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31 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AT WORK I: GROUNDED THEORY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should

- have an overview of the steps of research in one prominent approach in qualitative research
- understand the alternative ways of doing grounded theory research
- see why it is important to integrate the key elements of the approach in your research
- understand, on a more practical level, major issues outlined in this book from the angle of one particular approach

Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory methodology is relevant for qualitative research as a whole in several ways: (1) It has been a major input to the development of qualitative research as an approach and an alternative to other forms of social research, in particular with the book by Glaser and Strauss (1967). (2) It has provided several tools for doing qualitative research, which can be used also in other contexts—like a specific conceptualization for the research process (see Chapter 8), for the sampling of materials (see Chapter 11) and for coding data and materials (see Chapter 23). (3) It has provided an integrated concept of how to do qualitative research.

The original version of grounded theory was outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their book on the discovery of grounded theories. Its key components are summarized by Hood (2007); see Box 31.1.

Box 31.1 Key Components of Grounded Theory

1 A spiral of cycles of data collection, coding, analysis, writing, design, theoretical categorization, and data collection.
2 The constant comparative analysis of cases with each other and to *theoretical categories* throughout each cycle.
3 *A theoretical sampling process based upon categories developed from ongoing data analysis.*
4 The size of sample is determined by the *'theoretical saturation'* of categories rather than by the need for demographic 'representativeness', or simply lack of 'additional information' from new cases.
5 The resulting theory is developed inductively from data rather than tested by data, although the developing theory is continuously refined and checked by data.
6 Codes *'emerge'* from data and are not imposed a priori upon it.
7 The substantive and/or formal theory outlined in the final report takes into account all the variations in the data and conditions associated with these variations. The report is an *analytical product rather than a purely descriptive account. Theory development is the goal.* (Hood 2007, p. 154)

However, over the years, grounded theory methodology has proliferated as well. For example, you can find a number of textbooks introducing students and beginners to the principles of grounded theory (e.g., Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Each of these boob takes different starting points and takes different approaches to grounded theory or elements

in this methodology. This has to do with the development of the approach over the years, so that several aspects originally suggested by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 are no longer held up by any of the authors (e.g., the suggestion of refraining from using existing literature about the topic). Also new protagonists have entered the field since the first writings of both forefathers—like Juliet Corbin or Kathy Charmaz. Glaser (1992) has taken different stances and criticized the writings of Strauss and Corbin (1990) in a very distinctive manner. Charmaz and others have taken a more constructionist approach to grounded theory research. This includes reservations about the idea of discovering a theory in the field and the data and about aiming at constructing theories that are grounded in the field and the data. The role of "data" in the process has been discussed as well. Despite the further development, proliferation, and debates in the field in the following 40 years, Bryant and Charmaz (2007b, p. 12) and "Wiener (2007) define the following aspects as integral for using grounded theory *methodology:*

- data gathering, analysis and construction proceed concurrently;
- coding starts with first interview and/or field notes;
- memo writing also begins with the first interview and/or field notes;
- theoretical sampling is the disciplined search for patterns and variations;
- theoretical sorting of memos sets up the outline for writing the paper;
- theoretical saturation is the judgment that there is no need to collect further data;
- identify a basic social process that accounts for most of the observed behavior.

In this chapter, I want to give a brief summary of doing grounded theory in a step-by-step perspective and to spell out these integral aspects in some more detail.

Grounded Theory Step by Step

Finding a Relevant Problem: Discovering or Constructing it

There can be several starting points for doing a grounded theory study, as in other types of research: Charmaz (2006) gives examples, in which the researchers' curiosity led them into taking something as a research problem for developing a grounded theory—for example, how the process of recovering from addiction works without treatment. A second motivation can be a personal experience or concern, as in the example of Glaser and Strauss (1965a) when the researchers' experience with how their parents' dying was "managed" in hospitals made them study this process (see Chapter 8, Case Study 8.1). A third point of departure can be based on lacks and gaps in the state of a scientific field—research questions resulting from earlier research, the lack of theoretical models, theories, or explanations for a certain problem. A fourth background for doing a grounded theory study can be the emergence of a new phenomenon or the discovery of a new problem—a new kind of chronic illness may suggest a study of the experience of people concerned with it. Or the

relevance of a certain context (e.g., homelessness) for living with traditional forms of chronic illness is identified as a research problem. In all these cases, researchers take a decision on what they want to study.

This process of identification gives the issue a specific shape—certain aspects are more interesting, others are less prominent. Identifying an issue as a topic for a grounded theory study includes a decision for a research perspective, aiming at developing a new theory, where so far a lack of theoretical knowledge exists. It also includes designing the problem in a way that makes it worth studying from a theory development perspective and it includes constructing a phenomenon as a specific research issue. It finally includes developing a research question—which aspects will be studied first or mainly etc. Although this definition of a research question can be revised and although the researcher might find out along the way what the most important aspects of an issue under study are, any grounded theory study should start with making a research question explicit.

If we take these aspects of identifying an issue for research and of giving it a specific shape, it will become clear that issues are not something just discovered but are constructed in a specific way.

Problems of Funding: Research Design and Process in Grounded Theory Methodology

If the research needs some sort of external approval—for example, by a funding agency or by a dissertation committee—grounded theory studies often face a specific problem: for such an approval an elaborate research design may be helpful or necessary. This design should include the number of participants and why the individuals, groups, fields, or institutions are selected. If you look at successful examples in grounded theory research or in the methodological literature referring to it, these are decisions to be taken by researchers in the process of research. Maybe also the selection of data sorts and methods for collecting them is only defined later on or at least modified along the way. This may make the decision about a grounded theory study in terms of approval more difficult. To avoid this dilemma, I would suggest creating a provisional research design for a grounded theory study, which indicates the expected number and kinds of participants and the estimated extension of field contacts and the assumed use of methods in the field. The research design is provisional, as it may and should be adapted according to the development of the theory and to the insights produced in the first steps of the research. Thus you should demonstrate that you are able to plan your project and that you are able to adapt your research to the circumstances in the field under study.

Research Ethics in Grounded Theory Research

Although research ethics has become more important for qualitative research in general (see Chapter 4), this does not seem to be a big issue for grounded theory methodology and vice versa. So you will not find extra chapters or a number of

entries in the index of the *Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Bryant and Charmaz 2007a) or in recent textbooks (e.g., Charmaz 2006). Neither books nor chapters on research ethics often refer to grounded theory research as an example (e.g., Hopf 2004; Mauthner et al. 2002; see Case Study 4.2 in Chapter 4 in which parts of grounded theory methodology were used). At the same time, this issue may become even more relevant, the more qualitative research has to be approved by ethics committees and has to meet ethical standards. Here again, a grounded theory study may face the expectation of a clear research design which answers questions like: which methods will be applied, to whom, to how many people, and why? This again may contradict a more open approach like grounded theory methodology, in which many of these questions can only be answered along the way in the research process.

If you apply theoretical sampling in a consistent way, you will decide from the progress of the analysis which groups to include next in your sample. Again it may be helpful to construct a possible design: What do you expect in the beginning of your research (when you present it to the ethics committee); how many participants coming from which social groups or backgrounds do you expect to include; etc.? Try to be as clear as possible in formulating your research question. Try also to describe how you will obtain informed consent from participants and how you will avoid doing any harm to potential participants. Also give a clear account of how you plan to guarantee the anonymity of your participants or institutions. Try also to make clear *what the* novel aspects in your *expected research* will be, *which justify* why you will approach the issue, field, and participants with a rather open approach (see also Flick 2007c, Chapter 7).

In general, beneficence (see Chapter 4) is an ethical criterion for research. This means that there will be new insights as results of the research, which justify asking for somebody's time to participate in the research or disturbing someone's privacy. This criterion should be easy to fulfill if a new theory is the aim and this aim is likely to be reached.

Getting Started: Using Sensitizing Concepts and Finding Relevant Situations, Persons, or Events

A good starting point is to use **sensitizing concepts.** These are concepts which give the researcher a "general sense of references and guidance in approaching empirical instances … suggest directions along which to look … and rest on a general sense of what is relevant" (Blumer 1970, p. 58). They can be helpful as heuristic devices for giving researchers an orientation. Concepts like trust, identity, and the like can be such starting points for identifying relevant problems and first conceptualizations in a field. Once you have identified a specific problem, for which a lack of empirical analysis and theoretical explanation can be noted, the next step will be to find contexts in which you can begin to study it.

An example used repeatedly throughout the book may illustrate this. Chronic illness for homeless adolescents is an issue which is not very well analyzed empirically

or theoretically. In our study concerning health practices of adolescents living on the streets in Germany (see Flick and Rohnsch 2007), we came across several cases of adolescents reporting a more or less severe chronic illness, which made us start a project about this issue. Then the next question is where to find people in this situation more systematically: where would you meet potential participants for such a story, what kind of chronic illness would be most instructive as a starting point for developing a first understanding of this phenomenon, etc.? In this phase of the research, the identification of participants and contexts to begin with is not yet a question of sampling but a question of discovery, exploration and creativity, and imagination. Sometimes it is necessary to ask experts, professionals, or colleagues about their suggestions for where to take up your research. Once you have found this first case or first material, you should immediately begin to analyze it to advance your understanding of your issue.

Advancing in the Field: From Purposive to Theoretical Sampling

Sampling procedures in grounded theory research are often linked to theoretical sampling and used as an alternative model to statistical sampling (see Chapter 11):

> **Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory. You conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop the properties of your categories) until no new properties emerge. (Charmaz 2006, p. 97)**

Charmaz distinguishes other forms of sampling often misunderstood as being theoretical sampling, namely sampling

- to address initial research questions
- to reflect population distributions
- to find negative cases
- until no new data emerge. (2006, p. 100)

She emphasizes: "In short, theoretical sampling pertains only to conceptual and theoretical development" (2006, p. 101). This understanding of theoretical sampling highlights that it is not the starting point for data collection, but rather a refinement for the preliminary state of a developing theory.

Morse (2007, pp. 231-232) outlines several principles of grounded theory research, among them that it is necessary to locate "excellent" participants to obtain excellent data and that sampling techniques must be targeted and efficient. Therefore she discusses several techniques of sampling—from convenience sampling for locating people who are available to purposeful sampling for finding people who might be particularly relevant for the progress of data collection and theory development (see Chapter 11).

These examples show how in recent publications the overall concept of theoretical sampling has been differentiated. The beginning of research is now based on selection through "initial sampling" or convenience sampling, which will allow you to get into the field and in touch with the first cases and insights. Then you will go on with more purposeful strategies of sampling—directed to find specific cases, a variation in the material, and the like (see Chapter 11, Box 11.1, for examples of such strategies). Theoretical sampling—in the strict meaning of the concept and according to more recent publications—will only start later in the process. It is more about finding cases which allow further development of the rudimentary theory and its categories developed so far.

Collecting or Producing Relevant Data

Grounded theory methodology (literature) has a strong focus on two "steps": sampling and analyzing data. There is less emphasis on how to turn phenomena into data in the process, which means that there is less extensive advice on how to arrive at data to analyze once the fields or cases have been selected according to theoretical sampling. First of all, we find general statements like "All is data" (Glaser 2002). Looking at textbooks of grounded theory gives the impression that explicit methods of data collection are less covered than how to analyze them. Then we find a sometimes harsh debate about the status of data (collection) in the process of developing a grounded theory. This debate oscillates between the notion that data emerge in the field (Glaser), that data are collected by using specific methods (Strauss 1987), and the idea that data are constructed or produced by the researcher in the field (see Charmaz 2006). Beyond the epistemological differences in these notions, it seems obvious that researchers use methods for arriving at data. Grounded theory methodology is not linked to a preferable method for collecting or producing data.

However, the whole concept of the research process (see Chapter 8) has been developed in projects based on participant observation (see Chapter 17), including more or less formalized conversations or interviews with members of the field (see Case Study 8.1). This research strategy is based on repeated field contacts and allows coming back to the field and participants to collect more data and to adapt data collection to the needs and questions resulting from the analysis of the data so far. Interview studies are in most cases based on meeting the interviewee once and often rely on an interview schedule for all interviewees.

If you want to make the most out of using grounded theory methodology, you should consider a strategy open to including several forms of data (as in observation or in ethnography) rather than expecting to do only a limited number of interviews. Furthermore, the epistemological debates mentioned above should not confuse you in your access to data: data do not emerge from a field and not everything *is* data. But you can use almost everything as data—whatever is helpful to understand the process and the field you are interested in and to answer your research questions. Then you can use different sorts of phenomena and materials and turn them into

data. And you can use different methods to collect and document such materials as data. Whatever method you use in this step will influence what you see as data and how phenomena and materials appear as data. Thus, as in other kinds of research, the use of certain methods will produce data, which you can use for constructing a theory that is grounded in these data.

Memoing: Producing Evidence through Writing

"Memo writing is essential to Grounded Theory methodological practices and principles" (Lempert 2007, p. 245). This statement highlights the central role of writing in the process of theory development. However, most theorists of grounded theory methodology locate memo writing basically in the step of analyzing the data, as Lempert holds: "Memos are not intended to describe the social worlds of the researchers data, instead they *conceptualize* the data in narrative form" (p. 245). Memo writing can include references to the literature and diagrams for linking, structuring, and contextualizing concepts. They may also incorporate quotes from respondents in interviews or field conversations as further evidence in the analysis.

Memoing is not a standardized procedure but depends on the personal style of the researcher. However, it can be seen as a learned skill. Lempert sees four fundamental principles in memo writing. The intention is the discovery and development of theory rather than application and confirmation. A major step in analyzing any sort of raw data is memo writing and diagramming of concepts, both of which help to shape the further collection and analysis of data. Memos are written, reread, and rewritten in order to advance to more abstract levels of theorizing (2007, p. 262).

Memo writing helps to make the analysis more explicit and transparent for the researcher, other people in the team, and if used as part of a publication for readers of the research and its results. However, a consistent use of memoing should go beyond this restriction to analyzing data. Your research will benefit a lot if you start memo writing right away by writing a research diary throughout the process. Writing field notes should complement this once you get in touch with your empirical area and the members of your field. If you do interviews, you should write an extended context protocol including your impressions, descriptions of the setting in which you did an interview, circumstances and intriguing events in the relation to the field and the interviewee. This protocol complements the recording and transcription of what has been said in the interview. In general, try to make notes throughout the process of your research. Richardson (1994, p. 527) distinguishes four categories of notes helpful for documenting and reflecting on the process of research:

- Observation notes to cover perceptions in the field.
- Methodological notes about how methods are applied and how to frame that situation.

- Theoretical notes in the sense of what grounded theory researchers describe as memos.
- Personal notes in the sense of a research diary or journal.

This extension of memoing will make evident how your research advanced and how you produced evidence that allowed construction of your theory in the process.

Analysis through Coding

The central process in grounded theory research is coding the data. Different from other concepts of coding (which see the allocation of material to existing categories as coding), here the process of developing codes, categories, and concepts is seen as coding (see Chapter 23). As coding is so central in the process of grounded theory it is not surprising that the controversies about the right way of doing grounded theory research focused on the way of coding and what that means for openness to material, data, and phenomena. Glaser (1992) criticizes Strauss and Corbin (1990) for forcing their categories upon the material and for obstructing the process of emergence rather than supporting it by their way of coding. Charmaz (2006) questions this understanding of categories as emerging. She sees the whole process including the step of coding as a way of constructing grounded theories rather than discovering them. This again produces harsh reactions from Glaser.

The result for researchers who want to use grounded theory as a tool for studying their issue and field can be confusion, which you can deal with in different ways: either you adopt one of the perspectives and apply a Glaserian or a Straussian or a Charmazian version of grounded theory methodology in your research and ignore the other versions; or you follow the eclectic way and pick those concepts and procedures from each of the approaches, which look most instructive for your research. Finally, you could try to see the common core of methodological approach in the different versions of grounded theory methodology and see the differences in the detail more as alternative ways of how to proceed depending on your research question.

If we want to follow the last alternative, we can see the following common grounds in how to analyze data in grounded theory research:

- Coding means to develop categories, properties, and relations among them.
- Coding is a process which includes at least three steps (or ways of coding) with different aims.
- « The starting point is always open coding, sometimes called initial coding (Charmaz).
- Later, some form of more structured coding is included. The ways of how to structure this coding can vary between the approaches. This can be theoretical coding (Glaser), axial coding (Strauss and Corbin), or focused coding (Charmaz).
- Selective coding is the last step (Glaser 1978 sees it as prior to theoretical coding), which means that data are scanned for more evidence for core categories.

- Coding aims at identifying structures in the material—like core categories (Strauss), basic social processes (Glaser), story lines (Strauss and Corbin).
- The different ways of coding should not be seen as a one-after-the-other logic. Rather the researcher will return to open coding if the other forms of coding raise questions that can only be answered by developing new categories.
- The end point of coding is theoretical saturation, if continuing coding does not lead to new theoretical insights.

Identifying Structure, Reducing Complexity, and Developing a Theoretical Model

The aims of coding in this process are always twofold: to develop and unfold an understanding of the issue or field under study first, which demands an open access to what should be coded and how; the second aim is to identify an underlying structure, an organizing principle, a basic social process, or core category. This asks for reduction and structuration. According to these aims, Glaser (1978) for example distinguishes between substantive and theoretical coding. For the first form of coding he suggests using either words and concepts from the language of the field ("in vivo codes"), or words and concepts drawn from the scientific (e.g., sociological) terminology ("sociological constructs"). Theoretical coding then aims at identifying relations among such substantive codes as the next step towards formulating a theory. Here we find suggestions to look for relations among codes like causes, contexts, consequences, and conditions (1978, p. 72). Another tool that Glaser suggests is the coding families (see Chapter 23) .As KeUe (2007, p. 200) holds, this set of coding families comes with a lot of background assumptions not made explicit, which limits their usefulness for structuring substantive codes, in particular for beginners looking for an orientation of how to code. It can be used as an inspiration for which directions to look in if you are searching for possible links among your substantive codes.

In Strausss concept of coding, the coding paradigm (or paradigmatic model, see Chapter 23) replaces the coding families in Glasers approach. Here again an orientation is given for how to link substantive concepts with each other. Again this is an abstract and general model for how to link and contextualize substantive codes among each other. This model is constructed around two axes: one goes from causes to phenomena and to consequences, the other goes from context to intervening conditions and to action and interactional strategies of participants. Accordingly you may take a phenomenon, which was labeled with a substantive code, and ask yourself along the first axis: what are the causes of this phenomenon and what are its consequences? On the second axis you may ask: what were the context and intervening conditions influencing this phenomenon, which strategies by participants were linked to this phenomenon, and what were the consequences? Of course these questions are not hypothetical but should be addressed to the empirical material and answered by coding and comparison.

In both approaches, substantive codes are linked by codes that are more about formal relations (something is a *cause* of something). Strauss's model around two

axes led to his step of axial coding, which takes this model as a heuristic device for the further development of a grounded theory. In both approaches, the idea of selective coding is included, which focuses on potential core concepts or core variables (Holton 2007, p. 280). Also, constant comparison of materials during the coding process is beyond question for both approaches. Integration of materials and developing the structure of the theory is advanced by the theoretical sorting of codes and even more of memos written about them. Several authors suggest doing this sorting by hand. The theoretical codes produced in one of the ways discussed above can be used as an orientation for theoretical sorting (see Charmaz 2006, pp. 115-118).

Evaluating What You Found—Grounding Grounded Theory

In Chapter 28,1 discussed some earlier suggestions by Corbin and Strauss (1990) who list criteria for a grounded theory. A major point was that they evaluate rather the formal procedures of applying the methods of grounded theory research than the outcome of the process. A specific suggestion including this aspect comes from Charmaz (2006, pp. 182-183) for evaluating grounded theory studies. She suggests four criteria, each of which comes with several questions (Box 31.2).

Box 31.2 Criteria for Grounded Theory Research

Credibility

- Has your research achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?
- Are data sufficient to merit your claims? Consider the range, number and depth of observations contained in the data.
    - Have you made systematic comparisons between observations and between categories?
- Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?
- Are there strong logical links between the gathered data and your argument and analysis?
- Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the reader to form an independent assessment—and *agree* with your claims?

Originality

- Are your categories fresh? Do they offer new insights?
- Does your analysis provide a new conceptual rendering of the data?
- What is the social and theoretical significance of this work?
- How does your grounded theory challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts, and practices?

(Continued)

Resonance

- Do the categories portray the fullness of the studied experience?
- Have you revealed both liminal and unstable taken-for-granted meanings?
8 Have you drawn links between larger collectivities or institutions and individual lives, when the data so indicate?
® Does your grounded theory make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstances? Does your analysis offer them deeper insights about their lives and world?

Usefulness

- Does your analysis offer interpretations that people can use in their everyday worlds?
- Do your analytic categories suggest any generic processes?
® If so, have you examined these generic processes for tacit implications?
- Can the analysis spark further research in other substantive areas?
- How does your work contribute to knowledge? How does it contribute to making a better world? (Charmaz 2006, pp. 182-183)

Charmaz does not unfold this set of criteria in greater detail, but defines some links between them: "A strong combination of originality and credibility increases resonance, usefulness and the subsequent value of the contribution" (2006, p. 183). Her list is a combination of process criteria addressing the quality of the study (credibility), relevance criteria (resonance and usefulness), and novelty criteria (originality)[1].

Dey, however, discusses notions of validity and validation in this context and holds that:

> **If we think of validity as the extent to which a theory is well grounded empirically and conceptually, then we can better appreciate the importance of theoretical consistency as weD as the accuracy or acuteness of our empirical interpretations. When we develop categories, we need to take account of their theoretical underpinnings and implications as much as their efficacy with regard to the data. (2007, p. 177)**

A major criterion for evaluating efforts and their consistency in grounded theory research is linked to the idea of theoretical saturation. In Bryant and Charmaz (2007a), we find as a recent definition:

> **Theoretical saturation ... refers to the point, at which gathering more data about a theoretical category reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory, (p. 611)**

If you want to assess your own effort in developing or constructing a grounded theory, you should not restrict this question of theoretical saturation to data collection. You should also apply it to the analysis you did with the data and about the issue under study—have you taken all possible profit from your data, from your analysis of the issue? As mentioned earlier in this book (see Chapter 23), this criterion is not a fixed and formal one. It is relative as it is based on the judgment and the estimation of the researcher that there will not be any relevant additions from continuing the analysis.

Hood (2007) finally presents an instructive comparison of grounded theory to a generic inductive qualitative model, which characterizes a more general model of qualitative research based on induction from material. From this comparison, she concludes that three differences are crucial: research in grounded theory consists of theoretical sampling, constant comparison of data to theoretical categories, and the focus on the development of theory via theoretical saturation of categories rather than substantive verifiable findings (p. 163).

Case Study 31.1 identity Dilemmas of Chronically Ill Men

Charmaz (1997) did a grounded theory study interested in gender and identity in the context of chronic illness. Research questions were for example:

> What is it like to be an active productive man one moment and a patient who faces death the next? What is it like to change one's view of oneself accordingly? Which identity dilemma does living with continued uncertainty pose for men? How do they handle them? When do they make identity changes? When do they try to preserve a former self? (p. 38)

Her research was based on 40 interviews of 20 men with chronic illness; 80 interviews with chronically ill women were used for comparative purposes. Her sampling focused on (1) adult status (more than 21 years of age), (2) a diagnosis of a serious, but not terminal chronic illness, (3) a disease with an uncertain course, and (4) effects of illness upon daily life (p. 39). The steps in her research included: analysis of the interviews for gender differences, a thematic analysis of the men's interviews, building analytic categories from men's definitions of their situations, further interviews for refining these categories, rereading the data with a gender perspective, studying a new set of personal accounts, and making comparisons with women on selected key points.

She answered her research questions by looking at four major processes in men's experience of chronic illness: (1) awakening to death after a life-threatening

crisis, (2) accommodating uncertainty once the lasting consequences of the illness were recognized by the men, (3) defining illness and disability, and (4) preserving a self to maintain a sense of coherence while experiencing loss and change (see p. 38). This again is discussed from the comparative focus on how participants were "preserving a public identity" and "changing a private identity" and finally of "strategies for preserving self." A core element of her grounded theory was how men maintain an identity and/or sink into depression when facing their permanent illness and disability: "Life becomes struggling to live while waiting to die" (p. 57).

This research was done by one of the major protagonists of grounded theory methodology. It uses core elements of the methodology, although it is neither entirely clear how far the sampling is based on theoretical sampling, nor clear about which of the coding strategies were used exactly to analyze the data. The study provides interesting and important insights about living with chronic illness and fills relevant blanks in the theoretical knowledge about this issue. However, what becomes visible as a grounded theory is less clearly shaped than what Glaser and Strauss (1965a) for example presented as their theory of "awareness of dying." This research therefore is an example of how differently grounded theory research can be pursued, without leaving the framework of the approach[2].

Grounded Theory as Systematization of Intuition

If we summarize the steps of doing grounded theory outlined so far, we can see several phases in the research process (Box 31.3). In an *initial phase,* the researchers rely very much on their intuition when they define a field, a problem, get started with the first materials and cases. The same is the case in using sensitizing concepts, in initial sampling, and the first open coding of materials. The longer the researchers work in the field and with materials, the more the approaches become systematic and theory oriented—sampling turns into theoretical sampling, coding goes beyond substantive coding towards axial (Strauss) or theoretical (Glaser) coding and thus includes also formal aspects like relations among codes. This is the *conceptual-theoretical phase* of grounded theory research, in which building blocks of a grounded theory are developed, memos are sorted according to the fines and axes of the developing theory.

Finally, in each approach with grounded theory methodology, selective coding becomes more relevant and looks at further evidence for confirming the relevance and centrality of specific categories. This is the *confirmatory selective phase* of grounded theory development. The last step is the *reflexive phase* in which questions about the theoretical saturation of categories and the theory become relevant. Questions referring to quality criteria concerning the research and the developed theory as its end product are raised in this step.

Box 31.3 Phases in Grounded Theory Research

- initial phase
- conceptual-theoretical phase
- confirmatory selective phase
- reflexive phase

As this description of phases of the research suggests, the process of grounded theory-is based on a great deal of intuition in the early decisions and becomes more and more systematic in its development. This intuitive moment in the research can be applied more effectively depending on the researchers experience. On the other hand, it may be the reason why several of the methodological steps in the process are applied with a lower degree of rigor than in other qualitative approaches and used more flexibly. This also makes it more difficult to teach this approach to novices.

Art and Method in Grounded Theory

This last point turns to the tension between art and method in grounded theory research. We find statements like "The process of memo writing in Grounded Theory is a learned skill, a practiced art" (Lempert 2007, p. 250). Other steps in the research process are difficult to nail down as methodological rules which can be applied unambiguously. This is the case for theoretical saturation, for developing categories in open coding, for the use of sensitizing concepts, and the like. A good grounded theory study is a good combination of art (creativity, flexibility, and curiosity towards what is studied) and of methods applied skillfully for reaching the goals of the study in a systematic way. This combination can best be learned by working with experienced researchers and scholars of the approach.

KEY POINTS

- Grounded theory remains a major approach in qualitative *research.*
- There are a number of key elements in this approach, but also different versions of how to do the analysis.
- The approach is most fruitful when key elements of method are kept in mind.
- All in all, here we find an example of the fruitful combination of qualitative research as (1) an art of skillfully working with an approach and (2) the creative use of qualitative methods.

Exercise 31.1

1. Find a journal in which qualitative research is published (e.g. *Qualitative Inquiry* or *Qualitative Research*) and look for research referring to grounded theory methodology. Analyze which elements of the methodology are explicitly mentioned in the article as part of the study and which version of grounded theory was applied.
2. Think about your own research and plan it according to the key elements of grounded theory research mentioned in this chapter.

Further Reading

Textbooks and Handbooks of Grounded Theory

These books go further into the details of how to do grounded theory research in different ways:

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (eds.) (2007a) *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: SAGE.

Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: SAGE.

Glaser, B.G. (1978) *Theoretical Sensitivity*. MillValley, CA: University of California Press.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (2008) *Basics of Qualitative Research* (3rd edn). London: SAGE.

Notes

1 Interestingly enough, the *Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Bryant and Charmaz 2007) does not consider this aspect in an extra chapter, nor do we find it mentioned in the index.

2 This study was published in the only collection of grounded theory studies published by Strauss and Corbin (1997).