

CHAPTER 13

Grounded Theory Designs

***G**rounded theory enables you to generate a broad theory about your qualitative central phenomenon “grounded” in the data. As a systematic procedure, it appeals to a wide range of educational researchers. This chapter defines grounded theory research, identifies when to use it, assesses the key characteristics of it, examines several ethical issues in this form of inquiry, and advances the steps in conducting and evaluating this design.*

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- ◆ Define grounded theory research, and describe when to use it, and how it developed.
- ◆ Distinguish among three types of grounded theory designs.
- ◆ Identify the key characteristics of grounded theory research.
- ◆ Identify some potential ethical issues in conducting grounded theory research.
- ◆ Describe the steps in conducting a grounded theory study.
- ◆ Evaluate the quality of a grounded theory study.

Maria designs a grounded theory study for her school committee and her graduate research project. Her research question is “What is the process involved in apprehending students for weapon possession in their high schools?” To study this question, she plans to explore a process, the process of apprehending students for carrying weapons. Study of this process will help her understand one aspect of carrying weapons in the school. She identifies 10 people to interview: 5 students who were actually caught and 5 teachers or administrators who were involved in the apprehensions. After interviewing these individuals, Maria analyzes the data for themes (or categories). She arranges these categories into a visual model of the process. She develops a theory of the process of “being apprehended” for weapon possession in the hope that this theory will provide an explanation that school officials might use to identify early-warning signs for students who may be prone to possess weapons in high schools. Maria has constructed a grounded theory qualitative study.

WHAT IS GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH, WHEN SHOULD YOU USE IT, AND HOW DID IT DEVELOP?

A **grounded theory design** is a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or an interaction about a substantive topic. In grounded theory research, this theory is a “process” theory—it explains an educational process of events, activities, actions, and interactions that occur over time. Also, grounded theorists proceed through systematic procedures of collecting data, identifying categories (used synonymously with themes), connecting these categories, and forming a theory that explains the process.

When Do You Use Grounded Theory?

You use grounded theory when you need a broad theory or explanation of a process. Grounded theory *generates* a theory when existing theories do not address your problem or the participants that you plan to study. Because a theory is “grounded” in the data, it provides a better explanation than a theory borrowed “off the shelf,” because it fits the situation, actually works in practice, is sensitive to individuals in a setting, and may represent all of the complexities actually found in the process. For instance, in the study of certain educational populations (e.g., children with attention disorders), existing theories may have little applicability to special populations.

You also use grounded theory when you wish to study some process, such as how students develop as writers (Neff, 1998) or how high-achieving African American and Caucasian women’s careers develop (Richie, Fassinger, Linn, & Johnson, 1997). It also is used to explain actions of people, such as the process of participating in an adult education class (Courtney, Jha, & Babchuk, 1994), or an interaction among people, such as the support department chairs provide for faculty researchers (Creswell & Brown, 1992).

For the beginning qualitative researcher, grounded theory offers a step-by-step, systematic procedure for analyzing data. Having this procedure available may be helpful to students when they defend qualitative studies before faculty committees. As a systematic process, grounded theory exhibits the rigor quantitative researchers like to see in an educational study. As part of this process, grounded theory has features that contain a self-correcting nature. Based on analyzing one set of data, the researcher obtains direction from the analysis for the next set of data (Charmaz, 2000). Also, in data analysis, the researcher builds categories systematically from incident to incident and from incident to category. In this way, the researcher stays close to the data at all times in the analysis.

How Did Grounded Theory Develop?

Two sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and the late Anselm L. Strauss, developed grounded theory in the late 1960s. It evolved out of their work at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center with patients who were terminally ill. In studying these patients, Glaser and Strauss recorded and publicized their methods of research. This led to many individuals contacting Glaser and Strauss to learn more about their research methods. In response, Glaser and Strauss developed a pioneering book that expounded in detail on their grounded theory procedures, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). This book laid the foundation for the major ideas of grounded theory used today, and it became a procedural guide for numerous dissertations and research reports. In *Discovery*, Glaser and Strauss took the position that the current theory in sociology overly stressed verifying and testing theories rather than discovering the concepts (variables) and hypotheses based on actual field data from participants. A theory discovered during data collection

will “fit the situation being researched and will work when put into use” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3) better than a theory identified before a study begins.

The ideas in *Discovery* reflected the background of both authors. Glaser trained in quantitative research at Columbia University, with noted researchers who were interested in the inductive development of theory using quantitative and qualitative data. This inductive perspective led him to embrace the importance of generating theory from the perspective of participants in a study. Strauss, however, came to grounded theory from the University of Chicago, with a strong history and tradition in qualitative field research. This background led Strauss to emphasize the importance of field research, that is, going to individuals and listening closely to participants’ ideas.

In the years following *Discovery*, both Glaser and Strauss independently authored several books that refined and explained their early methods (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss, 1987). In 1990 and in 1998, Strauss teamed with a community nursing health researcher, Juliet Corbin, to take the techniques and procedures of grounded theory to new levels. They introduced a more prescriptive form of grounded theory, with predetermined categories and with concerns about validity and reliability.

Their systematic approach, although embraced by new qualitative researchers (Charmaz, 2000), provoked a critical response from Glaser (1992), which he detailed in a book to “set researchers using grounded theory on a correct path” (p. 3). Glaser was primarily concerned about how Strauss used preconceived categories and frameworks that did not allow theory to emerge during the process of research. He also took issue with what he saw as an emphasis on simply describing acts rather than actively conceptualizing patterns or connections in the data that would lead to theory.

“So who’s got the real grounded theory?” asks Charmaz (2000, p. 513). Her question was more than rhetorical; she answered it by advancing her own approach to grounded theory, the “constructivist” method (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz felt that both Glaser and Strauss (and Strauss and Corbin) were much too systematic in their procedures. Grounded theorists needed to stress flexible strategies, emphasize the meaning participants ascribe to situations, acknowledge the roles of the researcher and the individuals being researched, and expand philosophically beyond a quantitative orientation to research.

TYPES OF GROUNDED THEORY DESIGNS

We can see that perspectives about conducting grounded theory research have differed depending on the advocate for a particular approach. However, three dominant designs are discernible (Hood, 2007): the systematic procedure allied with Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Corbin and Strauss (2008); the emerging design, associated with Glaser (1992); and the constructivist approach espoused by Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2006).

The Systematic Design

The systematic design for grounded theory is widely used in educational research, and it is associated with the detailed, rigorous procedures that Strauss and Corbin identified in 1990 and elaborated in their second and third editions on techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (1998). It is much more prescribed than the original conceptualization of grounded theory in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A **systematic design in grounded theory** emphasizes the use of data analysis steps of open, axial, and selective coding, and the development of a logic paradigm or a visual picture of the theory generated. In this definition, three phases of coding exist.

In the first phase, **open coding**, the grounded theorist forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information. The researcher

bases categories on all data collected, such as interviews, observations, and researcher's memos or notes. Typically, researchers identify categories and subcategories, as is seen in the grounded theory study by Knapp (1995). She examined the career development of 27 educational trainers in career development. In interviews with these trainers, she learned about their adaptability and resilience. One page from her study, shown in Figure 13.1,

FIGURE 13.1**An Example of Coding Categories in Grounded Theory**

Coding	
<i>Categories</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Specialization	
definition	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26
generalist	1, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 23, 24
change agent	13, 17, J
Transferable skills	
previous job experience	CO2, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26
cross training in another department	7, 8, 12, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25
Finding a focus	
entering field serendipitously	5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, J, M
occupational fit	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, J
turn down promotions	2, 12, 18, 23
understanding self	3, 6, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25
having a personal mission	3, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19
personally well grounded	2, 6, 13, 14, 19
other centered	CO2, 3, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24
Learning On-the-Job	
wandering around in the dark	CO2, 15, 22, M
trial and error	CO2, 2, 15, 16, 23, 24
gradual development	1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 17, 20, 22
facilitating training	1, 8, 11, 17, 20, 21, 24, 26
keeping current	CO2, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 24, 26
learning environment	CO2, 18, 24, 26, F

KEY

#	Interview
CO#	Pilot
F	Focus groups
J	Journal
M	Memo
O	Observation

portrays several categories that Knapp identified from her data, such as specialization, transferable skills, finding a focus, and on-the-job learning. In this coding presentation, we find that Knapp also indicates the sources of information that support the categories, such as interviews, focus groups, journals, memos, and observations.

To consider another example of open coding, see Figure 13.2, which displays the coding for a study of 33 academic chairpersons in colleges and universities and their roles in enhancing faculty research (Creswell & Brown, 1992). The authors organized their presentation of open coding differently than Knapp and included broad categories, properties, and dimensionalized examples, and followed the systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1990). The major features of this table are the seven categories of roles: provider, enabler, advocate, mentor, encourager, collaborator, and challenger. However, the authors introduce two new ideas into our understanding of open coding. **Properties** are subcategories in grounded theory of open codes that serve to provide more detail about each category. Each property, in turn, is dimensionalized in grounded theory. A **dimensionalized property** means that the researcher views the property on a continuum and locates, in the data, examples representing extremes on this continuum. For example, the chair, as a provider (category), engages in funding faculty (a property), which consists of possibilities on a continuum of extent of funds ranging from long-term start-up seed money to short-term travel money (dimensionalized property).

In the second phase, **axial coding**, the grounded theorist selects one open coding category, positions it at the center of the process being explored (as the core phenomenon), and then relates other categories to it. These other categories are the causal conditions (factors that influence the core phenomenon), strategies (actions taken in response to the core phenomenon), contextual and intervening conditions (specific and general situational factors that influence the strategies), and consequences (outcomes from using the strategies). This phase involves drawing a diagram, called a **coding paradigm**, which portrays the interrelationship of causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences.

To illustrate this process, first examine Figure 13.3. In this figure, we see the open coding categories on the left and the axial coding paradigm on the right. A grounded theory researcher identifies one of the open coding categories as the core category that is central to a theory (we review the criteria for selecting this core category later). Then, this core category becomes the centerpoint of the axial coding paradigm. Examining this paradigm, you can see that there are six boxes (or categories) of information:

1. *Causal conditions*—categories of conditions that influence the core category
2. *Context*—the specific conditions that influence the strategies
3. *Core category*—the idea of phenomenon central to the process
4. *Intervening conditions*—the general contextual conditions that influence strategies
5. *Strategies*—the specific actions or interactions that result from the core phenomenon
6. *Consequences*—the outcomes of employing the strategies

In addition, viewing this coding paradigm from left to right, we see that the causal conditions influence the core phenomenon, the core phenomenon and the context and intervening conditions influence the strategies, and the strategies influence the consequences.

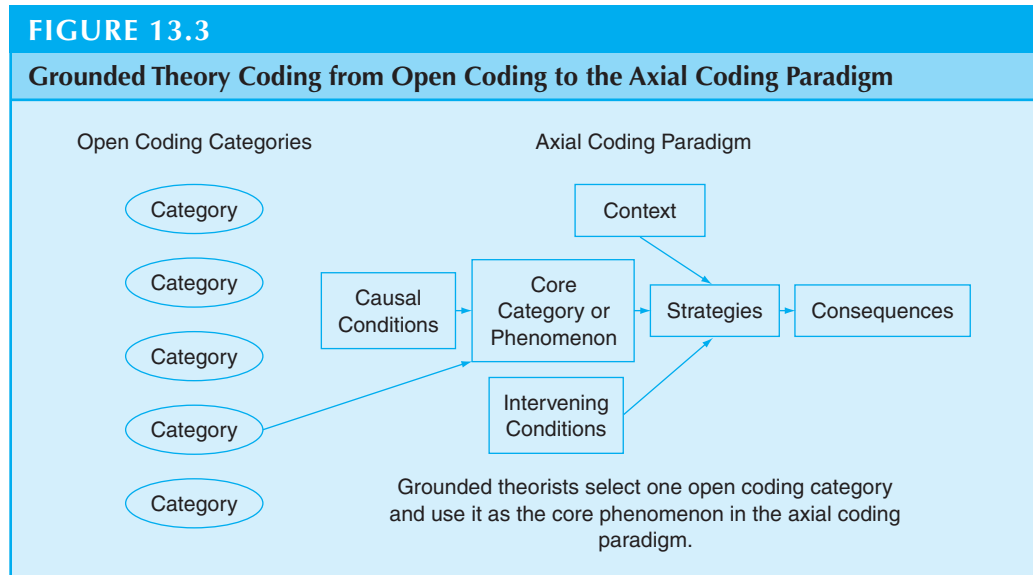
The third phase of coding consists of selective coding. In **selective coding** the grounded theorist writes a theory from the interrelationship of the categories in the axial coding model. At a basic level, this theory provides an abstract explanation for the process being studied in the research. It is the process of integrating and refining the theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) through such techniques as writing out the story line that interconnects the categories and sorting through personal memos about theoretical ideas (see discussion on memos later in the chapter). In a story line, a researcher might examine

FIGURE 13.2**An Example of Coding Categories in Grounded Theory with Properties and Dimensionalized Properties****Table 1**
Open Coding of Chairperson's Role

Broad Categories*	Category	Properties	Dimensionalized Examples		
Administrative role	Provider	With funding	Start-up seed money	Short-term travel	
		With nonfinancial aid	Laboratory equipment	Student personnel	
	Enabler	With more money	Faculty committees	Long-term sabbatical	
		With more visibility	Faculty committees	Administrative assignments	
External role	Advocate	For resources	Short-term funds	Long-term facilities	
		For interaction	With faculty	With students	
		To assist politically	With dean	With faculty	
Interpersonal role	Mentor	By role modeling	Time management	Working with others	
		By sharing expertise	About research topics	About specific journals	
		By reviewing and critiquing	Before manuscript submission	After manuscript submission	
		Encourager	By hands off	No pressure	Choice belongs to professor
			By recognition and appreciation	Private communication	Public communication
			By general support	Personal friendship	Professional collegiality
	Collaborator	By task-specific encouragement	Supporting ideas	Encouraging specific book or article	
		By jointly setting goals	Informal discussion	Formal performance reviews	
			By working together on projects	Writing grant proposals	Writing journal articles
	Challenger	By prodding	Gentle reminder	Direct formal conversation	
		By inspiring	Discussing general possibilities	Discussing specific examples	
		By evaluating and monitoring	Biweekly conferences	Annual review	

Source: Creswell & Brown, 1992.

*Corbin and Strauss (2008) define a category as "a higher-level concept" (p. 159). It is these concepts which analysts group into lower-level concepts according to shared properties. These concepts are sometimes called themes and they enable the researcher to reduce and combine data.



how certain factors influence the phenomenon leading to the use of specific strategies with certain outcomes.

Use of these three coding procedures means that grounded theorists use set procedures to develop their theory. They rely on analyzing their data for specific types of categories in axial coding and use diagrams to present their theories. A grounded theory study using this approach might end with hypotheses (called *propositions* by Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that make explicit the relationship among categories in the axial coding paradigm.

A study of the process of coping by 11 women who survived childhood sexual abuse illustrates this systematic procedure (Morrow & Smith, 1995). In this study we learn that the women felt threatened, helpless, and powerless, but that they survived and coped by managing their feelings (e.g., avoiding or escaping feelings, not remembering experiences). They also address their feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness using strategies such as seeking control in other areas of their life, reframing abuse to give the illusion of control, or simply rejecting power issues. As an example of the systematic procedure associated with Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Corbin and Strauss (2008), the authors include the process of open coding, axial coding, and generating a theoretical model. They had clearly identified sections in the study for discussion about each component of axial coding (e.g., causes of feelings and helplessness, the strategies used, and the consequences). A diagram illustrates the “theoretical model” for surviving and coping, and they discuss this diagram as a sequence of steps in the process of coping behavior.

The Emerging Design

Although Glaser participated with Strauss in the book on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Glaser has since written an extensive critique of the Strauss approach. In this critique, Glaser (1992) felt that Strauss and Corbin (1990) had overly emphasized rules and procedures, a preconceived framework for categories, and theory verification rather than theory generation. (Babchuk [1996, 1997] reviewed the history of the use of

grounded theory.) Glaser (1992), however, stressed the importance of letting a theory emerge from the data rather than using specific, preset categories such as we saw in the axial coding paradigm (e.g., causal conditions, content, intervening condition, strategies, and consequences). Moreover, for Glaser, the objective of a grounded theory study was for the author to explain a “basic social process.” This explanation involved the constant comparative coding procedures of comparing incident to incident, incident to category, and category to category. The focus was on connecting categories and emerging theory, not on simply describing categories. In the end, the researcher builds a theory and discusses the relationship among categories without reference to a diagram or picture.

The more flexible, less prescribed form of grounded theory research as advanced by Glaser (1992) consists of several major ideas:

1. Grounded theory exists at the most abstract conceptual level rather than the least abstract level as found in visual data presentations such as a coding paradigm.
2. A theory is grounded in the data and it is not forced into categories.
3. A good grounded theory must meet four central criteria: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. By carefully inducing the theory from a substantive area, it will fit the realities in the eyes of participants, practitioners, and researchers. If a grounded theory works, it will explain the variations in behavior of participants. If it works, it has relevance. The theory should not be “written in stone” (Glaser, 1992, p. 15) and should be modified when new data are present.

Larson’s (1997) study portrayed a grounded theory study consistent with Glaser’s approach. The goal for Larson was to write a “theory-in-process” (p. 118) for high school social studies teachers’ conception of discussion in their classrooms. This example of an emerging design takes the reader through six conceptions that emerged in the data: discussion as recitation, as a teacher-directed conversation, as an open-ended conversation, as posing challenging questions, as guided transfer of knowledge to the world outside the classroom, and as practice of verbal interaction. Larson also identified factors that influenced these conceptions, such as student diversity and lesson objectives.

In this emerging grounded theory approach, Larson’s attention was on developing an explanation for discussion in high school social studies classrooms. His procedure was to generate categories by examining the data, refining the categories into fewer and fewer categories, comparing data with emerging categories, and writing a theory of several processes involved in classroom discussions. Larson developed categories but did not present a diagram of his theory.

The Constructivist Design

The constructivist approach has been articulated by Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2006) as a philosophical position. To her, it lies between the more positivist (i.e., more quantitative) stance of Glaser and Strauss and Corbin and postmodern researchers (i.e., those who challenge the importance of methods). Overall, her focus is on the meanings ascribed by participants in a study. She is more interested in the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of individuals than in gathering facts and describing acts. Charmaz (2000, 2006) suggested that any aspects that obscure experiences, such as complex terms or jargon, diagrams, or conceptual maps, detract from grounded theory and represent an attempt to gain power in their use. Using active codes, such as “recasting life,” best captures the experiences of individuals. Moreover, a grounded theory procedure does not minimize the role of the researcher in the process. The researcher makes decisions about the categories throughout the study (Charmaz, 1990). The researcher

brings certain questions to the data, along with a “store of sociological concepts” (p. 1165). The researcher also brings values, experiences, and priorities. Any conclusions developed are suggestive, incomplete, and inconclusive.

In applying this approach, a grounded theorist explains the feelings of individuals as they experience a phenomenon or process. The constructivist study mentions the beliefs and values of the researcher and eschews predetermined categories, such as those found in axial coding. The narrative is written to be more explanatory, more discursive, and more probing of the assumptions and meanings for individuals in the study.

Charmaz illustrated the central elements of this approach to grounded theory. In a study of the processes involved in the experiences of 20 men with chronic illnesses (e.g., multiple sclerosis, renal failure, diabetes), Charmaz (1994) explored how and in what way their illnesses precipitated a personal identity dilemma. She contended that chronic illness threatened men’s “taken-for-granted” masculine identities. Her findings explored several dilemmas, such as risking activity versus forced passivity, remaining independent versus becoming dependent, maintaining dominance versus becoming subordinate, and preserving a public persona versus acknowledging private feelings. These dilemmas clustered into several processes the men experienced—awakening to death, accommodating uncertainty, defining illness and disability, and preserving self.

Using a constructivist approach to grounded theory, she clearly articulated that her purpose was to understand “what it means to have a disease” (Charmaz, 1994, p. 284). She reported the feelings of the men, using active code labels such as *awakening*, *accommodating*, *defining*, and *preserving*. These codes signal basic processes the men were experiencing. Charmaz interrelated their experiences, their conditions, and their consequences in a narrative discussion without the use of diagrams or figures to summarize these processes. She ended with thoughts such as “What are the conditions that shape whether a man will reconstruct a positive identity or sink into depression?” (pp. 283–284), more suggestive and questioning of the data than conclusive.

Choosing Among the Designs

Choosing among the three approaches requires several considerations. As you consider conducting a grounded theory study, you need to weigh how strongly you want to emphasize procedures, use predetermined categories in analysis, position yourself as a researcher, and decide how to end the study, whether it is with tentative questions or hypotheses that are specific.

If you were Maria, seeking to generate a theory of the process of apprehending students for weapon possession, what design would you use? Because Maria is a beginning researcher, the more structured approach of the systematic design would be ideal. With the procedures clearly identified and the axial coding model specified in terms of types of categories to relate, the systematic procedure would be best.

In selecting one of the three approaches, consider that the procedures advanced by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) may lead to a commitment to a set of analytic categories (Robrecht, 1995) and a lack of conceptual depth (Becker, 1993). Also, in all types, grounded theory has a distinct language that some educators may view as jargon and, hence, in need of careful definition (e.g., constant comparative, open coding, axial coding). One criticism is that these terms are not always clearly defined (Charmaz, 2006), although Corbin and Strauss (2008) provided numerous definitions at the beginning of each chapter of their book. Finally, with the varied approaches to this design and the continual emergence of new perspectives, readers may become confused and not know which procedures would best produce a well-developed theory.

THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH

Grounded theory can incorporate a systematic approach, a flexible emerging design, and the use of active codes to capture the experiences of participants. In the six characteristics that follow, you can find elements of the systematic, emerging, and constructivist approaches. Characteristics that grounded theory researchers use in their designs are:

- ◆ Process approach
- ◆ Theoretical sampling
- ◆ Constant comparative data analysis
- ◆ A core category
- ◆ Theory generation
- ◆ Memos

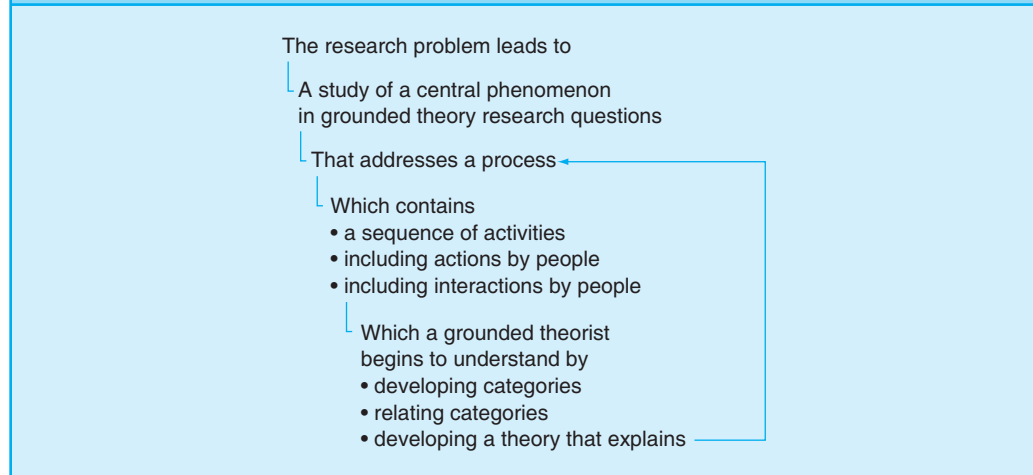
A Process Approach

Although grounded theorists might explore a single idea (e.g., leadership skills), they more frequently examine a process because the social world that we live in involves people interacting with other people. Grounded theorists generate an understanding of a process related to a substantive topic. A **process in grounded theory research** is a sequence of actions and interactions among people and events pertaining to a topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The educational topic could be AIDS prevention, achievement assessment, or counseling between a school counselor and a student. In all of these topics, researchers can isolate and identify actions and interactions among people. Grounded theorists call these isolated aspects categories. **Categories in grounded theory designs** are themes of basic information identified in the data by the researcher and used to understand a process. A category for the process between a school counselor and student, for example, may be the student's understanding of "success" in the session.

Several types of labels or titles are used for themes or categories. In grounded theory research, a frequently used form is *in vivo* codes. **In vivo codes** are labels for categories (or themes) that are phrased in the exact words of participants, rather than in the words of the researcher or in social science or educational terms. Researchers identify these words by examining passages of transcripts or observational fieldnotes to locate phrases mentioned by participants that capture the intent of a category. For example, rather than use the social science concept "upward mobility," a participant might call this idea "goin' up the ladder." Using *in vivo* coding, the researcher would use the phrase "goin' up the ladder" to describe the category. Because categories become major headings in research reports, this phrase would be the heading of the discussion about the open coding category "goin' up the ladder."

It is helpful to see how the two ideas of process and categories relate to activities that are typically applied by a grounded theorist. Examine the flow of activities as shown in Figure 13.4.

A researcher begins with a research problem, such as the need to examine how academic chairpersons balance their work and personal lives. The central phenomenon, then, becomes a "balance of work and personal life." To study this central phenomenon, the grounded theorist frames it as a process, such as the "process by which chairs balance their work and personal lives" (alternatively, the process of "imbalance" might be explored). Whatever be the process, it has a sequence of activities, actions and interactions among people. The actions of the chair might include exercising early in

FIGURE 13.4**A Process and Categories within the Flow of Research in Grounded Theory**

the morning and visiting with faculty later in the morning about stressful situations in the department. Here we have several activities, organized into a sequence, exhibiting actions by people. As the grounded theorist studies chairpersons (e.g., through interviews or observations), an understanding of the process of balancing work and personal life slowly emerges. The researcher categorizes this information, drawing on evidence to support each category. This phase is the open coding phase. Then the researcher starts organizing the categories into a model (axial coding), and interrelating the categories to form a theory that explains the process of balancing work and personal life. In this example, the process emerges from the problem and the need to explore the central phenomenon, and the categories develop from data collection.

As grounded theorists conduct a study, they often use a phrase for the process starting with a gerund word (i.e., *ing* words; as recommended by Charmaz, 2000). As a phrase that appears in titles and purpose statements, it signals the action of the study. Listed below are titles for grounded theory studies in which we can see the use of gerund words, a key category of interest, and the broader topic being explored:

- ◆ “Educating Every Teacher, Every Year: The Public Schools and Parents of Children with ADHD” (Reid et al., 1996)—the process of educating teachers, the implied category of relations between parents and schools, and the topic of children with ADHD
- ◆ “‘Discovering’ Chronic Illness: Using Grounded Theory” (Charmaz, 1990)—the process of patients discovering their illness, the category of chronic illness, and the implied topic of disease

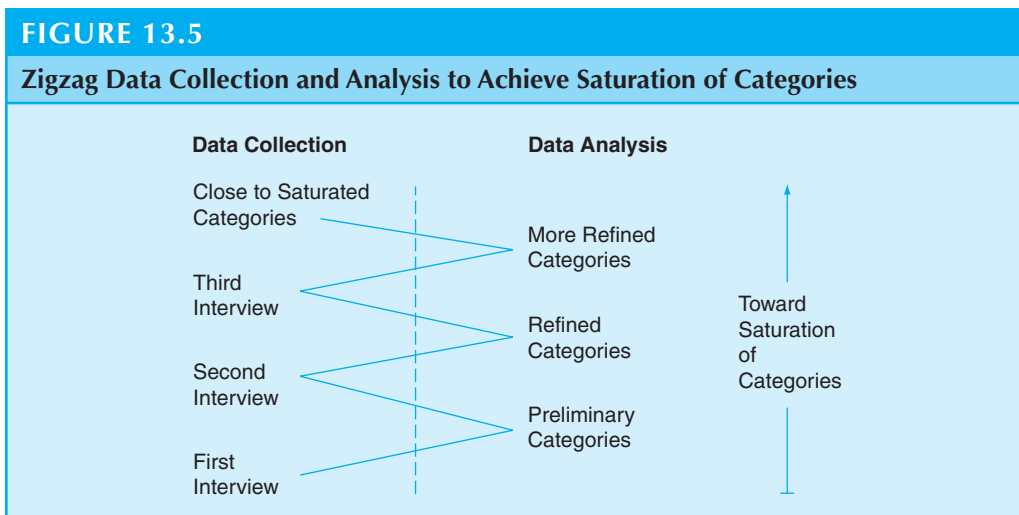
Theoretical Sampling

The data collected by grounded theorists to establish these processes includes many forms of qualitative information. Researchers can collect observations, conversations, interviews, public records, respondents’ diaries and journals, and the researcher’s own personal reflections (Charmaz, 2000). Many grounded theorists, however, rely heavily on

interviewing, perhaps as a way to capture best the experiences of participants in their own words, which is an approach consistent with the constructivist position (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007).

In the purposeful sampling of individuals to interview or observe, grounded theory espouses a unique perspective that distinguishes it from other qualitative approaches to data collection. Grounded theorists sample theoretically using a procedure involving the simultaneous and sequential collection and analysis of data. **Theoretical sampling** in grounded theory means that the researcher chooses forms of data collection that will yield text and images useful in generating a theory. This means that the sampling is intentional and focused on the generation of a theory. For instance, when a grounded theorist decides to study children's choice of a school, students and their parents are good candidates for interviews because they are actively involved in the process of selecting a school and can speak from firsthand experiences. However, school personnel (e.g., the principal) may have useful information to inform this process, but they would be less central than the students and parents, who are making the choices. In this project, the grounded theorist would begin with students and their parents, who actually make the choice of schools.

Beyond sampling data for its theoretical value, grounded theorists also espouse the idea of using an emerging design. An **emerging design** in grounded theory research is the process in which the researcher collects data, analyzes it immediately rather than waiting until all data are collected, and then bases the decision about what data to collect next on this analysis. The image of a "zigzag" helps us to understand this procedure, as shown in Figure 13.5. As illustrated in this figure, the grounded theorist engages in initial data collection (e.g., the first collection of interview data), analyzes it for preliminary categories, and then looks for clues about what additional data to collect. These clues may be underdeveloped categories, missing information in the sequence of the study process, or new individuals who can provide insight into some aspect of the process. The grounded theorist then returns to the field to gather this additional information. In this procedure, the inquirer refines, develops, and clarifies the meanings of categories for the theory. This process weaves back and forth between data collection and analysis, and it continues until the inquirer reaches saturation of a category. **Saturation** in grounded theory research is a state in which the researcher makes the subjective determination that new data will not provide any new information or insights for the developing categories.



Identifying this process in a published grounded theory study requires close examination of the data collection and analysis process to note whether the researcher seems to be recycling between data collection and data analysis. For example, in a study of the processes of men experiencing chronic illness, Charmaz (1990) carefully documented how she interviewed 7 of the 20 men in her study more than once to refine her emerging categories.

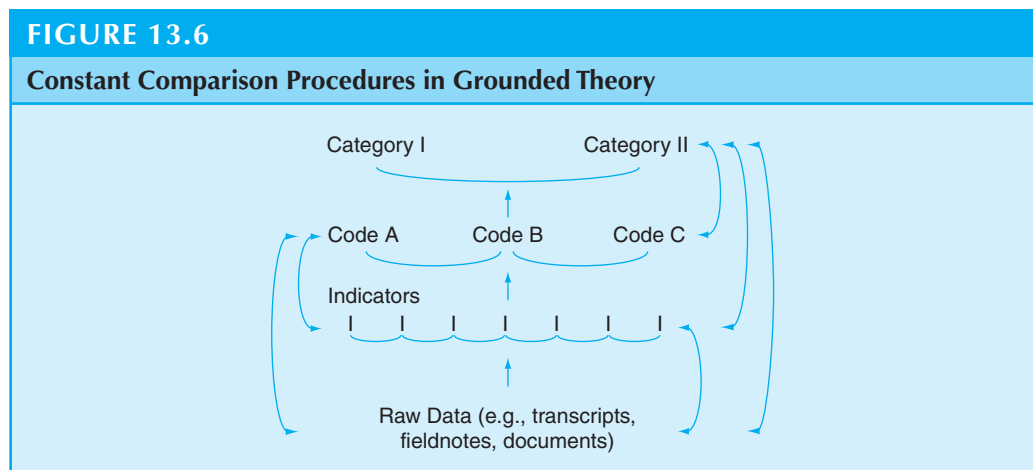
Constant Comparative Data Analysis

In grounded theory research, the inquirer engages in a process of gathering data, sorting it into categories, collecting additional information, and comparing the new information with emerging categories. This process of slowly developing categories of information is the constant comparative procedure. **Constant comparison** is an inductive (from specific to broad) data analysis procedure in grounded theory research of generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories. The overall intent is to “ground” the categories in the data. As shown in Figure 13.6, raw data are formed into indicators (Glaser, 1978)—small segments of information that come from different people, different sources, or the same people over time. These indicators are, in turn, grouped into several codes (e.g., Code A, Code B, Code C), and then formed into more abstract categories (e.g., Category I, Category II). Throughout this process, the researcher is constantly comparing indicators to indicators, codes to codes, and categories to categories. This eliminates redundancy and develops evidence for categories. In addition, the grounded theorist compares the emerging scheme with the raw data to ground the categories in the information collected during the study.

In this process, the grounded theorist asks questions of the data. Glaser (1992), for example, suggested that the inquirer ask:

- ◆ What is the data a study of?
- ◆ What category or what property of what category does this incident indicate?
- ◆ What is actually happening in the data?
- ◆ What is the basic social psychological process or social structural process in the action scene? (p. 51)

In a grounded theory study of becoming an adult student in New Zealand, Cocklin (1996) collected observations, interviews, participant diary accounts, questionnaires, and



documentary materials from teaching staff in one secondary school. In this study, Cocklin described the process of refining his categories (called themes) by returning to his data repeatedly as themes emerged. He commented:

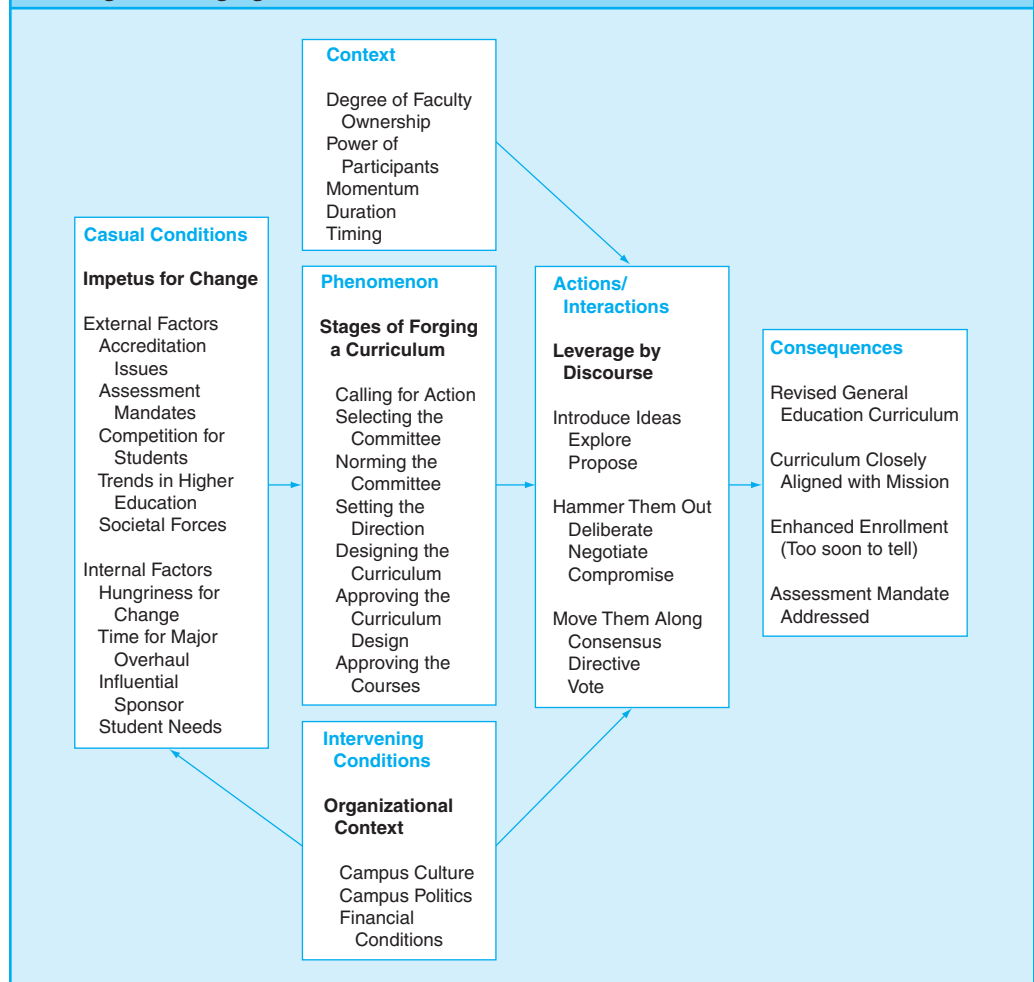
While doing this transcription and organization, and as an activity, I undertook at weekends, statutory holidays, and term vacations, I also engaged in a continuous process of reflection and analysis which included placing interpretive comments alongside the transcribed data (see Figure 2). These comments, akin to the derivation of properties and hypotheses, I also subjected to ongoing analysis and development as the year progressed and data emerged. . . . (p. 97)

A Core Category

From among the major categories derived from the data, the grounded theorist selects a core category as the central phenomenon for the theory. After identifying several categories (say, 8 to 10 depending on the size of the database), the researcher selects a **core category** as the basis for writing the theory. (See Figure 13.3 for a visual of this process.) The researcher makes this selection based on several factors, such as its relationship to other categories, its frequency of occurrence, its quick and easy saturation, and its clear implications for development of theory (Glaser, 1978). It is a category that can “process out,” in other words, be the center or main theme of the process (Glaser, 1978). Listed here are detailed criteria that Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified for choosing a central (or core) category:

1. It must be central; that is, all other major categories can relate to it.
2. It must appear frequently in the data. This means that within all or almost all cases, there are indicators pointing to that concept.
3. The explanation that evolves by relating the categories is logical and consistent. There is no forcing of data.
4. The name or phrase used to describe the central category should be sufficiently abstract.
5. As the concept is refined, the theory grows in depth and explanatory power.
6. When conditions vary, the explanation still holds, although the way in which a phenomenon is expressed might look somewhat different (p. 147).

We can illustrate a core category by turning to an actual grounded theory study. As shown in Figure 13.7, Mastera (1996) developed a theoretical model of the “stages of forging a curriculum.” In this study, she examined three undergraduate colleges from three states in the Midwest that were engaging in the process of changing their general education curricula. Semi-structured interviews with 34 faculty and administrators led to a theory about forging a curriculum. As shown in Figure 13.7, at the center of this theory was the phenomenon (or core category), “stages of forging a curriculum,” consisting of several properties: calling for action, selecting the committee, forming the committee, setting the direction, designing the curriculum, and approving the curriculum design and the courses. Mastera’s overall model showed how these stages emerged through changes, shaped by institutional context, that led to strategies for leveraging the discourse on the committees and contributed to specific consequences, such as revising the general education curriculum. In this process, Mastera identified early in open coding the importance of her phenomenon or core category, “stages,” although “selecting labels that captured this staged process proved to be more elusive” (p. 59).

FIGURE 13.7**Example of a “Core Category” in a Theoretical Model of “Stages of Forging a Curriculum”**

Source: Reprinted with permission from Georgianne Mastera, Ph.D.

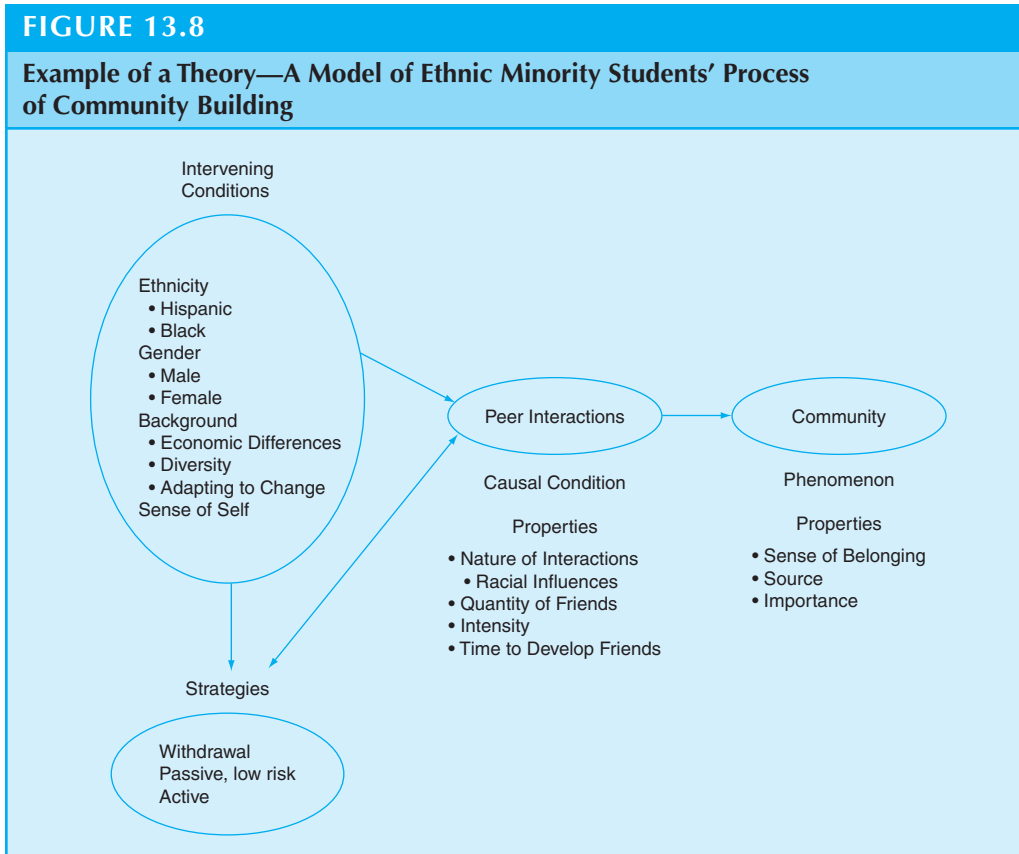
Theory Generation

In identifying a core category and the process categories that explain it, grounded theorists have generated a middle-range theory. The entire procedure leads to generating a theory based on data collected by the researcher. This **theory in grounded theory research** is an abstract explanation or understanding of a process about a substantive topic grounded in the data. Because the theory is close to the data, it does not have wide applicability or scope, such as “grand” theories about human motivation that apply to many people and situations. Nor is it a “minor working hypothesis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 33), such as an explanation for students in one school or classroom. Instead, the theory is “middle range” (Charmaz, 2000), drawn from multiple individuals or data sources, which provides an explanation for a substantive topic.

Consider how grounded theorists actually present their theory in three possible ways: as a visual coding paradigm, as a series of propositions (or hypotheses), or as a story written in narrative form.

Theory appears in studies as the visual coding model or coding paradigm discussed earlier in the systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1998). We have viewed several of these coding paradigms already, but a slightly different version is seen in Brown's (1993) model of ethnic minority students' process of community building. As shown in Figure 13.8, Brown explored the process of community building among 23 black and Hispanic freshmen during the first 6 to 10 weeks at a private, predominantly white university in the Midwest. In this study, an inductively developed process of campus community building resulted from the data. The theory or model of this process is shown in Figure 13.8. Based largely on the predetermined, systematic categories of intervening conditions, strategies, causal conditions, and phenomena, Brown developed a picture of the process as the key theoretical description of the process.

Brown's (1993) study also illustrated a visual model and the use of theoretical propositions (or hypotheses) for conveying a theory. **Theoretical propositions** in grounded theory research are statements indicating the relationship among categories, such as in the systematic approach to axial coding that includes causal conditions, the core category or phenomenon, the context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.



Source: Reprinted with permission from Martha L. Brown, Ph.D.

After presenting her visual model, Brown identified propositions and subpropositions that relate her categories in the model:

1. Peer interactions influence community building among black and Hispanic college freshmen.
2. The more time students spend with peers, the greater their sense of community. The more their free time spent alone, the greater the feelings of loneliness and alienation.
3. The more free time students spend on campus interacting with peers in the residence halls, the greater their sense of community.
4. Active involvement in small groups within the institutional setting (i.e., residence hall floors, freshmen seminar groups, intramural sports teams, clubs) will facilitate feelings of community.

Returning again to Figure 13.8, we can see that Brown is interrelating the causal conditions about interactions and friends in the proposition and subpropositions. In additional propositions in her study, Brown continued to identify relationships that interrelated with other aspects of her model.

Although the “theory” may be easy to identify in a grounded theory study when the author presents it as a visual coding paradigm or as a series of propositions, a discussion written in the form of a story (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) may be less obvious to a reader. In the process of integrating the categories, grounded theorists develop a sense of what the research is all about and start writing a descriptive story about the process. Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommended that the researcher:

. . . sit down and write a few descriptive sentences about “what seems to be going on here.” It may take two, three, or even more starts to be able to articulate one’s thoughts concisely. Eventually, the story emerges. (p. 148)

After refinement and reworking, grounded theorists include these stories in their research reports as a means for describing their theory of the process. A good example of this type of passage is a descriptive story about teen drug use cited by Strauss and Corbin (1998):

What keeps striking us about these interviews is that, although many teens use drugs, few go on to become hard-core users. It seems to be a kind of teenage experimentation, a developmental phase in their lives that marks the passage from child to teen and from teen to adult. They learn about drugs and also themselves, gain acceptance from their peers, and challenge adult authority through using drugs. It is a very specific behavior that sets them apart from family, but, at the same time, makes them one of the teen group. (p. 149)

In this passage, the authors identify a causal condition (i.e., “developmental phase”). They also mention the outcomes (i.e., “marks the passage”) and establish context (e.g., “sets them apart from family”). Through this descriptive story, the authors interrelate several categories of axial coding to form a theoretical discussion about the process of teen drug use—a third form for writing theory into a grounded theory project.

Memos

Throughout the grounded theory procedure, grounded theorists create memos about the data. Memo writing is a tool in grounded theory research that provides researchers with an ongoing dialogue with themselves about the emerging theory (Charmaz, 1990). **Memos** are notes the researcher writes throughout the research process to elaborate on ideas about the data and the coded categories. In memos, the researcher explores hunches, ideas, and thoughts, and then takes them apart, always searching for the

broader explanations at work in the process. Memos help direct the inquirer toward new sources of data, shape which ideas to develop further, and prevent paralysis from mountains of data. However, grounded theory studies do not often report memoing, or if they do, they do not provide evidence of how it was used (Babchuck, 1997).

We can illustrate memoing in a study about the process of identity loss by individuals with Alzheimer's disease. Orona (1997) discussed how memoing helped her to:

1. Free associate and write whatever thoughts she became aware of
2. Unblock at times when she felt she could not quite describe in words what was occurring in the data
3. Begin conceptualizing by tracking ideas from raw data to coding and into categories

The memos can be short or long, more detailed and related to codes and categories, or broader and more abstract. Here is an illustration of a short, detailed memo written by Charmaz (1994) during her study of patients who were terminally ill, and the “identifying moments” in the hospital when patients developed new insight into themselves.

It became clear to me that how a particular chronically ill person who was identified by others sometimes became revealed to them in the course of a moment's encounter or interaction. These moments gave the ill individual new reflections of self, often revealing that he (or she) is not the person he felt he was. . . . Negative identifying moments are those shrouded in embarrassment and devaluation. . . . One woman described a demeaning encounter with a social service agency when in the course of a moment, she saw herself as being defined as someone not worth helping. She said, “All I can do is dissolve in tears—there is nothing I can do. I just get immobilized. . . .” (pp. 110–111)

This passage illustrates how a grounded theorist can write a memo, use it in a study, highlight her own reflexive thoughts in a way consistent with qualitative research, and use the memo to highlight categories of information (i.e., “negative identifying moments”).

POTENTIAL ETHICAL ISSUES IN GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH

One way to view grounded theory is that it is an approach or set of approaches to the analysis of data. Consequently, the writings on grounded theory are largely silent on ethical issues in the conduct of research (e.g., privacy, consent, confidentiality, deceit, deception, and harm [Olesen, 2007]). This does not mean that grounded theory is unethical or devoid of ethics, and, when grounded theory emerged during the 1960s, the discussion about ethics in educational research was not widely shared. Still, ethical issues face grounded theorists when they declare the purpose of the study knowing that it will emerge through a grounding in participant views. The central role of interviewing in grounded theory raises questions about power and authority and giving appropriate voice to participants about the process of research. The use of logically building grounded theory from concepts or categories to a theoretical model needs to be documented so that others can recreate similar processes. The idea of using grounded theory to benefit participants looms large just as in other forms of qualitative research.

The following Box 13.1 discusses an ethical issue that arose in the grounded theory study by Creswell and Brown (1992).

BOX 13.1**Ethical Dilemma****Walking Off with the Data**

The researchers collected qualitative interviews to build a theoretical model of department chair support for faculty in higher education institutions. For a few of these interviews, follow-up campus interviews took place. At these interviews, the researchers were able to visit personally with some of the participants. For the most part the interviews were not on a sensitive topic, but the interviewees on some campuses did talk about the challenges and difficulties they faced with department chairs. During one campus visit, the researchers initiated a casual conversation with an interviewee about the interview. This faculty member asked to see the audiotape. The researchers had a transcription back home. The tape was handed over. This individual then promptly turned and left, taking the audiotape. Should the researchers ethically use the interview from this individual or consider it missing data?

WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN CONDUCTING GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH?

With the different types of grounded theory procedures—systematic, emerging, and constructivist—researchers might engage in alternative procedures to conduct a grounded theory study. The approach taken here will be the systematic form of inquiry because it consists of easily identifiable steps, is frequently used for grounded theory research, and provides a procedure that beginning researchers will find useful.

Step 1. Decide If a Grounded Theory Design Best Addresses the Research Problem

A grounded theory design is appropriate when you want to develop or modify a theory, explain a process, and develop a general abstraction of the interaction and action of people. As such, it offers a macropicture of educational situations rather than a detailed micro-analysis. Because of the generation of an abstract process, it seems suitable for sensitive topics, such as the coping process of women who have been sexually abused (Morrow & Smith, 1995), or any research problem situation in which individuals need their privacy protected. Grounded theory also seems applicable for those individuals who are trained in *quantitative* research but who want to explore a *qualitative* procedure that is rigorous and systematic. For example, in educational fields in which *qualitative* research has made slow inroads, such as educational psychology, inquirers are turning to grounded theory as a useful procedure. (See one of many examples, such as Frontman & Kunkel's [1994] grounded theory study about how counselors construe success with clients.)

Step 2. Identify a Process to Study

Because the intent of grounded theory research is to explain a process, you need to identify early a tentative process to examine in your grounded theory study. This process may change and emerge during your project, but you need to have an idea of the process at

this step. This process should naturally follow from the research problem and questions that you seek to answer. It needs to involve people who are acting or interacting with identifiable steps or sequence in their interactions. It is helpful to write down this process early in your plan for a study, such as “What is the process of coping for first-year teachers?” or “What is the process by which faculty develop into productive researchers?”

Step 3. Seek Approval and Access

As with all research studies, you need to obtain approval from the institutional review board. You also need access to individuals who can provide insight into the process that you plan to study. Like other studies, this step involves seeking approval to collect data, appraising individuals of the purpose of your study, and guaranteeing protection of the site and participants as you conduct the inquiry.

If you plan to use the zigzag approach to data collection and analysis, it is difficult to plan and receive prior approval for collecting some data. This approach relies on collecting data, analyzing it, and using this information to determine the next step in data collection. Thus, as you seek permission to conduct a grounded theory study, it is helpful to apprise reviewers of this process and the tentative nature of the data collection procedures at the beginning of the study.

Step 4. Conduct Theoretical Sampling

The key concept in grounded theory data collection is to gather information that can assist in your development of a theory (e.g., individuals who have experienced the process you are studying). Grounded theorists use many forms of data, but many researchers rely on interviews to best capture the experiences of individuals in their own words. A characteristic of grounded theory research, however, is that the inquirer collects data more than once and keeps returning to data sources for more information throughout a study until the categories are saturated and the theory is fully developed. There is no precise time line for this process, and researchers need to make the decision as to when they have fully developed their categories and the theory. One rule of thumb in graduate student research and interviewing is to collect at least 20 to 30 interviews during data collection (Creswell, 2007). This general guideline, of course, may change if you collect multiple sources of data, such as observations, documents, and your own personal memos.

Step 5. Code the Data

The process of coding data occurs during data collection so that you can determine what data to collect next. It typically begins with the identification of open coding categories and using the constant comparative approach for saturation by comparing data with incident and incident with category. A reasonable number of 10 categories may suffice, although this number depends on the extent of your database and the complexity of the process you are exploring. McCaslin (1993), for example, conducted a grounded theory study of the complex question of leadership in rural communities. In exploring “What is leadership?” he identified 50 categories from observing and interviewing individuals participating in educational leadership development programs in six counties.

From open coding, you proceed to axial coding and the development of a coding paradigm. This involves the process identified in Figure 13.3 of selecting a core category from the open coding possibilities and positioning it at the center of the axial coding process as a core category. From here you will likely return to data collection or reanalyze your data to identify causal conditions, intervening and contextual categories, strategies, and consequences to develop the axial coding process. You can assemble this

information in the form of a coding paradigm or visual picture of the process in which you indicate with arrows the direction of the process.

Step 6. Use Selective Coding and Develop the Theory

The final process of coding is selective coding, and it involves actually developing your theory. This procedure includes interrelating the categories in the coding paradigm. It may involve refining the axial coding paradigm and presenting it as a model or theory of the process. It may include writing propositions that provide testable ideas for further research. You can present your theory as a series of propositions or subpropositions. This stage may also involve writing a story or a narrative that describes the interrelationships among categories.

Step 7. Validate Your Theory

It is important to determine if your theoretical explanation makes sense to participants and is an accurate rendering of events and their sequence in the process. In grounded theory research, validation is an active part of the process of research (Creswell, 2007). For example, during the constant comparative procedure of open coding, the researcher triangulates data between the information and the emerging categories. The same process of checking data against categories occurs in the axial coding phase. The researcher poses questions that relate the categories, and then returns to the data and looks for evidence, incidents, and events—a process in grounded theory called **discriminant sampling**. After developing a theory, the grounded theorist validates the process by comparing it with existing processes found in the literature. Also, outside reviewers, such as participants in the project who judge the grounded theory using “canons” of good science, may substantiate the theory, including the validity and credibility of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Step 8. Write a Grounded Theory Research Report

The structure of your grounded theory report will vary from a flexible structure in the emerging and constructivist design to a more quantitatively oriented structure in the systematic design. Compared with other qualitative designs, such as ethnography and narrative research, the structures of grounded theory studies are scientific and include a problem, methods, discussion, and results. In addition, the point of view of the writer in the systematic approach is sometimes third person and objective in tone. All grounded theory projects, however, end with the theory generated by the researcher reporting his or her abstraction of the process under examination.

HOW DO YOU EVALUATE GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH?

Criteria for specifically evaluating a grounded theory study are available in Charmaz (2006), Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), and in Corbin and Strauss (2008). Charmaz (2006) uses terms such as credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. Corbin and Strauss (2008) discuss factors such as how individuals can benefit from the research (i.e., fit,

sensitivity, and applicability); the importance of concepts (or categories) and their discussion within a context; the logic, depth, and variation; and the creative, innovative manner in which the researcher says something new.

In a high-quality grounded theory study, some combination of these factors exists, and the author:

- ◆ Makes explicit the process or action at the heart of the study.
- ◆ Develops or generates a theory at the end of the study that is grounded in the view of the participants.
- ◆ Makes certain that a link exists between the data, the generation of categories, and the ultimate theory.
- ◆ Provides evidence of using memoing and sampling that enables the generation of the theory.
- ◆ Presents a visual model of the theory.
- ◆ Provides evidence of the use of one of the types of grounded theory designs, such as the systematic, emerging, or constructivist approaches.

KEY IDEAS IN THE CHAPTER

What Is Grounded Theory, When to Use It, and How It Developed?

A grounded theory design is a set of procedures used to generate systematically a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process about a substantive topic. You use grounded theory when you seek to generate a theory because one is not available or suitable. It is also useful to study a process, an action, or an interaction. It offers a step-by-step, systematic procedure for the beginning researcher. In using grounded theory, a researcher can stay close to the data at all times in the analysis. This design was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss at the University of California San Francisco in the late 1960s.

Three Types of Grounded Theory Designs

Grounded theory research consists of three types of designs. The systematic procedure of Strauss and Corbin (1998) involved using predetermined categories to interrelate the categories, visual diagrams, and specific propositions or hypotheses to make the connections explicit. The emergent design, consistent with Glaser's (1992) ideas, relied on exploring a basic social process without preset categories. The constructivist approach of Charmaz (2000) focused on subjective meanings by participants, explicit researcher values and beliefs, and suggestive or tentative conclusions.

Key Characteristics of Grounded Theory Research

Despite these differences, six aspects characterize grounded theory. Grounded theorists employ this design to explore a process around a substantive topic. They theoretically sample using a procedure of simultaneous data collection and analysis. Grounded theorists analyze their data for increasing levels of abstraction by using constant comparative procedures and asking questions about their data. During analysis of the data for categories, grounded theorists identify a core category (or central phenomenon) that will “process out” (Strauss, 1987) into a theory. Grounded theorists explore this process to develop a theory. Throughout the grounded theory procedure, grounded theorists write memos to themselves.

Potential Ethical Issues in Grounded Theory Research

Because of the focus of grounded theory on data analysis, not much discussion of ethics has occurred in the grounded theory literature. However, throughout the process of research, grounded theorists may be confronted with ethical challenges ranging from advancing the purpose of the study, to the power and authority issues of interviewing, and on to building a useful chain of evidence from the data to the generation of the theory that will benefit those the study is intended to serve.

Steps in Conducting a Grounded Theory Study

The steps involved in conducting a grounded theory study are to start with the intent to develop a theory, to locate a process (or action or interaction) to study, to obtain necessary approvals, to sample individuals who have experienced the process, to code data into categories or concepts, and to interrelate the categories to form a theory. Next comes validating the theory and writing the grounded theory report.

Evaluating the Quality of a Grounded Theory Study

Several published criteria exist for evaluating the quality of a grounded theory study. A good grounded theory study presents a theory of a process grounded in the views of participants. This theory is developed from the memos written by the researcher, the linking of concepts or categories, the presentation of the theory as a visual model, and the use of systematic, emerging, or constructivist approaches.

USEFUL INFORMATION FOR PRODUCERS OF RESEARCH

- ◆ When planning a grounded theory study, use the steps for conducting a study advanced in this chapter.
- ◆ Consider whether your grounded theory study will be systematic, emergent, or constructivist. Make this decision based on reviewing the arguments for each design type and determining whether you prefer a more flexible or prescribed approach to grounded theory research.
- ◆ The visuals presented in this chapter can be adapted and used to display several processes and to create tables and diagrams, such as the zigzag data collection process and the constant comparative approach.
- ◆ Creating a visual diagram of your theory helps to clearly identify the categories and see their interrelationships.
- ◆ Validate your theory by using constant comparative procedures, triangulating during the research, and by employing member checking with participants in your study.

USEFUL INFORMATION FOR CONSUMERS OF RESEARCH

- ◆ Educators can use the criteria for evaluating a study to assess the quality of a published study.
- ◆ When examining a study to determine if it is a grounded theory project, you might look at the title to determine if the words “grounded theory” are included.

Also, most grounded theory projects clearly include an exploration of a process, and the authors should identify this process in the purpose statement or research questions.

- ◆ A sign of grounded theory research is that the author employs multiple passes to the field to collect data. A well-refined theory (and categories) consists of saturation and zigzagging back and forth between data collection and analysis to build the categories and theory.
- ◆ Look for a visual model of the theory. This model is the centerpiece of the grounded theory study and represents the author's attempt to visualize the process under study.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES YOU MIGHT EXAMINE

Several major books are available to provide the procedures used in grounded theory research. Examine the books by Strauss:

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Examine the books by Glaser:

Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

You might also consult the original book they developed together:

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

For a recent perspective on grounded theory from a constructivist perspective, examine the book chapter by Charmaz (2000) and her recent book, Charmaz (2006), and look at her journal articles for applications of her approach. Also, see the edited volume of writings on grounded theory by Bryant and Charmaz (2007).

Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (Eds.). (2007). *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Charmaz, K. (1990). "Discovering" chronic illness: Using grounded theory. *Social Science Medicine*, 30, 1161–1172.

Charmaz, K. (1994). Identity dilemmas of chronically ill men. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 35, 269–288.

Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 509–535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.

Example of a Grounded Theory Study

Examine the following published journal article that is a grounded theory design study. Marginal notes indicate the major characteristics of grounded theory research highlighted in this chapter. The illustrative study is:

Developing a Leadership Identity: A Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory Characteristics in Marginal Annotations

Susan R. Komives
Julie E. Owen
Susan D. Longersbeam
Felicia C. Mainella
Laura Osteen

This grounded theory study on developing a leadership identity revealed a 6-stage developmental process. The thirteen diverse students in this study described their leadership identity as moving from a leader-centric view to one that embraced leadership as a collaborative, relational process. Developing a leadership identity was connected to the categories of developmental influences, developing self, group influences, students' changing view of self with others, and students' broadening view of leadership. A conceptual model illustrating the grounded theory of developing a leadership identity is presented.

- (01) Burns (1978) observed that despite the large volume of scholarship on the topic, leadership is not well understood. Recent attempts to classify and make meaning of the evolution of leadership have been generally successful at organizing theories of leadership into conceptual families (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2003; Rost, 1993). Numerous books and articles focus on leadership theory, behaviors, effective practices, or on particular populations (e.g., women, youth, ethnic groups), specific settings (e.g., civic leadership, business leadership, church leadership), and diverse outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, effectiveness, social responsibility). Despite the broad scope of this literature, there is little scholarship about how leadership develops or how a leadership identity develops over time.

The Scholarship of Leadership

- (02) Rost (1993) concluded that most of what has been labeled leadership in the past was essentially good management. Leadership theories that rely on traits, behaviors, and situations to explain leadership worked well in an industrial era when the predominant goals of leadership were production and efficiency. However, Rost and other scholars (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Bennis, 1989; Heifetz, 1994; Wheatley, 1999) noted that society has shifted to a knowledge-based, networked world. Rapid advancements in technology, increasing globalization, complexity, and interconnectedness reveal the new postindustrial paradigm of a networked world and call for “new ways of leading, relating, learning, and influencing change” (Allen & Cherrey, p. 1; Rost). Many of these “new ways of leading” include components of principle-centered leadership such as collaboration, ethical action, moral purposes, and leaders who transform followers into leaders themselves (Burns, 1978; Covey, 1992; Rost).
- (03) The principles involved in postindustrial leadership support a values-centered approach (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Matusak, 1997) and have influenced new pedagogical leadership models. Scholars who have developed models largely designed for college student leadership development such as the Eisenhower/UCLA ensemble social change model (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) assert that collaboration among individuals, groups, and communities

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is essential for social change to occur. Similarly, the relational leadership model (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998) defines leadership as “a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good” (p. 21). This relational leadership model includes elements of inclusiveness, empowerment, ethics, purposefulness, and process orientation. Many leadership educators agree that college students are best informed by learning a postindustrial, relational-values approach to leadership (Higher Education Research Institute; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Although scholarship exists that describes these leadership approaches, none offers a theoretical model of how this kind of relational leadership develops.

Most leadership development scholarship focuses on skill-building or short-term interventions such as retreats or courses, rather than on the process of how leadership capacity or leadership identity is created or changes over time. Although there were conceptual models of leadership development (Brungart, 1996; Velsor & Drath, 2004) at the time of this study there was no known research on how leadership identity was formed. Understanding the process of creating a leadership identity is central to designing leadership programs and teaching leadership. The purpose of this study was to understand the processes a person experiences in creating a leadership identity.

(04)

Process
approach

Method

Because the purpose of the study was to understand how a leadership identity develops, a grounded theory methodology was chosen. The intent of a grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory or abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation grounded in the experience and perceptions of the participants (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The grounded theory in this study reflects the developmental experience of college student participants who had been observed working effectively with others toward shared purposes, that is, who had demonstrated relational leadership (Komives et al., 1998).

(05)

Theory
generation

Procedures

Sampling. The study employed the purposeful sampling procedures of intensity sampling to identify “intensity-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Nominators in professional positions that afforded them the opportunity to observe students interacting in group settings at a large mid-Atlantic research university were invited to nominate students who were exemplars of relational leadership.

(06)

Theoretical
sampling

Participants. From the pool of possible participants, we invited 13 students who exhibited the theoretical dimensions of relational leadership to participate in the study. Eight of the participants were White, 1 was Asian American, 3 were African American, and 1 student was African who immigrated to the United States as a child. Eight of the participants were men and 5 were women. There were 2 sophomores, 9 fourth- or fifth-year seniors, and 2 recent graduates. Two participants identified themselves as gay men; others identified themselves as heterosexual or did not identify their sexual orientation. The group was religiously diverse including Muslim, Bahá'í, Jewish, and Christian students, as well as those without active religious affiliations. There was a range of majors from chemistry to speech communications. Students used their own first name or chose their own pseudonym.

(07)

In-Depth Interviews. Each student participated in a series of three interviews with the same interviewer. A research team of five White women conducted the research. A structured interview protocol was designed to ensure continuity across interviewers. After participants gave written informed consent, interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Through constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the research team modified questions to explore emergent issues. Researchers maintained field notes during each interview.

(08)

Constant com-
parative data
analysis

The three interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours each. This “three-interview series” followed Seidman’s (1991) model focusing on life history, followed by a detailed exploration of the experience, and lastly focusing on “reflection on the meaning” (p. 12). The first interview used a life narrative method (Bruner, 1987; Riessman, 1993) and asked the student to start back in elementary school and reflect on “how you have become the person you are now.” This question allowed for the broadest possible story to emerge so researchers could connect various experiences to the emergence of leadership identity. The purpose of the second interview was to identify the students’ experiences working with others and to explore their experiences with leadership. The third interview explored how the students’ view of leadership changed over time and what influenced that changing view.

(09)

- (10) *Trustworthiness*. The research team ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with multiple procedures. Participants reviewed and responded to transcripts of their interviews (i.e., member checking). Research team members served as peer debriefers for the process. The team sought feedback on the evolving theory and interpretations of the data from diverse colleagues to understand its meaning. Concepts were identified in the data and were examined across the stages of the evolving model. The detail in coding and analysis confirmed saturation in the central category and categories of the theory. Grounded theory does not seek to be generalizable and the degree to which it is transferable is sought through the participant “voices” and the thick descriptions reflected in this study.

No memoing in
data analysis

Data Analysis

- (11) We used open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data. During open coding, each transcript was analyzed in sentences or groups of sentences reflecting single ideas. These units were given a code to reflect that idea or concept (Strauss & Corbin). The open coding identified 5,922 items that were combined through axial coding into 245 abstract concepts. In selective coding the concepts were ultimately organized into one central category or “what the research is all about” (p. 146), in this case, leadership identity along with five categories: (a) essential developmental influences; (b) developing self; (c) group influences; (d) changing view of self with others; and (e) broadening view of leadership. Properties—also known as attributes of a category—were identified for each of these categories. Strauss and Corbin clarified that “whereas properties are the general or specific characteristics or attributes of a category, dimensions represent the location of a property along a continuum or range” (p. 117). Through constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Strauss & Corbin), each participant’s response was compared and connected to others as categories, properties, and dimensions emerged.

A core category

Findings and Emerging Theory

- (12) The experiences and reflections of these students revealed the dynamic process of developing a leadership identity. Students had different experiences, came to new awareness of themselves in a leadership context at different ages, identified a variety of ways these experiences and context had an impact on them, yet they engaged with the process in similar ways leading to credibility in the emergent theory. The theory emerged as the relationships between the concepts combined into an integrated framework that explained the phenomenon of leadership identity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The categories interact to create a leadership identity as the central category that developed over six identity stages. Developing self interacted with group influences to shape the student’s changing view of self with others. This changing view of self in relation to others shaped the student’s broadening view of what leadership is and created a leadership identity. Illustrative quotations from the participants are included in each of the categories to tell the story of this theory.

Developmental Influences

- (13) The essential developmental influences that fostered the development of a leadership identity included adult influences, peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning. Each of these four properties has dimension, which means they change across the stages of the central category. For example, how adults influenced newer leaders was a different process than with experienced leaders, and meaningful involvement began with an individual joining a variety of organizations but progressed to more in-depth, responsible experiences with one or two core groups.
- (14) *Adult Influences*. Adults played different roles in influencing student movement through the leadership identity development stages. In the family, adults were very important in building confidence and being an early building block of support. Angela noted, “My family is really what built a lot of my character.” Adults created safe spaces in classes and organizations where students learned to communicate and relate to peers. On the importance of his scoutmaster, James noted with relief, “When we had moved houses, we didn’t move troops” so he still had access to the same scoutmaster who affirmed him. Students explicitly noted the role of school-teachers and the encouragement found in the continuity of those teachers across grades in school.

In the early stages of their leadership identity, adults were particularly influential as role models. (15)
James said,

Through all this you need that person you look up to, that role model, that figure that you aspire to be like or to be. Doesn't have to be a real person, people usually see qualities of what they aspire to be in different people, I guess like a hero . . . And [when I was little] I wanted to be like Superman and smart like Batman and be in touch with people like Star Trek characters.

Adults were the first to recognize the students' leadership potential. Ed recalled times when he (16)
was encouraged to take leadership roles in groups: "[adults said] 'Oh, you'd be good at that', or 'I really think you should apply for that.'" In the early stages, adults affirmed and sponsored students. They often prompted students initially to get involved in organizations and helped them set high expectations for themselves. Joey observed: "Positive reinforcement . . . gave me the drive to get more involved in things." Eventually there was less need for this external affirmation and the students became self-directed. Ed saw that shift in his motivation and said, "I'm going to go ahead and do this. I'm going to feel confident in the things I've done in the past, because I don't want to rely on others to force me forward."

Later, adults continued as models and became actively engaged mentors. Jayme described (17)
watching adults as intentional modeling: "I'm going to learn from other people's experience, and I'll at least get some information before I jump in there." Students of color, especially, benefited from the presence of an active adult mentor. Students of color were often apprenticed to an adult and worked in intensive and intentional ways as an assistant or protégé to that adult. Jayme became the "protégé" of Miss [Smith]—a highly involved woman at her church. This woman "adopted" her and took her everywhere including on business and church trips. Jayme observed adult conversation, manners, and how conflicts were resolved. She drew on those experiences when she subsequently became the assistant to the dance teacher in her high school and often chose her own behaviors by asking herself, "What would Miss [Smith] do?"

In college, adults continued as models and mentors, but also become meaning-makers and (18)
even evolved into friends. Ed described how he often thought things through with his advisor: "We would always talk after any experience. I would go right to [my advisor] and like, 'Okay, this is what happened, and I'm trying to figure it out.'" Adults were a meaningful part of each stage of developing students' leadership identity. The dimensions of adult influences ranged from being affirmers, models, and sponsors in the early stages to being mentors and ultimately to being meaning makers and colleagues or friends.

Peer Influences. Same-aged peers served as friends and older peers served as role models in early (19)
leadership identity stages. Joey emulated an older student who was an officer in his college LGBT group and observed: "That's kind of cool . . . I could do that." Modeling peers served as a motivator for involvement as well as a model of leadership. Jimmy admired the SGA president:

[She] was one of the first people . . . like my role model, like she was . . . this perfect leader. That's what I'm going to strive to be, because, you know she takes this group of uninvolved kids, and she makes them do so much for the campus. She's so great at like organizing. She's fighting for the students. Like, she has this love . . . very selfless like promotion for students in general.

Numerous students cited older peers as the reason they got involved or interested in an organi- (20)
zation in college. These peers served as sponsors and took the student to initial meetings of a group or encouraged them to join or to run for an office. Peers served as sources of affirmation and support. For Corey, this peer affirmation was important. He initially described his preference to be an active member of a group and not the positional leader until he was turned to by peers to be the formal leader:

[I] started to realize that in fact that's how I was viewed by my peers. I felt like, okay, well, if my peers have put faith in me, faith in the fact that they truly believe that I'm a leader, then I kind of need to take it on. I wasn't pressured into it, but I felt like it would be best, that maybe I do have something to offer, so I started to embrace it more.

Engaging with peers gained depth and meaning as leadership identity developed. With more (21)
group experience, peers served as followers, teammates, and ultimately as collaborators and peer meaning-makers.

- (22) *Meaningful Involvement.* Involvement experiences were the training ground where leadership identity evolved. These experiences helped clarify personal values and interests, and helped students experience diverse peers, learn about self, and develop new skills. Early involvements were a way to make friends. Reflecting on his membership on the high school swim team, Joey described his motivation: “It wasn’t the athletics event. It was the camaraderie.” As they transitioned into new schools and the university, they sought social integration through involvement in sports, band, theater, or service as a source of new friends. Later meaningful involvements showed more complex motivations. Jimmy reported that “SGA was the first kind of goal-oriented group for me . . . I felt like I was working towards something.” Other involvements developed values and personal skills. Jayme learned new skills through service: “I’ve gotten used to just listening like just hearing them talk about their lives.”
- (23) Team-based involvements such as sports, theater, and band taught students to do their personal best while concurrently supporting others. From playing sports, Corey said, “I learned it is not just about me” and “your individual achievement helps the team. It doesn’t help you shine or stand out, and don’t ever put yourself on that pedestal.” Marie learned in band that “I’m not trying to beat someone else, but like we’re trying to sound good together.” Some learned the importance of support from older teammates who established a positive group climate. Ed described his swim team experience as always being “on our feet cheering for each other,” and “we cheered more for the kids that were struggling.”
- (24) *Reflective Learning.* Structured opportunities for critical reflection, such as journaling and meaningful conversations with others, allowed students to uncover their passions, integrity, and commitment to continual self-assessment and learning. This reflection was initially with a parent or sibling; participants described dinner table conversations, family meetings, and the listening ear of close-age siblings. Over time, they began to process their experiences with other adults and peers. Some students preferred journaling and began to share those journals with others.
- (25) Experiences in which students intentionally learned about leadership, such as trainings, retreats, or classes, provided them with new language and ideas that aided their development. Students used this new leadership language to assess themselves and differentiate experiences. Ed talks about the power of his first undergraduate leadership classes: “We talked about having some kind of lens or framework, or even the language to describe [leadership], it changes not only the way I think about it, but it changes the way I act as a leader in ways that I don’t understand . . . in unconscious ways.” Becky clearly saw:
- It’s a combination of the experiences I’ve had, the classes and the theories I’ve learned. I don’t think alone any of it would have influenced me as it has. It has really made it spin together to really understand it, because I could come out of class one day and take something that I learned and really implement it in my experience, but because having experienced it I can also talk about it theory-wise. So I think it’s definitely that combination.
- (26) Even being a participant in this study supported reflection. Jimmy said, “Now, I feel like having gone through this research study like definitely . . . my interactions are more genuine.” As depicted in Figure 1, these developmental influences were the environmental context in which leadership identity developed.

Developing Self

- (27) The category of developing self contains properties with dimensions of personal growth that changed throughout the development of leadership identity. The properties in this category are deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills, and expanding motivations.
- (28) *Deepening Self-Awareness.* In the early stages of developing their leadership identity, students recalled a highly vague and diffuse sense of self. Attributions from adults, family, and peers helped them identify aspects of themselves that were strengths and aspects that needed attention. Over time they were able to label aspects of their personal identity on their own. For example, Becky said, “I just happen to be a very outspoken, share-my-opinion-kind of person.” Joey claimed, “I’m more of an interpersonal person.”

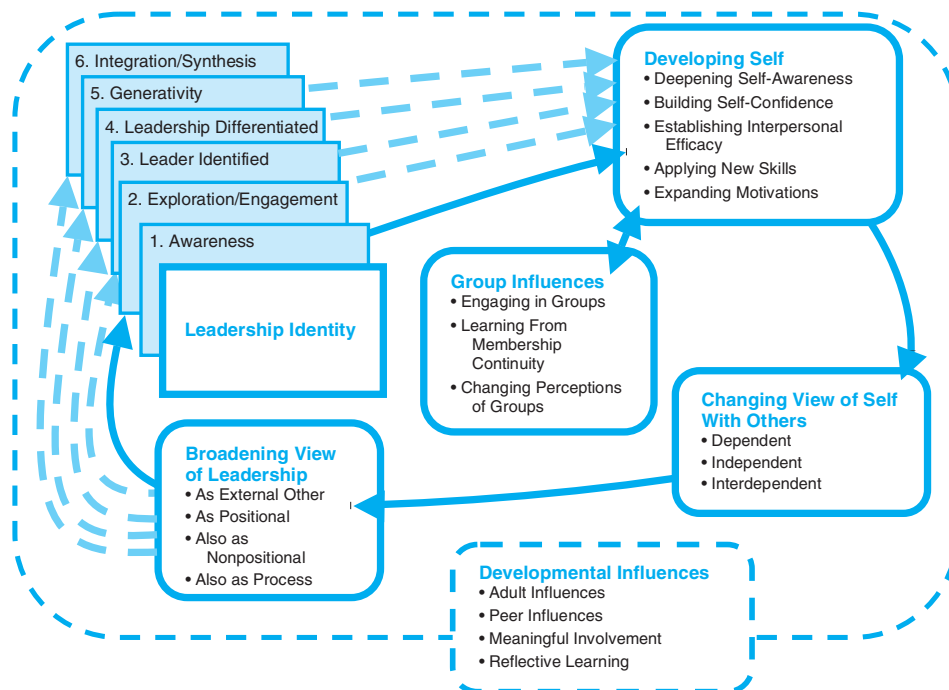
When asked about their personal identities, students of color identified race as a critical factor. James, an African American student, said, “[the] biggest thing is race”; another African American student, Ray, described how he was motivated to present “a positive image of a Black male,” although he tried “not to think about [race] too much.” Sammy, an Asian American student, discussed his many identities including the influence of race, ethnicity, and being male, and had come to see them as assets of diversity that he brought to a group. Both gay students felt being male was an asset to their leadership; however, Donald worried that sexual orientation could be a barrier to leadership based on what others might have thought of him. (29)

Gender was a factor in how some approached leadership. After being denied membership in a group based upon her gender, Jayme noted, “I decided that I am not going to let anything, anything at all, push me down.” Christine became more activist in her youth after completing altar server training in her church only to be denied the opportunity to become an altar “boy.” Angela acknowledged that she didn’t ever think, “I can’t do [something] because I’m a woman,” but acknowledged that “[you] have to succeed to the best of your ability to show that you’re not inferior.” (30)

The awareness of majority aspects of the students’ identities was largely taken for granted. For example, most of the White students did not identify race until asked about it. Donald, a White male, reflected what many White men in the study shared that: “Race and gender does sort of make it easier. . . . People sort of expect you to take on a leadership role.” Angela did not think about how being White and heterosexual helped her, although in reflection, said that it probably did. Ed, however, felt truly transformed and enlightened when he “started to understand my own privilege . . . as a White able-bodied male.” Those in later stages of developing their leadership identity were generally more complex in their awareness of their multiple identities. (31)

Other aspects of self-awareness were the development of personal values and a sense of personal integrity that became more important over time. James shared that: “The first time I heard the (32)

FIGURE 1
Developing a Leadership Identity: Illustrating the Cycle



word *integrity* was my Dad saying it; and he was like, ‘You know when it comes to integrity it is the most important thing because if everything is gone that is all you have.’”

- (33) *Building Self-Confidence.* Most students described feeling special in their families and with other adults. Even when they went through periods of self-doubt and low esteem, they knew they mattered to someone. They sought the support and approval of adults in the early stages of their leadership identity development. For example, James commented, “I always wanted the coach’s approval.” Building their confidence supported developing a positive self-concept, a sense of themselves. Sammy knew when that happened and shared that: “Things started rolling and I was in a groove . . . I knew what needed to get done.” Confidence came with meaningful experience. James said “I can do this because I have done similar things to it.” Confidence also came with being able to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Jayme said, “I’m not perfect, but I have something to bring.”
- (34) As their confidence built, they were willing to take risks to get more involved and were empowered to take on more active group roles. Jayme reflected, “Eleventh grade was when I started letting myself be open and do what I wanted to do and not think about what other people say.” Over time, their growing sense of self-awareness let them take on unpopular issues, stand up for their values, and not need peer affirmation. Ed described antihomophobia programs he did on his residence hall floor as a heterosexual resident assistant, knowing it was the right thing to do so “the alienation doesn’t matter as much.”
- (35) Once they acknowledged that they were leaders or had leadership potential, they began to incorporate that identity into their sense of self. Corey noted: “Sophomore year in college is when I really started to believe and really identify with being a leader—others had been saying it” and Jimmy noticed that “people showed respect . . . [I] started to think of [my]self this way.”
- (36) *Establishing Interpersonal Efficacy.* Participants had numerous experiences that contributed to their efficacy in working with other people. Most students described how they learned to make new friends in the normal transitions from elementary school to middle or junior high school, high school, and on to college. Sammy and Joey, who moved often as children, saw the value of those transitions. Sammy said: “I get to know people a lot quicker because I socialize with everybody.”
- (37) Students noted how important it was that they learned to relate to and communicate with people different from themselves. They developed an appreciation of diverse points of view and valued different perspectives. Ray observed: “I’ve just been really exposed to a broad range of viewpoints and that’s kind of helped me to mature and helped me to be a better person in interacting with people too.” Ed came to the realization that he first had to understand himself well before he could
- learn to deal with people who are different from me and have different ideals from what I have, I need to understand more what I represent and what I think. So the more work I do about what I value and what biases I have already that I’ve been culturally or socially conditioned to have, the better.
- (38) Students who felt different or who worked closely with people different from themselves (such as Becky, Ed, and Donald who worked weekly with youth with severe disabilities), later came to value that difference and credit it with the importance of empathy and their commitment to involving others who may be marginalized in groups. According to Becky, “All my work with people with special needs has really opened my eyes to an entirely different world of respect.” Donald observed: “I think that [being gay] does make me more sensitive towards other people and what . . . their needs are in a group situation.”
- (39) Students recognized that working with others on shared tasks required new inter-personal skills. Ray noted that in leadership: “The trickiest thing was asking one of your peers to do something.” When he was in an early leadership position, Sammy described his own struggle with delegation when he stated, “I mean there are certainly times in my life when I feel that . . . I can’t trust other people and that I’m going to have to do it myself.” With the acceptance of interdependence, developing trust in others became essential. Being a cochair and practicing shared leadership, Becky observed: “I guess it all developed in one big chunk that I started to go through the process of really learning how to build relationships with other people, to help influence them to be a part of the group, and to make the changes [together].” She reflected, “I’ve gained trust in other people . . . I just took a few years to figure that out.”

Each student valued being a self-proclaimed “people-person.” They developed an early appreciation of harmonious relationships with others. Few of the participants liked conflict and each had learned to be mediators. Jimmy, for example, described himself as a “smoother” and Joey saw himself as “the connector, the bridge builder.” Marie observed: (40)

I’m just a big believer . . . in the power of personal relationships . . . it’s one thing to work with someone in a group or with a campus committee or whatever but if you can get to know that person and they can get to know you outside of that professional or academic experience and have a social bond on top of everything else I think that that personal relationship when you take that into the academic/professional scenario will lead to maybe bigger and better results.

Applying New Skills. Participants worked to develop new skills as they developed their leadership identity. When they first started joining groups, they were conscious they were learning how to work with other people and knew this required new skills. They found developmental opportunities in many experiences; for example, Jimmy spoke about his high school play experience. “The play was the first time I learned how to completely interact with other people.” When first serving as positional leaders, they practiced more directive leadership styles and approaches, all with the goal of getting tasks accomplished. Practical skills dominated that stage of their leadership identity. Donald noted he was “a good time framer, practical, an organizer,” and Becky developed her public speaking skills. Practicing included learning difficult tasks such as delegation, member motivation, and member recognition. (41)

When they became aware of interdependence, they came to need new skills such as trusting others, and being open to diverse ideas and perspectives. They recognized the need to develop team-building skills and learned how to work alongside others toward common purposes. Becky asserted: “If the group is working together, there needs to be a common set of values, so everyone is working toward the same goal and everyone has the same ideas.” Key to the facilitator role was learning to listen actively to others. They knew listening was a learned skill. Jimmy reflected on his awareness of how he was developing this skill with the support of his advisor: (42)

Sometimes I think I don’t realize what I say or what I do can offend other people . . . like . . . for me coming from like a White male background. So working with [an advisor] has really put a spin like I see myself acting differently. Then it comes out in more like not talking, but more listening.

Expanding Motivations. Students’ indiscriminant early interests to get involved included personal motivations such as making friends or doing interesting things. Goals were refined as they narrowed their focus to joining or remaining in groups that meant something to them. As they developed personally and gained more experience, they sought a deep sense of commitment to something and knew that passion would be a strong motivation to action. James observed, “I like [having a] passion about things, [but] I didn’t know what I was passionate about.” Jayme observed that “Every single person needs something bigger than just their everyday life, because then it makes things all worthwhile.” As participants’ commitments to a change or a passion emerged, they took on a catalyst or a change agent role. (43)

Group Influences

The category of developing self interacted with the category of group influences (see the double arrow in Figure 1). The category of group influences includes the properties of engaging in groups, learning from membership continuity, and changing perceptions of groups. (44)

Engaging in Groups. Students often sought groups for a “sense of place.” Ed captured many students’ early childhood group experiences when he said, “I had feelings of being an outsider.” They sought to find organizations that fit their developing self-image. James observed that “Working at scout camp made me feel like I could do anything.” (45)

Students sought a sense of belonging in groups. Donald’s college church group was even called “The Welcoming Place.” These core groups included identity-based groups such as LGBT organizations or the Black Student Union. As he became more purposeful in his membership, Joey observed he sometimes felt (46)

the weight of the world on your shoulders . . . you feel like you’re alone and there’s points where you feel like you need to have a safe space where there’s people like you that can identify with you, who are experiencing the same struggle and have the same objectives.

- (47) Participants were also becoming increasingly clear about the conditions under which they would participate in groups and the role of groups in their development. They were developing convictions and narrowing their interests. Donald dropped out of scouts when he feared being “outed” as gay because the group was hostile toward gay students. Ed described dropping out of a sports club because “the more that I learned about myself and who I wanted to be, and what I wanted to do, it just didn’t align with kind of their priorities.” He shared the painful story of being at dinner with several members of that group who were telling insensitive jokes so he just got up and walked away and never went back to practice again. In reflection, he told us that he wished he had the capacity to tell them why he was upset but he did not know how to say those things then.
- (48) Many kinds of group experiences were critical. Experiences with group projects such as class projects contributed to trust and relationship building when successful and resulted in resentment toward others when not successful. Ed described a bad group experience in a class: “It was a dismal experience. I hated it, and I think some students really hated it since they are the ones that ended up taking on most of the work.” Most shared Christine’s comment that “[class] group projects are terrible.” Conversely, Ray eventually came to learn a lot in group settings: “Everyone has different concerns in the groups that I work with, so that’s kind of opened my mind . . . I’ve been able to understand where people are coming from a lot better.”
- (49) We were fascinated by the relationship of a strong group culture to the individual’s view of themselves and how that culture influenced developing a leadership identity. Becky described being the chair of a senior honor society committee going into her first meeting with a highly structured agenda and a set of ideas about how the task should be accomplished. The group slowed the process down by affirming that they were all leaders with good ideas and wanted to build a vision together of how the committee should approach its task. The group pulled Becky back from being too directive and supported her in practicing shared leadership. Becky reflected that she actually was very relieved. In a similar way, Jayme described her experience in her work with the local African immigrant community. The group continually reminded her that she and others were there to serve the group, not stand out as leaders themselves. Jayme observed:
- It keeps you grounded, because they’ll easily call you out . . . So you don’t get too cocky. It doesn’t make you think . . . “I’m a leader.” They’re quick to tell you, . . . “What are you doing? A leader is the one who serves the community. Are you serving us?”
- (50) *Learning From Membership Continuity.* To gain more time and energy to invest in organizations they cared about, students started to narrow down their numerous organizational involvements to a few that were more meaningful. They went deep into these organizations. Corey chose to stay highly involved in his fraternity and reflected on this experience: “[It] . . . just changed my entire life.” Students who were committed to a group or organization over time readily gained relational skills such as dealing with conflict, handling transition issues, and sustaining organizations. They increasingly became aware of their responsibility for the development of younger group members. They assumed responsibility and took on positional leadership roles and active member roles. Students often maintained their membership in other groups, while retaining a primary group as their main source of identification; a concept that Marie called her “core group.” They eventually became wise senior members and continued their support of their core groups even when less active in the group’s leadership. Some sports team experiences were particularly powerful developmental environments, which offered opportunities to develop group spirit, encouraged bonding and morale, and were sustained over time. On some teams, they learned to work with people they might not even like but had to learn to function together. That continuity of being known provided a core group—a safe space—to try on roles and practice processes.
- (51) Students’ interaction with others in groups influenced their own self-awareness as well as shaped how they viewed groups and their role with others in groups. Angela, for example, had been used to doing things by herself in most groups but as tasks became more complex in one of her high school organizations, she came to realize she had to depend on others in the group to accomplish their goals. She had learned that working along with others was more productive than working alone. Subsequently, in her first year of college, she was one of several vice presidents of her residence hall association. When the president abruptly resigned, the group of vice presidents decided to share the role as copresidents until a new president was elected some months later.

Changing Perceptions of Groups. Students initially viewed groups as just collections of friends or people they knew. As they began to realize those groups had purposes and objectives, this collection of people began to be seen as an organization with structure and roles. Eventually they saw that those organizations were entities to develop. Becky saw this as a new responsibility in her developing leadership identity: “I really try to . . . make it a better organization . . . [and make] simple changes that maybe in the long run would affect the organization.” Organizations were also viewed as communities of people working together. Becky observed that the feeling of “community is necessary to do anything.” As they developed in their leadership identity, they had a new sense of how their group was linked to other organizations in a system, and they became interested in how the system worked. Students became aware of those who worked in other groups on campus-wide or community-wide issues, and of those who functioned well in coalitions. These systems views led them to see the contributions of diverse roles of stakeholders in those systems and the complexity of different groups within a system. By gaining a systems-view, Ray even gained a new view of administrators: “Working with administrators [I’m] now . . . able to see where they’re coming from . . . I’m a little bit more open-minded about sometimes why they can’t get things done.” (52)

Changing View of Self With Others

Developing self interacted with group influences to effect how participants changed their view of themselves in relation to other people. In the early stages of engaging in groups, they were *dependent* on others. Even when developing personal efficacy to accomplish their goals, they depended on adults and older peers for sponsorship, affirmation, and support. As students began to be involved in leadership contexts and take on member or leader roles, they engaged in groups from one of two primary pathways: *independent* or *dependent*. On the independent path, students aspired to be the positional leader or had a strong motivation to change something in a group or organization of which they were a part. Others continued to be dependent and preferred to be members or followers in groups. Corey said, “I didn’t want to lead, but be part of a team that did.” Many functioned on both pathways and clearly saw that they had different roles (independent leader or dependent follower). Whether students entered groups from an independent or dependent position, they shared a leadercentric view of leadership, believing only positional leaders did leadership. Donald said it succinctly, “Leadership is what the leader does.” The key transition to a more differentiated view of leadership was facilitated by the awareness that group participants were interdependent with each other. The students continued a consciousness of the interdependence of themselves with others across the final stages of their leadership identity. They believed that leadership came from anywhere in the group and worked to develop their own and their peers’ capacity for leadership. (53)

Broadening View of Leadership

Students’ changing view of themselves with others influenced their broadening view of leadership and their personal definitions of leadership. The final category concerned participants’ construction of leadership and the mental models that framed that construct. In the early stages of leadership identity, the construction of leadership was not yet a personal identity. The initial view of leader was an external adult and it broadened to include an older peer. That view could be stated as: “I am *not* a leader.” Leadership then became leader-centric with the belief that a positional leader does leadership. Jayme said, (54)

When I was a girl, I thought leadership was the person who could boss everyone around, and make them do what they wanted to do. Because you saw all the people around you, those in charge were like, “Do this, do that, do this, do that.”

That individual leader takes on responsibility, organizes tasks, and gets things done. Taking on a position meant one was the leader. In their independent or dependent approaches to leadership, students acknowledged they were the leader in some contexts and also knew there were other contexts in which they were not the leader, they were “just” a member or follower. As students recognized they could not do everything themselves as positional leaders and that they valued the diversity of talents and perspectives brought by group members to accomplish goals, they began to engage with others in more meaningful, interdependent ways. This led to differentiation in the (55)

concept of leadership acknowledging that leadership could come from those in nonpositional roles (i.e., members) and increasingly was seen as a process among people in the group. Leaders were people facilitating the groups' progress from anywhere in the organization.

- (56) A leadership identity had become a more stable part of self. This led to the view represented by stating: "I can be *a* leader even when not being *the* leader." Evidence for this transition can be seen in Marie commenting: "There is a difference between having a position and being a leader," and in Ed's philosophy that "leadership is more of a fluid thing, it wasn't just rested in one person." From viewing leadership as a process comes the awareness that people can learn to engage in leadership. Sammy summed it up: "You know, everyone has leadership qualities, and everyone can be a leader in some avenue." Ultimately leadership became an integrated part of self-concept.

Leadership Identity

- (57) The central category of this grounded theory was leadership identity and it developed in six stages. Each stage ended with a transition, which signaled leaving that stage and beginning the next stage. The process of developing a leadership identity was informed by the interaction of developing self through group influences that changed one's view of self with others and broadened the view of leadership in the context of the supports of the developmental influences. These stages are briefly described with student voices as illustrations.
- (58) *Awareness.* The first stage was the early recognition that leaders existed. As children, participants were particularly aware of parent figures and of national, historic, or charismatic leaders. Angela said, "I always thought of my mom as a huge leader just because in times of hardship she always was the one that pulled through and seemed to pull everything together, and I think that's a leadership quality." This view of leadership was external to the self and participants did not personally identify as a leader or even differentiate group roles. Becky said, "I would say that my lower school and middle school parts of my life, I was not a leader. I wasn't much, I wasn't really a follower, I was kind of just there."
- (59) *Exploration/Engagement.* The second stage was a time of intentional involvement, experiencing groups, and taking on responsibilities, though not generally in a positional leadership role. They often engaged in a myriad of organizations and activities such as swim teams, church bible study groups, dance, Boy Scouts, student council, and community service, usually for the friendships involved. They liked to belong to groups but their involvement was often unfocused. Ray observed, "I always wanted to be doing things," but, "I wasn't ready for a huge role yet." This was a significant skill development stage, when they were seeking to learn anything they could from their participation in groups, including observing adult and peer models of leadership.
- (60) *Leader Identified.* In this third stage, all participants perceived that groups were comprised of leaders and followers and believed the leaders did leadership—that leaders were responsible for group outcomes. In this leader-centric stage, one was a leader only if one held a leadership position; indeed, one was *the* leader. When Marie became a positional leader as captain of the swim team her junior year in high school, she said to herself, "You are a leader now." Donald saw the responsibility of a leader as "you get a job, and you've got more work than everybody else to make sure everything happened." Students became intentional about their group roles in this stage. Some participants intentionally chose a member role when they joined groups; for example, Christine would "be a member first to see what something is about." As followers, these students might be very active and engaged in the goals of their group, but they still looked to the leader as the person who should be in charge.
- (61) *Leadership Differentiated.* In Stage 4, students differentiated leadership beyond the role of the positional leader and recognized that anyone in the group could do leadership and became aware that leadership was also a process between and among people. Students entered this stage with a new awareness that people in organizations were highly interdependent and that leadership was happening all around them. If they were in a positional leadership role, there was a commitment to engage in a way that invited participation and shared responsibility. They began to view this positional leader role as a facilitator, community builder, and shaper of the group's culture. James realized, "We were actually working together as a group, not under me." When they were

in a member role (i.e., a nonpositional role), there was an awareness of their own influence and the responsibility of every member to engage in leadership together to support the group's goals. James observed, "I like the fact that I can be a leader without a title because I think those are the best types of leaders to have." They affirmed their commitment to the groups' responsibility for its goals—as a "we" thing and not the individual leader doing it all. [Note: The complexity of the data in Stages 3 and 4 led us to identify two phases in each of these stages. An *emerging phase* clarified the ways the student "tried on" the identity early in the stage and the *immersion phase* was the practicing or living with that identity. These phases are discussed further in Komives, Owen, Long-erbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005).

Generativity. In Stage 5, students became actively committed to larger purposes and to the groups and individuals who sustained them. Students entered this stage and sought to articulate a personal passion for what they did. These passions were explicitly connected to the beliefs and values they identified as important in their lives. Describing her experience in residence hall government, Angela felt rewarded to realize that future "freshmen . . . [were] getting something better because of something we did." Service was seen as a form of leadership activism, a way of making a difference and working toward change. Exploring their interdependence further, they began to accept responsibility for developing others and for regenerating or sustaining organizations. They made a commitment to sponsor, support, mentor and develop others. They recognized that younger group members were in a developmental place that they themselves had experienced. Jimmy saw his responsibility from "having a peer mentor and now turning around and being a peer mentor." They sought to enhance the leadership capacity of newer members so they too could be part of the leadership process, largely to create a leadership pipeline for their groups. Anticipating his graduation, Sammy worked for continuity in the organization so the "person coming after me feels comfortable and can do just as well . . . as I did. . . . My approach to leadership now would have to be a kind of mentoring people." (62)

Integration/Synthesis. Stage 6 was a time of continual, active engagement with leadership as a daily process—as a part of self identity. They were increasing in internal confidence and were striving for congruence and integrity. Ed described this as: (63)

A conscious shift . . . I feel that I can take ownership and the strengths that I have and the value that I bring to a group of people and have confidence in myself that I can do the things that I could set out to do.

This stage was signaled by many students in the study, but not fully evident in all of them. Those in or approaching this stage were confident that they could work effectively with other people in diverse contexts whether they were the positional leader or as an active group member. Even if they did not own the title of leader, they did have a confident identity of a person who does leadership. They understood organizational complexity and practiced systemic thinking. They were comfortable with contextual uncertainty knowing that because they had internalized leadership into their self-concept they could adapt and contribute to a new, unknown context. Ultimately, they echoed Joey's observation that "I see leadership now as an everyday thing." (64)

A Conceptual Model of the Integration of Categories

The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates a cycle of how students engaged in the categories that in turn influenced the development of their leadership identity and how that developed over time. One category, *developmental influences*, defined the supports in the environmental context in which the development of leadership identity was occurring. (65)

As students developed themselves through deepening their self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, learning to apply new skills, and expanding their motivations, they changed their perceptions of groups and their role in groups. Similarly, engaging in groups and feedback from group members informed the development of themselves as individuals. This interaction between *developing self* and *group influences* shaped an individual's awareness of who they were in relation to others. Depending on their stage of leadership identity, students saw themselves as dependent on others, independent from others, or interdependent with those around them. Their *changing view of self with others* had a direct bearing on their *broadening view of leadership*. Those who viewed themselves as dependent on others saw leadership as something external to (66)

them or as a position someone else held. Those who viewed themselves as independent from others assumed positional leader roles and perceived that the leader does leadership. Those who saw their interdependence with those around them viewed leadership as a relational process and leaders as anyone in the group who was contributing to that process.

- (67) An individual's broadening view of leadership has properties that develop through the six stages of the core category, *leadership identity*. Students remained in a stage of leadership identity for varying lengths of time. Either dissonance with the stage they were in or a new view of themselves and how they related to others in groups eventually led them to a new view of leadership. This new view of leadership signaled a transition to a new stage. These transitions between stages of leadership identity marked a shift in thinking, a very gradual process of letting go of old ways of thinking and acting, and trying on new ways of being. In the new, more complex stage, students repeated the cycle that supported their transition to the next stage of leadership identity. This could be envisioned as a helix where one returns to a category such as *developing self* with a higher level of complexity.
- (68) Each student's story across the stages of developing their leadership identity was unique, yet was reflected in this grounded theory. Even those who did not evidence all six stages are represented in the theory. Donald, for example, was a sophomore in the study who saw himself as the positional leader in most groups he was in. Concurrently, he eloquently described the issues he was wrestling with as he tried to be a good team member for a major group research project in his honors class and knew that his next developmental step was to learn to trust classmates more and be an active leader as a member of the team. His story described his identity in Stage 3, *leader identified*, and he was beginning a transition toward Stage 4.
- (69) We observed that leadership identity is the cumulative confidence in one's ability to intentionally engage with others to accomplish group objectives. Further, a relational leadership identity appears to be a sense of self as one who believes that groups are comprised of interdependent members who do leadership together. This theory is further applied in a leadership identity model (LID) that integrates these categories (Komives, et al., 2005).

Summary of Results

- (70) This grounded theory demonstrated that leadership identity develops through six stages moving from awareness to integration/synthesis. The process within each stage engaged developing self with group influences, which in turn influenced the changing view of self with others from dependence to interdependence and shaped the broadening view of leadership, shifting from an external view of leadership to leadership as a process. Developmental influences facilitated this identity development.

Discussion and Implications

- (71) After developing an awareness of leadership, the students in this study described their shifting leadership identity as moving from a hierarchical, leader-centric view to one that embraced leadership as a collaborative, relational process. Participants' recognition that they function in an interdependent world was an essential part of having a *leadership differentiated* leadership identity. Students in the *generativity* and *integration/synthesis* stages recognized the systemic nature of leadership. The components of this leadership identity theory connect to the observations of many leadership scholars. Margaret Wheatley (1999) described the zeitgeist of the end of the 21st century as an "awareness that we participate in a world of exquisite interconnectedness. We are learning to see systems rather than isolated parts and players" (p. 158). Allen and Cherrey (2000) stated that "new ways of leading require the ability to think systemically. One cannot make sense of relationships and connections by looking at a small part of the system" (p. 84).
- (72) This leadership identity theory affirms Wielkiewicz's (2000) operationalization of Allen, Stelzner, and Wielkiewicz's (1998) ecology of leadership model. Wielkiewicz measured two orthogonal dimensions called hierarchical thinking and systemic thinking. Both dimensions were clearly present in the leadership identity stages. Hierarchical thinking was the view of leadership held in *leader identified* and systemic thinking emerged in *leadership differentiated*. This theory extended Wielkiewicz's work by indicating that these appear to be developmental dimensions and that one experiences hierarchical thinking before one develops systemic thinking.

Some leadership scholarship (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988) asserted the role of key events and critical incidents in the development of leadership. In McCall et al.'s research, they found key events to include challenging assignments, bosses (good and bad), and hardships as the broad categories that impacted leadership growth. We found that the developmental process for these students does include key events but it is more grounded in the psychosocial dimensions of developing their interdependence, establishing healthy interpersonal relationships, and forging a confident sense of self (Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kegan, 1994). (73)

The students in this study had multiple social identities and factors in *developing self* were central to developing a leadership identity. In research about the multiple identities of college students, Jones (1997) found that students' most salient identity was the one identified with a minority status. On the other hand, students did not usually speak about identities associated with a privileged status; this silence indicated a limitation in their development of the identity associated with a privileged status. This finding is consistent with the development of leadership identity; race, for example, was most salient for the students of color in the study. The leadership identity of women, men who were gay, and students of color connected to those aspects of themselves and led them to view leadership contexts differently, particularly when they anticipated attributions made about them based on those personal dimensions. In organizational settings, they were committed to including all members so that no one would feel excluded or marginalized. (74)

The students in this study had a leadership identity that developed over time. Erikson (1968) asserted that people discover, more than create, their identities, and they do it within a social context. Each person discovers and uncovers their identity through a continual process of observation and reflection. "Identity development is the process of becoming more complex in one's personal and social identities" (McEwen, 2003, p. 205). Identity is often viewed as a global sense of self but it can also refer to a particular dimension of one's identity (McEwen), such as a professional identity, an athlete identity, or as it did in this study, a leadership identity. (75)

Limitations and Implications

This theory has direct implications in both advising individual students and in designing programs to develop the leadership efficacy of students in an organizational context. In this study we identified a number of meaningful factors that work together to facilitate the development of a leadership identity. Komives et al. (2005) described a model integrating the categories with the developmental stages and expanding on practice implications. (76)

It must also be recognized that for this study we examined the identity development process for students who were selected because they exhibited a relational leadership approach to others. Although relational leadership is a broad postindustrial approach, the process for identity development might be different for those who espouse other specific leadership philosophies such as servant leadership. Further, the study reflects the developmental process for students who were involved in organizations that may not be the same for those with little formal group involvement. In addition, more participants of color would have allowed for more saturation in diverse experiences. Although diverse perspectives were incorporated, a more diverse research team might have analyzed the data differently. The transferability of the study is influenced by the methodology, particularly related to the small number of participants from one campus. (77)

The possibilities of research on a new theory such as this one are numerous. For example, more research is needed on environmental interventions that facilitate the key transition from Stage 3 (independence) to the Stage 4 interdependent levels of consciousness (Kegan, 1994). The theory should be tested with students who do not hold extensive organizational involvements as did the students in this study to see if this theory is transferable to the development of their leadership identity; and if so, what the conditions are that facilitate it in non-organizational settings. Further research is needed with those for whom leader-centric approaches are not part of their cultural values in particular, to explore if they experience Stages 3 and 4 differently. As a potential life span model, more research is needed to determine how postcollege adults experience the *integration/synthesis* stage of leadership identity and whether there are additional stages not reflected in this theory. Leadership identity development could also be explored with noncollege adults. In addition, more research is needed to see if groups or organizations function in ways parallel to the core category and what influences those organizational practices; for example, are group leadership (78)

practices dependent on the positional leader's style? Do group structures shape the approaches used?

- (79) The students in this study shared their stories of how they experienced themselves in groups engaging with others that revealed how their leadership identity developed. The theory has implications for working with individuals as they develop their leadership identity and for groups as they learn to work more effectively to enhance the leadership efficacy of group members.

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