

The Grounded Theory Method and its uses for political science

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Series of Papers: Methods of Field Research

No 4

2012

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Publication Info:

Result of the seminar on Methods of Field Research (WS 15272) in the fall semester 2011/12

Content

<i>Abstract</i>	4
Introduction.....	4
The Grounded Theory Method.....	5
GTM and Theory Generation in Political Science	7
Discussion	10
Conclusion	10
References	12

Abstract

Over the past fifty years, Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory method has become an important component of social science methodology. This paper seeks to determine the uses of grounded theory methodology for the field of political science. After giving an overview of the grounded theory method, the criticisms Glaser and Strauss levelled at the field of sociology are examined and their relevance for political science are discussed. The findings show that grounded theory is able to resolve some of the problems of political science methods, such as its over-reliance on theory testing and deductive approaches to theory generation. However, when considering how one could apply grounded theory methodology to a 'typical' political science question on regime change, it becomes clear that the theory's usage is very limited in some sub-fields of the discipline such as international relations. In the field of political science, therefore, grounded theory methodology is clearly not as widely applicable and useful as Glaser and Strauss proclaim.

Introduction

The grounded theory method (GTM) arose out of the collaboration of two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, and crystallized in their work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). The GTM has become very popular in disciplines across the social sciences beyond only sociology, including anthropology, nursing studies, and organizational studies (Charmaz 1995: 30). Based on an inductive approach, the GTM promises to aid researchers in generating theories that are both “grounded” in data and that offer good explanations of the phenomena under study (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 3). The work arose in response to many of the flaws Glaser and Strauss identified in sociological methodology at the time. Many of these perceived weaknesses also extend to the field of political science. This paper seeks to ascertain whether the GTM could be a useful approach in this discipline. While the approach has been widely discussed and criticized within the social sciences (Haig 1995), its applications in political science have rarely been the subject of academic debate.

In the following section, the GTM will briefly be introduced. Then, its applications in the field of political science will be discussed with regards to the flaws within political science methodology and, subsequently, using an example of a much-researched question within the field.

The Grounded Theory Method

Grounded theory methodology was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss during the 1960s. Their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, published in 1967, forms the foundation of the grounded theory method (GTM), which has come to occupy a highly important place among qualitative research methods (Mey and Mruck 2007: 12). Glaser and Strauss wrote this work for numerous reasons. One of their main goals was to rail against the fact that sociologists spent a disproportionate amount of time testing or verifying theories rather than generating them (Locke 1996: 239; see Glaser and Strauss 1967: 1 et seq.). But the work also challenges other aspects that dominated sociological methods at the time: the division between theory and research, the view that qualitative methods were inferior to quantitative methods, the separation between data collection and analysis, and the assumption that qualitative research produces only descriptive works and is not useful for theory generation (Charmaz 1995: 29; cf. Dryzek 2009). In addition to criticizing the mainstream research practices of sociology in that period, the work proposes GTM as a viable alternative to the popular hypothetical-deductive approach and a way to generate high-quality theories from data (Kelle 2005; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

In the past fifty years, GTM has grown to become very popular and is now included in almost every manual on qualitative research methods (Mey and Mruck 2007: 12; Miles and Huberman 1994). This method still features prominently in academic debates, especially with regards to unresolved issues and conflicting opinions about this theory (Cutcliffe 2000: 1476). Haig (1995: 1) explains that “[s]ince its introduction in the 1960s, grounded theory has been progressively developed [...] such that it is currently the most comprehensive qualitative research methodology available.” Both Glaser and Strauss continued to develop and modify this theory, though not together, since they began to develop a different understanding of the method shortly after the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Mey and Mruck 2007: 12). There has been a major divergence between the two researchers, who have each adapted GTM in their own way, prompting many analysts to refer to the emergence of two separate variants of GTM (Strübing 2007: 158). These are known by some as the Straussian and the Glaserian school (Locke 1996: 239). In this paper, “GTM” will refer to the “original” method as described in Glaser and Strauss (1967); important or contentious modifications of the method will be pointed out where relevant.

The central theme of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* is “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 2). Thus, the theory is derived inductively from an analysis of the locally surveyed data as opposed to “theory generated by logical deduction from a priori assumptions” (Ibid.: 3), as was the norm in sociological methods at the time (Kelle 2005). In addition, they clearly emphasize the importance of theory *generation* rather than verification (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 6 et seq.). Deriving the theory inductively, Glaser

and Strauss argue, leads to the generation of theories that closely “fit” the data and “work” (in the sense that the theory is able to explain the phenomenon that is being studied) (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 3). Two types of theories can be generated by constant comparative analysis: substantive theories, which apply to an empirical area of inquiry, and formal theories, which are developed for a formal area of inquiry (Ibid.: 32 et seq.). In GTM, substantive theories emerge first as the researcher studies a substantive area. These theories then aid him in developing formal grounded theories which may apply to more areas than only the specific empirical context under study (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 34).

In contrast to traditional logico-deductive methods, a researcher following the GTM does not begin his work with a careful review of the literature relevant to the topic at hand (Charmaz 1995: 47). The first step of GTM, data collection, is not guided by a preconceived theoretical framework; rather, the researcher simply begins collecting data with a general problem or subject area in mind (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45 et seq.). Data is simultaneously collected, coded, and analyzed, whereby the researcher continually decides what data are relevant to the emerging theory (Ibid.). In this method, the data used include different types of text, such as field notes, transcribed interviews or reports (Böhm 2004: 270). Data collection is based on the idea of theoretical sampling: “[I]n the early stages as many different people, situations and documents as possible are selected to obtain data covering the complete spectrum of the research question” (Ibid.). As the researcher begins analyzing the first data collected, he starts to see categories emerge along with their properties, which will lead him to begin forming hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 35 et seq.). Data collection continues until the researcher has reached theoretical saturation, meaning that “no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (Ibid.: 61). The ability to “conceptualize and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data”, upon which the GTM depends, requires the sociologist to be “theoretically sensitive” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 46).

Coding the data (understood as “deciphering” or “interpreting the data” (Böhm 2004: 270)) is the first major analytical phase of GT research (Charmaz 1995: 37). Simply put, coding is the process of sorting incidents in the data into categories of analysis (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967: 105 et seq.). In GTM, the codes are created as the data are studied, rather than applying a preconceived code as is done in quantitative methods (Charmaz 1995: 37). The coding process involves continual comparison of incidents that are to be added to a category with incidents coded in that same category. In comparing and contrasting these incidents, the researcher quickly begins to generate theoretical properties of the category (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 106). The Glaserian and Straussian approaches differed most visibly in how they further developed the process of coding (cf. Mey and Mruck 2007: 26-31).

The next step is to integrate categories and their properties: as the coding process continues, the researcher begins to compare incidents with properties of the category (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 108). As the researcher carries out this process, he begins to integrate the categories as he makes connections between them (Charmaz 1995: 41). The third step is delimiting the theory. The theory solidifies, meaning that modifications of the theory become fewer and uniformities within the categories are identified, thereby reducing the number of concepts, terminology, and text in the theory. This process goes hand-in-hand with generalization, ensuring the theory fulfills the requirements of parsimony and scope of application of the theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 110 et seq.). Lastly, the researcher writes and presents his theory (Ibid.: 113). Ideally, a theory fits the substantive area under study, is understandable and usable to what Glaser and Strauss refer to as “laymen”, and is complex enough to account for much of the variation in the examined domain (Locke 1996: 240; Glaser and Strauss 1967: 237).

The most important and distinctive aspects of the grounded theory approach are thus its flexibility, which is a result of the inductive procedure, and simultaneous data collection and analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 43) emphasize that “[j]oint collection, coding, and analysis of data is the underlying operation. The generation of theory, coupled with the notion of theory as process, requires that all three operations be done together as much as possible.” Now that the GTM has been introduced in brief, the next section will focus on its applications within the field of Political Science.

GTM and Theory Generation in Political Science

The authors of the GTM do not link it specifically to any discipline, claiming that it can be applied in many different disciplines (Haig 1995: 2). Is this true for political science? In what areas of political science could GTM be most useful? First, the usefulness of GTM for political science will be discussed, particularly with regards to the importance of theory generation. Secondly, we will determine its value to sub-disciplines of political science.

For decades now, a contentious debate has been raging between proponents of qualitative methods and advocates of quantitative methods in political science (Thomas 2005: 855; Goertz and Mahoney 2012). Quantitative methods are criticized for their reliance on the contested doctrine of positivism and the necessity to express complex concepts as quantifiable indicators as well as being limited to observation only (Pierce 2008: 44). Qualitative methods, on the other hand, are attacked for their subjectivity and their subsequent lack of reliability (Ibid.: 46). Glaser and Strauss (1967: 17) argue that “there is no fundamental clash between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative methods or data.” They point out that both forms of data are often necessary and though they strongly emphasize qualitative data collection in their book, they claim that GTM is

equally suited to collecting and analyzing qualitative data (Ibid.: 18). Thus, GTM as a structured method of collecting and analyzing qualitative data resolves some of the criticisms leveled at it by proponents of quantitative data, while also lending itself to use as a quantitative method. Finding a means of reconciling the two sides could be of use for political science research. This is particularly relevant since field research forms an important part of political science methodology. Wood (2009: 124) points out that field research has made unique contributions to social sciences that would not be possible through the application of other methods. For instance, field research enables scientists to make analyses of events that have not previously been documented and, as Glaser and Strauss point out, it is highly conducive to theory production (Ibid.). Since GTM provides an innovative way to conduct this type of study, it could be a highly useful method for conducting field research in political science.

In most works on political science methods, the section on theory generation is dwarfed by the many pages devoted to theory testing (see, for example, Van Evera 1997). Like in sociology, political science focuses to a greater extent on testing theory than generating it. The field of comparative politics forms an exception to this rule, however, since its methods serve the purpose of both theory testing and theory generation (Mair 1998: 310; Pennings et al. 2006). However, even within comparative politics, the dominant approach is deductive – the researcher begins with a research question in mind and selects his cases on the basis of knowledge attained through a literature review (see Pennings et al. 2006). Glaser and Strauss would clearly criticize the overemphasis on theory verification and the deductive approach, which results in “the opportunistic use of theories that have dubious fit and working capacity” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 4). This, they would argue, would explain the general shift from “grand theories” to “middle-range theories” that have taken place within sub-fields of political science such as international relations (cf. Goldmann 1998: 402): theories in political science are often derived deductively, which results in theories that are not grounded in data and thus only dubiously explain the phenomena under study. Glaser and Strauss would see the neglect of theory generation as a significant issue within the field of political science; the GTM would be one way to rectify it.

The merits of induction versus deduction have been debated at length within the political science field, whereas deduction is generally accepted as the best approach (Ragin et al. 1998: 764). The most common approach to qualitative studies in political science is to derive variables from a literature overview, include them in a research design, and try and discern their importance for the outcome that is to be explained. The problem with this approach is that it is incapable of addressing every relevant factor or interaction that has an effect upon the outcome under scrutiny (Ragin et al. 1998: 754). Glaser and Strauss (1967: 4 et seq.) point out that a logically deductive approach such as this one results in theories that are only vaguely connected to the data and that omit many

possible explanations.

The political science field displays many of the faults which Glaser and Strauss identified within the sociology field and which inspired them to come up with the GTM. From their point of view, therefore, the political science field could benefit greatly from using this method as a way to overcome its deficiencies in terms of the quantitative/qualitative opposition, the focus on theory verification to the detriment of theory generation, and the misplaced focus on induction.

Yet could the GTM really be useful in answering many questions common in the political science field? Glaser and Strauss (1967: 21) argue that “comparative analysis can [...] be used for social units of *any* size” (emphasis by the authors) including “nations or world regions.” Thus, the GTM could, in theory, be applied to questions within the international relations field or for any research question in comparative politics. Instead of conducting interviews or observations in the field, researchers could also analyze historical documents or other library materials. Glaser and Strauss point out that “[t]heir use is perhaps more efficient, since the researcher is saved much time and trouble in his search for comparison groups, which are, after all, already concentrated in the library” (1967: 53). Political scientists can therefore use GTM whereby the cases are states or world regions, using library materials for data. Could GTM truly enable this researcher to generate theories on common political science questions with states as the social units?

Let us examine one of the questions that has been the focus of political inquiry for a very long time (cf. Mair 1998: 320): What accounts for regime stability, and what accounts for regime change? GTM dictates that the researcher begin without carrying out a literature overview; he should simply begin collecting data and carry out initial analyses to steer further collection of data. With regards to the question on regime stability, the researcher stands before an insurmountable number of places to begin: even if he focuses on only one region of the world, he still has the dilemma of what time period he should study. This would constitute a major problem for this researcher. The researcher may decide to study historical accounts of one or more states in order to study why certain regimes changed and others, if any, remained stable. Here the question arises which historical accounts he may study – must he stick to one account or can he gain data from several accounts which may, in the end, have different points of view? Once he has solved this issue, the researcher may begin coding incidents in his data (see Glaser and Strauss 1967: 105 et seq.). As he does so, a category may emerge, or data emerge that fit an existing category – in this case, the codes “military dictatorship” and “democracy” could be placed in the category “economic well-being”¹. In the next step, the researcher will develop integrate his categories with their properties (see Ibid.: 108 et seq.). He may compare incidents and find that in cases of “economic well-being”, there is less regime

1 Of course, the actual properties and categories would very much depend on the researcher's data; the properties and categories mentioned are purely invented as a way of explaining the researcher's method.

change or he may notice that when economic well-being changed for the worse, regime change occurred more frequently. From this, he might formulate the theory that a high economic well-being makes regime change less likely.

Discussion

The researcher's theory on regime change may have some weaknesses, which are endemic to GTM. Grounded theory has been subjected to a deal of criticism (Haig 1995: 2). Several authors (Haig 1995: 3; Allan 2003: 8) take issue with Glaser and Strauss's insistence that no literature review be carried out prior to beginning the data collection and analyzation process. This makes it extremely difficult for the researcher to focus his research question and initial data collection (as we saw in the example above). Furthermore, as Cutcliffe (2000: 1480) points out, no researcher is entirely free of preconceived knowledge on the topic. The researcher has likely been studying this same topic (or at least a very similar one) for his entire career; this clearly affects his data collection and analyzation process. Thus, Cutcliffe (2000: 1479) suggests that a researcher should acknowledge his prior knowledge of the topic and openly reflect upon how this could have affected his data collecting and coding process, as well as theory development.

Secondly, as Allan (2003: 8) points out, Glaser and Strauss do not provide a clearly defined coding process, making the coding process difficult, particularly for novice researchers (Kelle 2005). Kelle (2005) argues that the coding process is extremely tedious and time-consuming, especially as Glaser and Strauss insist the researcher had no preconceived knowledge which would aid in simplifying the coding process. The concept of "theoretical sensitivity" which Glaser and Strauss argue will aid a researcher in conceptualizing and formulating his theory (see Glaser and Strauss 1967: 46) is not clearly defined in clearly methodological rules. Kelle (2005) points out that it is also at odds with the rule that there be no preconceived knowledge of the field.

Conclusion

Discussing GTM's applications in political science highlighted some additional issues with the approach. Data collection without any prior knowledge is clearly difficult, if not impossible, particularly if the social unit being examined is a state or a region of the world. The proposition of analyzing nation-states as a social unit is therefore highly problematic – the sheer amount of data available is staggeringly large. In addition, Glaser and Strauss claim that any historical documents or other works could be analyzed instead of field notes or interview transcriptions, but this could be highly problematic in practice. Any works that have been written down by someone else involve a degree of processing – they are edited according to what the author finds relevant and important. The researcher has no opportunity to ask questions or investigate into one area of a topic if the data

are documents (as opposed to interviews or field observations). Neither can he modify his data collection method the way one could adapt his interviews in order to garner those details he found most important. Additionally, in trying to imagine how this process could be carried out, it became clear how imprecise the description of the coding process is in Glaser and Strauss's work. Clearly, then, the GTM is not appropriate to any and every research interest and would be better suited to a smaller social unit than nation-states. Interviews and field notes taken by the researcher also lend themselves much better to analysis than historical documents. The method's application in political science is thus somewhat limited – it is less suited for the international relations field and more fitting for political sociology and public policy research.

Glaser and Strauss proclaim that GTM could be widely applied within the social sciences to generate theories that fit the data and explain the phenomena under study. GTM could indeed address some of the shortcomings in the political science field, such as the neglect of theory generation and its many theories that seem vastly separate from the phenomena they seek to explain. Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss suggest that states or even world regions could be analyzed as social units and that the data need not necessarily consist of interviews or field notes. The theory would thus lend itself to being used for many of the important questions within political science. However, a discussion of a possible research endeavor highlighted some of the flaws of the approach. Ultimately, grounded theory could prove itself highly useful for theory generation in some fields of political science, such as political sociology, and some questions, such as voting behavior or responses to political campaigns. Yet in many sub-disciplines of political science, such as the hugely important field of international relations, GTM is too limited to be a truly appealing research method. For the time being at least, political scientists will stick to their deductive methods, whether Glaser and Strauss like it or not.

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