectivist grounded theory to oversimplify, erase differences, overlook variation, and assume neutrality throughout inquiry. Simultaneously, this analysis grapples with *why* questions and offers qualified explanations.

Grounded theory is a method of explication and emergence. The method itself explicates the kinds of analytic guidelines that many qualitative researchers implicitly adopt. It also fosters explicating analytic and methodological decisions—each step along the way. By explicating their decisions, grounded theorists gain control over their subject matter and their next analytic or methodological move. The construction of the process, as well as the analytic product, is emergent. As I stated earlier, immediate exigencies in the field and concerns of gatekeepers and participants affect this construction, and the contextual positioning of the research frames it. All become grist for analysis. In short, when social constructionists combine their attention to context, action, and interpretation with grounded theory analytic strategies, they can produce dense analyses with explanatory power, as well as

conceptual understanding. Simultaneously, their analyses attest to how furthering the social constructionist elements in grounded theory strengthen the method.

• Acknowledgments

• Notes

1. David Silverman (2005) has made a similar argument about qualitative research. He contends that by studying phenomena that occur naturally, qualitative researchers can define how interaction ensues and what meanings it holds. For Silverman, answering the "how" and "what" questions must precede the "why" questions.

2. In earlier works, I have referred to my approach as *constructivist grounded theory* to distinguish it from objectivist iterations. The present chapter continues my earlier approach but frames the discussion under the more general rubric of social constructionism to be consistent with the purpose of this volume. Constructivist grounded theory assumes relativity, acknowledges standpoints, and advocates reflexivity. My use of constructivism assumes the existence of an obdurate, real world that may be interpreted in multiple ways. I do not subscribe to the radical subjectivism assumed by some advocates of constructivism. Consistent with Marx, I assume that people make their worlds but do not make them as they please. Rather, worlds are constructed under particular historical and social conditions that shape our views, actions, and collective practices. Constructivist grounded theory (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006; Clarke, 2003, 2005, 2006) has fundamental epistemological roots in sociological social constructionism. My position on social constructionist grounded theory in this chapter relies on the preceding definition and its premises.

3. They did claim that their method was phenomenological (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Social constructionist approaches had a long and varied history but moved to the forefront of qualitative sociology in the late 1960s. Harold Garfinkel published *Studies in Ethnomethodology* in 1967. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) came out almost simultaneously with *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and built on the phenomenological tradition of Alfred Schutz (1967). In contrast, Strauss's social constructionism drew on the pragmatist and symbolic interactionist traditions of Blumer (1969), Dewey (1958), Mead (1932, 1934), and Peirce (1958). These three developments remained relatively independent of each other. Neither Strauss nor Glaser was influenced by the other developments, but Strauss remained in frequent contact with his Chicago school colleagues. Much of Strauss's (1993) and Corbin and Strauss's (1984, 1988) subsequent research and writing contained strong constructionist elements; Glaser's much less so.

4. A number of works describe the method and its variations, so I do not detail them here. See Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2006); Clarke (2005, 2006); Glaser (1978, 1998, 2003); Glaser and Strauss (1967); Strauss (1987); Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998).

5. Their students' locations also influenced the dissemination of grounded theory. Many more of the University of California, San Francisco, nursing doctoral students of the early years later took positions in doctoral training programs in their profession than did the sociology students of the same era. Graduate programs in nursing emerged and expanded from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, whereas positions in graduate sociology programs shrunk.

6. Paradoxically, the social constructionist logic of Corbin and Strauss's (1988) empirical work often is apparent.

7. See Bryant and Charmaz (2007) for a discussion of the epistemological climate of the mid-1960s.

8. I come close to the Marxist view of history here because I acknowledge human agency but assert that it always occurs within a preexisting social frame with its constraints—of which we may be unaware and which may not be of our choosing (see also Charmaz, in press).

9. My subsequent comparisons draw on Charmaz (in press).

10. Now Glaser (2003) disavows his earlier insistence on finding and studying a basic social process. I have long argued that the quest for a basic social process can mislead the researcher or

mask many processes, and therefore I agree with his recent view (see also Clarke, 2005).

11. Any qualitative study without extensive data can make only limited claims; small interview studies that make general claims stand on shaky ground. The generality of the claims needs to be proportionate to the thoroughness of the data collection.

12. The genre matters here. Academic disciplines and journals vary in their prescriptions for methodological detail. Many require authors to specify their logic of sampling and data collection, but not their analytic strategies. Books differ markedly in the amount and complexity of methodological explanation, depending on the publisher and projected audience. Trade and crossover books (those published as scholarly works that will reach general educated audiences) seldom provide more than minimal information and may not include a methodological section or appendix.

13. These dimensions of Casper's work align her with the constructivist grounded theory that I have previously delineated.

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