



Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons:

<http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/>

'This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:  
Giles, T., King, L., & de Lacey, S. (2013). The Timing of the  
Literature Review in Grounded Theory Research.

Advances in Nursing Science, 36(2), E29–E40. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ans.0b013e3182902035>

which has been published in final form at

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/ANS.0b013e3182902035>

Copyright: © 2013 Wolters Kluwer Health | Lippincott  
Williams & Wilkins

**This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:**

Giles, T., King, L. and De Lacey, S. (2013). The timing of the literature review in grounded theory research: An open mind versus an empty head. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 36(2) pp. E29- 40, which has been published in its final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/ANS.0b013e3182902035> Copyright © 2013 Lippincott Williams &Wilkins.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Contentious debate has taken place about the role of the literature review in grounded theory research ever since the publication of *The discovery of Grounded Theory*.<sup>1</sup> Concerns have been raised about how researchers should approach the related literature,<sup>2</sup> with timing of the literature review in grounded theory research an issue of ongoing confusion and misunderstandings.<sup>3-12</sup> Conflicting advice, in particular the commonly held belief that *all* grounded theorists should delay the literature review until during or after data collection, can lead to inexperienced researchers becoming confused and in some cases discounting grounded theory as a potential methodology.<sup>13</sup>

The timing of the literature review is often influenced by the researcher's epistemological perspective, and previous background and knowledge in the study area.<sup>6</sup> In quantitative research the review is undertaken prior to data collection to guide the development of the research question and the methods used, and to provide the rationale for future research by considering previous gaps and inconsistencies.<sup>14</sup> The guidelines about the use of the literature review in qualitative research differ, with some approaches recommending delay of the review until after data collection.<sup>14</sup> One research approach that sometimes recommends postponing the literature review is grounded theory.

Two broad perspectives about the timing of the literature review in grounded theory are apparent in the literature; 1) to delay the literature review until after data collection and analysis begins, and in some cases until codes and categories begin to emerge, or 2) to undertake a preliminary literature review prior to the study and then either expand this review or write a secondary review during data collection and analysis. Few articles and texts discuss this issue in depth, and most sources offer conflicting advice which contributes to the ongoing confusion about the 'correct' use of the literature in grounded theory research. This article provides a critical review of the extant literature and debate about the timing of the literature review and makes recommendations for researchers to consider when planning their grounded theory studies.

## **HISTORICAL POSITIONING OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW IN GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH**

Several styles of grounded theory have been developed and used over the years, each reflecting the epistemological underpinnings of the researchers developing these styles. Literature plays an important and varied role in grounded theory research<sup>15</sup> depending on the chosen style. The following section explores historical and current recommendations and rationales about use of literature in grounded theory research by Glaser and Strauss,<sup>1</sup> Glaser,<sup>16-18</sup> Strauss and Corbin<sup>15,19-21</sup> and Charmaz.<sup>2,4,22,23</sup>

## **Glaser and Strauss**

The recommendation to delay reviewing the literature until after data collection begins, or even until after the substantive theory has been generated, first arose in relation to the classical grounded theory method developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss.<sup>1</sup> In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* Glaser and Strauss advised researchers to ‘literally ignore the literature and fact on the area under study, in order to ensure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas.’<sup>1</sup> (p37) They assured readers that similarities and differences with the literature could be established after the analytic core of categories has emerged.

However, several contradictions to this advice are evident further along in the text. The first of these is their recommendation that researchers should be sufficiently theoretically sensitive in order to conceptualise and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data.<sup>1</sup> ( p 46) They acknowledge that researchers have previous knowledge in their substantive area (p 92), and advise that the theoretical sensitivity developed over many years within the researcher can be used to generate his specific theory if ‘the fit and relevance to the data are emergent’ (p46). This begs the question - exactly how can this sensitivity be developed without knowledge of existing literature? The second contradiction is evident in their chapter about new sources of qualitative data. Here, Glaser and Strauss<sup>1</sup> agree that documents ‘may be used – especially in the early days of research – to help the researcher understand the substantive area he has decided to study ... and help him formulate his earliest hypotheses’ (p 162).

In light of this contradictory advice within their co-authored text, it is not surprising then that Glaser and Strauss went on to make opposing recommendations about the timing of the literature review in grounded theory research in their subsequent publications. These differences are explored below.

## **Glaser**

Since the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* Glaser has maintained that the literature should not be reviewed prior to the study for fear of contaminating, constraining, inhibiting or impeding the researcher’s analysis of theoretical codes emerging from the data.<sup>16-18</sup> More specifically Glaser advises ‘do not do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is to be done; and when the grounded theory is nearly completed during sorting and writing up, then the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison’.<sup>17</sup> (p 67) Glaser’s claim that the researcher in traditional or classical grounded theory must be a *tabula rasa* (or blank slate) when beginning a study however is at odds with some of his writings in *Theoretical Sensitivity*.<sup>24</sup> In this text Glaser alludes to possessing prior knowledge of the research issue when he writes ‘it is necessary for the grounded theorist to know many theoretical codes in order to be sensitive to rendering explicitly the subtleties of the relationship in his data’ (p 72). This leads us to question, as Charmaz<sup>4</sup> does, how researchers could know these theoretical codes if they are not part of their existing knowledge. If the researcher *does* know these codes as Glaser suggests, this implies knowledge of the relevant literature.

Glaser also acknowledged the problems of presenting a research proposal to dissertation committees and funding agencies in light of recommendations to delay the literature review until after analysis. Glaser

concedes that if a preliminary literature review is necessary to satisfy university requirements then it should be done, recommending that researchers not waste time and 'do what people want.'<sup>17</sup> (p 72) He assures us that concepts from the literature 'will constantly be corrected, put in perspective and proportioned in relevance by the constant comparative method.'<sup>17</sup> (p72), and falsify, confirm or extend the applicability of the theory to the substantive area under study.

### **Strauss and Corbin**

While Glaser remains adamant about delaying the literature review in grounded theory research to this day, Strauss appears to have changed his view over time. Strauss (together with Glaser) also initially advocated delaying the literature review,<sup>1</sup> but later Strauss suggests they may have overemphasised the inductive aspects of grounded theory in their earlier work.<sup>21</sup> Strauss also acknowledges that his earlier advice to delay the literature review applied less so to experienced researchers. Strauss indicates that experienced researchers are able to subject a theoretical statement to comparative analysis and would be capable of questioning whether such a decision would hold true under different conditions.<sup>20</sup> In his later works with Corbin,<sup>15,19,21</sup> Strauss highlights both the advantages and disadvantages of the initial literature review stating that while there is a risk that familiarity with the relevant literature can block creativity, familiarity can also enhance sensitivity to subtle nuances in data.<sup>21</sup>

In *Basics of Qualitative Research* Strauss and Corbin<sup>15</sup> acknowledged that researchers bring with them life experience and knowledge of related literature. They stress the importance of acknowledging and using that knowledge to enhance theoretical sensitivity, stimulate research questions and direct theoretical sampling. Strauss and Corbin elaborate on these recommendations in the second<sup>21</sup> and third<sup>19</sup> editions of their text, adding that before a research project begins the literature can formulate questions that 'act as a stepping off point' during initial observations and interviews, and during data analysis can stimulate questions about 'what is going on' with the data.<sup>21</sup> (p 51) In these later editions they also maintain that the literature can help the researcher to assist theoretical sampling, and add that it can direct the researcher to situations they might not have considered otherwise. Strauss and Corbin<sup>21</sup> conclude that if the researcher is careful not to allow the literature to stand between themselves and the data, it can also be used as an analytic tool to foster conceptualisation.

### **Charmaz**

One of the founders of a constructivist approach to grounded theory research and a previous student of Glaser, Kathy Charmaz<sup>4</sup> presents her version of grounded theory as a return to the classic statements of the past century, which have been re-examined through a methodological lens of the present century. In *Constructing Grounded Theory*<sup>4</sup> Charmaz writes that institutional and ethical requirements often dictate the need for a preliminary literature review but warns if the literature is reviewed *in-depth* prior to data collection, the novice researcher may be influenced by existing theories and force data into pre-existing categories.<sup>4,23</sup> However Charmaz fails to define exactly what an in-depth review consists of in such a study. Together with Antony Bryant<sup>2</sup> Charmaz later acknowledges that advice to delay the literature review usually comes from experienced researchers who have extensive knowledge of the literature and general familiarity with key topics and concepts.<sup>2</sup> This knowledge in effect becomes *a literature review on tap*, a concept that is mentioned again later in this paper in relation to Glaser.

Although Charmaz believes grounded theory research aims to minimise pre-conceived ideas about the research problem and data, she concedes that each person brings a past to the present and will most certainly bring pre-conceived knowledge and ideas to their research.<sup>22</sup> In her later collaboration with Antony Bryant,<sup>2</sup> Charmaz contends that a researcher should account for these pre-conceived ideas in some way and not simply ignore them. Together they recommend a balance between using the literature to provide a beginning framework to the research study and having a level of understanding to provide an orientation to the research. On the latter point they cite Lempert<sup>25</sup> who strongly advocates a preliminary literature review in order to avoid ignorance of existing evidence and to participate in the current theoretical conversation, while maintaining that the review does not have to define your research.

Charmaz's constructivist view therefore appears to allow a preliminary literature review prior to the study, which is then put aside and 'allowed to lie fallow' until the researcher has begun to develop categories during analysis.<sup>4</sup> (p 166) She asserts that during data collection and analysis, 'completing a thorough, sharply focused literature review strengthens your argument – and your credibility.'<sup>4</sup> (p 166) This secondary literature review provides a place to engage with the ideas and research in the areas relevant to the grounded theory, and helps the researcher position the study and clarify its contribution to knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

## **THE ONGOING LITERATURE REVIEW DEBATE**

One of the most often cited rationales for delaying the review is to ensure that the emergent theory will be grounded in the data rather than being forced to fit into a pre-conceived theory.<sup>1,4,6,15-17,20,26,27</sup> Glaser<sup>17</sup> famously stated that *everything is data*, something to be constantly compared and analysed with everything else that is data. Many researchers have interpreted this statement in different ways, with some arguing that the data Glaser refers to includes literature that may have been examined at some time before or during the study. The following discussion focuses on the apparent contradiction that exists between recommendations made by Glaser and Strauss about the use of literature in grounded theory and their own research practices.

### **Glaserian and Straussian Grounded Theory: Recommendations versus Practice**

As far back as the 1970's, Blumer<sup>28</sup> argued that Glaser and Strauss's original tabula rasa view of inquiry was open to serious doubt. More recently, Mills and colleagues<sup>7</sup> and Dey<sup>29</sup> argue that Glaser could not have really thought it possible to begin a research study with an actual blank slate. Indeed, few researchers today begin a study with no knowledge of a topic due to the enormous amounts of information available freely online, and experts argue that exposure to this knowledge cannot be simply put aside and forgotten.<sup>3,10,22</sup>

While they originally warned against engaging with the literature prior to beginning a study, it appears that both Glaser and Strauss did not always follow their own advice. It has been said<sup>30</sup> that Glaser provided ambiguous advice about the timing of the literature review to his students, such as advising them *not* to review the literature prior to data analysis but not actually telling them *when* they should review it. Some students reported being increasingly frustrated that their analysis was hampered by their poor knowledge of the literature while at the same time Glaser used the huge amount of data in his head

(referred to by his students as a *literature review on tap*) to identify categories and enhance his theoretical sensitivity.<sup>30</sup>

Strauss too did not always appear to follow his original advice of avoiding the literature prior to a study, with a previous student attributing Strauss's skill in analysis and coding to his wide experience and reading.<sup>31</sup> Wiener goes on to say that while studying with Strauss, she and Strauss both found the literature useful from the very beginning of their research to widen their horizons and enrich their interviews. Wiener claimed that rather than avoiding the literature, they used it extensively and in fact remaining current was the pressing challenge of their research.<sup>31</sup>

The differing opinions of the founders of grounded theory discussed so far have already highlighted conflicting and at times confusing advice regarding *what extent* the literature should be scrutinised, and exactly *when* it should be reviewed. Many authors have contributed to this timing debate. Some have supported Glaser's approach of delaying the literature review until after analysis begins and in some cases until codes and categories begin to emerge, while others defend their use of literature at any point from the very beginning of the research onwards. Some of the most common concerns about undertaking a preliminary literature review are discussed below along with strategies to ensure these issues do not adversely affect or bias the research process or outcomes.

### **Dealing with Preconceptions**

Delaying the literature review in grounded theory studies has been recommended in the past to avoid the influence of previous knowledge, values, beliefs and experiences on the research. This was thought to decrease any chance of personal bias, which some people maintain was to gain credibility with researchers who use quantitative or positivistic methods.<sup>32</sup> It has since been said that grounded theory (and in particular constructivist grounded theory) has moved beyond the positivist stance that we should come to the data with a clear mind and no pre-conceptions.<sup>12</sup>

The fundamental tenet of grounded theory research to minimise pre-conceived ideas about the research problem and data is being questioned more and more in the literature. Bryant<sup>3</sup> contends that the belief that researchers can approach a topic without any preconceptions or having rid themselves of all prejudices and bias is now largely derided by many experts. Rather than being thought of as disadvantageous and undesirable, it is argued that *a priori assumptions* should not only be expected, but in fact welcomed as a way of making the study worthwhile and possible.<sup>33</sup> Bryant agrees that sometimes it is precisely someone's prejudices (in the sense of prior judgements) that can lead to innovative insights.<sup>3</sup> He also argues that if we move away from the idea of grounded theory as a purely inductive process and instead stress the ways that 'theoretical sensitivity can be encouraged and advanced as a form of abduction' then whether or not we use existing literature at the beginning of a study loses relevance.<sup>3</sup> (p 14) In other words it is possible to access existing knowledge without 'being trapped in the view that it represents the final truth in the area.'<sup>34</sup> (p 341)

Evidence suggests that forcing pre-conceived ideas on the data from existing literature can be minimised or even avoided with careful thought and planning. For example McCallin<sup>11</sup> used classical grounded theory in her nursing research, but undertook a pre-study literature review in order to satisfy university

authorities and ethics committees. She avoided literature she considered had the potential to emerge as a significant concept, but justified her significant reading in other related areas. McCallin used Glaser's argument that *any literature is data* that can be neutralised or integrated using the constant comparison method if the researcher can put aside personal perspectives in order to understand the participant's viewpoint.<sup>11</sup> More recently, several lecturers in Health Studies presented opposing approaches to using the literature in grounded theory research. McGhee et al. concluded that the use of literature or any other pre-knowledge should not prevent a grounded theory emerging if reflexivity is used to prevent prior knowledge distorting the researcher's perception of the data.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reflexivity in Grounded Theory Research**

The constant comparison method of grounded theory where emergent themes are grounded in the data rather than gained from pre-conceived concepts requires a consciously reflective process called reflexivity.<sup>6</sup> Reflexivity is a process during which a researcher overtly scrutinises his or her research experiences, decisions and interpretations in order to allow the reader to assess to what extent the researcher's interests, positions and assumptions influenced the research.<sup>2</sup> Glaser<sup>18</sup> does not appear to believe reflexivity to be an appropriate grounded theory strategy, warning that it will lead to 'reflexivity paralysis' (p 47) during analysis. However Corbin and Strauss<sup>19</sup> argue that reflexivity is now considered an essential part of the grounded theory research process. They state the meaning a researcher gives to reflexivity and the extent to which it is used varies depending on their philosophical orientations and perceived degree of relevance. Using a constructivist approach, Charmaz<sup>4</sup> believes grounded theorists are obligated to incorporate reflexivity into their research design, arguing that we are 'part of our constructed theory and this theory reflects the vantage points inherent on our varied experience, whether or not we are aware of them.' (p 149)

Reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher as an individual, with a particular background and social identity, will inevitably influence the research process and should be subject to the same critical analysis and scrutiny as the research itself.<sup>2,4,3</sup> Reflexivity can make research findings more credible by making explicit the researcher's contribution to the interpretive process through self-critical appraisal and self-awareness.<sup>35</sup>

Self-awareness expressed through analytic memo-writing is integral to the process of reflexivity, making personal assumptions explicit and enabling a *turning back* on initial reactions to the data.<sup>36</sup> In other words reflexivity requires the researcher to develop a self-aware, self-questioning approach and be prepared to allow prejudices to be eliminated by data that oppose them.<sup>6,37</sup> Corbin wrote about how self-reflection allowed her to identify when she was slanting the data, at times noting that her memos were more reflective of her emotional response to the data rather than a conceptualization of what the respondents were telling her. This allowed her to go back and re-analyse the data and increase the truthfulness and credibility of the findings.<sup>19</sup>

McGhee and colleagues<sup>6</sup> argue that reflexivity can prevent a researcher who is already very familiar with the literature on the study topic from distorting perceptions of the data, or forcing pre-conceived concepts and theories. The fear that a researcher might stifle their analysis can also be addressed by being self-aware and able to appreciate other theories without imposing them on the data.<sup>34</sup> Reflexivity therefore can

allow researchers to be informed by and build on previous knowledge gained through a literature review without assuming that concepts discovered in the preliminary literature review would be the only solution to a research problem.<sup>9,38</sup>

### **An Empty Head versus an Open Mind**

Pre-conceived ideas themselves then are not the problem, but rather how they are dealt with by the grounded theory researcher in order to minimise bias and avoid imposing existing theories on the data. As we have already shown, a blank slate is neither desirable nor possible,<sup>39</sup> and instead the main goal should be that the researcher does not start with an existing theory to prove or disprove but rather allows theories to emerge from the data.<sup>4</sup>

More and more experts are now questioning the recommendation to avoid the literature at the beginning of a grounded theory study, arguing that we can never enter a research area with an empty head, but that we can try to approach research with an open mind.<sup>3,40</sup> It could in fact be argued that the researcher is no more likely to adversely influence the inductive research process by prior reading of the literature than from any knowledge gained through professional experience.<sup>41</sup> In addition, knowledge and concepts drawn from the immediate field can provide a useful guide to analysis provided we keep an open mind about their cogency and relevance to the data.<sup>40</sup>

Preconceptions are acknowledged and accepted by many experts as unavoidable and by some as necessary to contribute to the worth of the study. Their acceptance adds weight to the argument in favour of a preliminary literature review in grounded theory research. The point therefore is not to avoid pre-conceptions, but to ensure they are well-grounded in arguments and evidence and always subject to further investigation, revision and refutation.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore important for researchers to account for their pre-conceived ideas in some way,<sup>2</sup> and openly acknowledge the influence of prior work in their perspective of what is emerging from the data.<sup>4</sup>

### **Using the Constant Comparative Technique to deal with Pre-conceptions**

Researchers have used Glaser's<sup>17</sup> *all is data* tenet to justify their use of literature in grounded theory research in many different ways. For example, McCallin<sup>11</sup> (p 66) used classical grounded theory for her dissertation, yet conducted a preliminary search of relevant literature which she concedes was not strictly in accordance with the grounded theory style used. She argued that some sense of direction was needed to satisfy university and ethics committees, and that any literature was data which according to Glaser could be neutralised or integrated as long as it was constantly compared with emerging concepts.

Although Urquhart<sup>43</sup> delayed the bulk of her literature review while using a classical grounded theory approach, she developed a preliminary theoretical framework using minimal aspects of the literature, arguing that this framework increased her theoretical sensitivity. Urquhart claimed her thinking was not overly coloured by this literature because she took an inductive rather than a deductive approach and listened to the data rather than imposing pre-conceived ideas on the data. She also used the constant comparative approach to confirm, deny or extend the applicability of the theory to the substantive area under study.<sup>43</sup>



The constant comparison used in grounded theory research therefore validates, modifies, or rejects the researcher's observations. For the researcher with professional experience in the substantive field of research or in-depth knowledge of the related literature, constant comparison is a valuable feature of the grounded theory method to reduce the risk of bias-induced interpretations and analysis of the data.<sup>39</sup>

### TO REVIEW OR NOT TO REVIEW

Two broad perspectives have been explored in this paper concerning the timing of the literature review in grounded theory; 1) to delay the literature review until after data collection and analysis begin, and in some cases until theoretical codes and categories begin to emerge, or 2) to undertake a preliminary literature review prior to the study and then either expand this review or write a secondary review during data collection and analysis. Advocates of the delayed literature review seem concerned primarily with avoiding pre-conceived ideas and assumptions, while those recommending a preliminary literature review argue that any concerns can be overcome with correct and transparent techniques and procedures. Table 1 presents rationales for and against a preliminary review of the literature in grounded theory research. We argue that the evidence favours a preliminary review of the literature, and provide a detailed discussion of the rationales that support our position below.

**Table 1: Rationales for the timing of the literature review in Grounded Theory Research**

Timing of the review	Rationale
<b>Preliminary review</b>	Become familiar with the literature and identify gaps <sup>6, 21, 25, 31, 40, 46</sup>
	Identify new approaches the researcher might not have otherwise considered <sup>21</sup>
	Stimulate research questions <sup>6, 15, 21</sup>
	Provide justification, background and framework for the study and demonstrate the potential of new knowledge <sup>2, 5, 6, 18, 25</sup>
	Meet ethics committee requirements <sup>6, 18</sup>
	Avoid conceptual and methodological pitfalls of previous studies <sup>5, 6, 25</sup>
	Gain a critical knowledge of key concepts <sup>5, 6, 25</sup>
	Direct theoretical sampling <sup>6, 15, 21</sup>
	Enhance theoretical sensitivity <sup>3, 5, 6, 15, 21, 25, 31, 40, 48, 49</sup>
	Provide secondary source of data to stimulate thinking <sup>6, 15, 21</sup>
<b>Delayed review</b>	To be strictly in keeping with a post-positivist ontology of Classic GT <sup>6, 27</sup>
	Avoid recognised or unrecognised assumptions and preconceptions <sup>6, 23, 27, 42</sup>
	Avoid being constrained, contaminated, inhibited or blocked <sup>1, 6, 15, 16, 20, 21, 23, 24, 27, 42</sup>
	Prevent generating a focus from the literature rather than from the emerging data; avoid forcing data into pre-conceived categories <sup>1, 6, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 24, 27, 41</sup>
	Avoid being 'stuck' with a lot of information outside data analysis categories <sup>42, 45</sup>

### **To Meet Committee Requirements and Assist with Methodological Choices**

Most ethics committees and funding agencies demand a thorough literature review prior to collecting data,<sup>6,8,11</sup> which is a compelling reason for many researchers (particularly PhD students) to undertake a preliminary review. Some Departments of Health also argue that research which needlessly duplicates other work is unethical,<sup>44</sup> further supporting a preliminary review to ensure that research adds to the body of evidence rather than just replicating it.

A preliminary review allows the researcher to become familiar with the literature and gain a comprehensive knowledge of the key concepts and issues seminal to the topic at hand.<sup>6</sup> Some experts warn that it can be hard to know which literature is relevant for the initial review<sup>42,43</sup> while others point out that the researcher may be stuck with information that lies outside of the analysis of the gathered data.<sup>45</sup> (p 123) However, other grounded theory researchers may choose to review the literature prior to the study because they have not yet chosen their methodology and therefore all literature is relevant at this stage in order to guide methodological choices.<sup>6,32</sup>

The literature can be used to identify that a new approach is needed to solve an old problem even though it has been well studied in the past.<sup>6,19,46</sup> Marland<sup>6</sup> found this to be true when he was able to develop a theory free of the methodological and conceptual pitfalls of previous studies whilst also bridging perceived gaps in existing knowledge. He argued that his preliminary review of the literature was vital to demonstrate his proposed approach had not been taken before and therefore the result would constitute a unique addition to knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

### **To Identify Current Knowledge and Gaps in the Literature and help Formulate Questions**

Hutchinson<sup>47</sup> believes a literature review should precede data collection and analysis to identify current gaps in knowledge and help provide a rationale for the proposed research. This preliminary review can sensitize concepts and add to conceptual clarity. McCallin<sup>11</sup> and McGhee et al<sup>6</sup> agree that a preliminary review is necessary at the very least to determine whether the proposed study or something similar has been done before.

Sound preliminary work can demonstrate that researchers know exactly what they are doing even if they do not know exactly what they are looking for.<sup>11</sup> A literature review as an orientating process can be useful to ensure researchers know about current thinking, without taking a position on the research to be done.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of a project, the literature is also useful to help formulate questions that act as a stepping off point during initial observations and interviews.<sup>21</sup> Then as the study progresses the literature becomes an effective analytical tool to stimulate thinking.

### **To Enhance Theoretical Sensitivity**

Glaser and Strauss have both noted that grounded theory methods seem to be easier to use when the researcher is sensitive through having professional experience or knowledge about the study field.<sup>1,17</sup> Theoretical sensitivity, a major tenet of grounded theory, relates to the ability to have insight, to understand and give meaning to the data, and to detach the relevant from the irrelevant<sup>5,15,21</sup>

With these purposes in mind, some experts advocate an early review of the literature in order to enhance theoretical sensitivity.<sup>6,25,48,49</sup> Gibson goes further to question how researchers can be expected to develop theoretical sensitivity *without* some familiarity with the relevant literature<sup>49</sup> The theoretical sensitivity gained by an initial review of the literature can help emphasize the need to not be guided by an existing conceptual framework, and to demonstrate that the research question would be likely to generate new knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Lempert<sup>25</sup> used the literature extensively during data collection, coding, memo writing and write up. He argued that ‘in order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, I need to understand it. I must recognise that what may seem like a totally new idea to me – an innovative breakthrough in my research – may simply be a reflection of my ignorance of the present conversation.’ (p 254)

A preliminary review of the literature can therefore be used to enhance sensitivity and to help researchers know the types of themes and categories to look for during analysis. Researchers must be careful to ensure that themes and categories from the literature actually exist in their own data to avoid imposing pre-existing ideas and theories.<sup>5,21</sup> However, if used reflexively, a preliminary literature review can enhance a research study without defining it.<sup>25</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

Grounded theory research is continually evolving and different styles are used by researchers throughout the world. Whatever style is used, a defining feature of grounded theory is that emergent categories and themes arise from and are thus grounded in the data rather than being imposed on the data from existing evidence and theories. Some experts (most notably Barney Glaser) argue that reviewing the literature prior to beginning a grounded theory study threatens this defining feature by causing the researcher to force preconceived ideas on the data. However we agree instead that a constructivist grounded theory style has moved beyond the positivist stance that we should come to the data with a clear mind and no pre-conceptions.<sup>12</sup> We believe the use of literature or any other pre-knowledge should not prevent a grounded theory emerging if: reflexivity is used to prevent prior knowledge distorting the researcher’s perception of the data;<sup>6</sup> essential grounded theory methods are used consistently and correctly; and the entire process is transparent.

There is a growing body of evidence that supports a preliminary literature review to contextualise the background, identify knowledge gaps, avoid conceptual and methodological pitfalls of previous research, satisfy ethical committees, provide a rationale for the study, stimulate research questions and enhance theoretical sensitivity (refer again to table 1). We agree with Charmaz that the preliminary literature review should then be put aside and be ‘allowed to lie fallow’<sup>4</sup> (p 166) until data analysis begins.

A secondary review of the literature during data collection and analysis can link existing research and theory with the concepts, constructs and properties of the new research,<sup>47</sup> and validate emerging theory.<sup>21,34,50</sup> Charmaz asserts that during data collection and analysis, ‘completing a thorough, sharply focused literature review strengthens your argument – and your credibility.’<sup>4</sup> (p 166) This second literature review provides a place to engage with the ideas and research in the areas relevant to the

grounded theory, and allows researchers to situate their work among and within the body of related literature and demonstrate how they built upon and went further than previous research.<sup>4,45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The timing of the literature review in grounded theory research has been an issue of ongoing debate since its inception in the 1960's. Previous recommendations to delay the review of the literature in order to minimise pre-conceived ideas and bias are questioned by experts who argue that such pre-conceptions are unavoidable. There is now a considerable body of evidence arguing a preliminary review of the literature does not jeopardise the rigour of grounded theory research. Rather it can be seen to enhance creativity, theoretical sensitivity and rigour. Previous knowledge and experience can lead to innovative insights. However it is important for researchers to openly acknowledge the influence of prior work in their perspective of what is emerging from their own data. The recommendation from this paper therefore is not to avoid pre-conceptions, but to ensure that they are well-grounded in arguments and evidence and always subject to further investigation, revision and refutation. If used reflexively, a preliminary literature review can enhance grounded theory research without defining it.

## Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

## REFERENCES

1. Glaser B, Strauss A. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. New York: Aldine Publishing Company; 1967.
2. Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: SAGE Publications Inc; 2007.
3. Bryant A. Grounded theory and pragmatism: the curious case of Anselm Strauss. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 2009;10:Available online: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index/php/fqs/article/view/1358/2850>. Accessed 15 May 2012.
4. Charmaz K. *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage; 2006.
5. McCann T, Clark E. Grounded theory in nursing research: Part 1 - methodology. *Nurse Researcher*. 2003;11:7 - 18.
6. McGhee G, Marland G, Atkinson J. Grounded theory research: literature reviewing and reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 2007;60:334 - 42.
7. Mills J, Bonner A, Francis K. The development of constructivist grounded theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*. 2006;5:March 2006.
8. Skeat J. Using grounded theory in health research. In: Liamputtong P, ed. *Research methods in health; foundations for evidence-based practice*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press; 2010.
9. Strubing J. Research as pragmatic problem-solving: the pragmatist roots of empirically-grounded theorising. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007: 580-602.
10. McCallin A. Designing a grounded theory study: some practicalities. *Nursing in Critical Care*. 2003;8:203 - 8.
11. McCallin A. Grappling with the literature in a grounded theory study. *Contemporary Nurse*. 2003;15:61 - 9.
12. Kennedy T, Lingard L. Making sense of grounded theory in medical education. *Medical Education*. 2006;40:101 - 8.
13. Kelle U. The development of categories: different approaches in grounded theory. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007: 191-213
14. Taylor B, Kermode S, Roberts K. *Research in nursing: evidence for best practice*. 4th ed. Sydney: Cengage Learning Australia Pty Ltd; 2011.
15. Strauss A, Corbin J. *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 2nd edition. London: SAGE Publications; 1990.
16. Glaser B. *Basics of grounded theory analysis: emergence vs forcing*. Mills Valley California: Sociology Press; 1992.
17. Glaser B. *Doing grounded theory; issues and discussions*. California: Sociology Press; 1998.

18. Glaser B. The grounded theory perspective: conceptualisation contrasted with description. Mill Valley California: Sociology Press; 2001.
19. Corbin J, Strauss A. Basics of qualitative research; 3rd edition. California: SAGE Publications Inc; 2008.
20. Strauss A. Qualitative analysis for social scientists. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press; 1987.
21. Strauss A, Corbin J. Basics of qualitative research; techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory; 2nd Edition. California: SAGE Publications Inc; 1998.
22. Charmaz K. Grounded Theory in the 21st century; applications for advancing social justice studies. In: Denzin N, Lincoln Y, eds. The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research. 3rd ed. California: Sage Publications Inc; 2005.
23. Charmaz K. 'Discovering' chronic illness: using grounded theory. *Social Science and Medicine*. 1990;30:1161 - 72.
24. Glaser B. Theoretical sensitivity. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press; 1978.
25. Lempert LB. Asking questions of the data: memo writing in the grounded theory tradition. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007.
26. Hickey G. The use of literature in grounded theory. *Nursing Times Research*. 1997;2:371 - 8.
27. Holton J. The coding process and its challenges. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007.
28. Blumer M. Concepts in the analysis of qualitative data. *Sociology Review* 1979;27:651 - 77.
29. Dey I. Grounding grounded theory. San Diego: Academic Press; 1999.
30. Covan E. The discovery of grounded theory in practice: the legacy of multiple mentors. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE publications Ltd; 2007: 58-74.
31. Wiener C. Making teams work in conducting grounded theory. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE publications Ltd; 2007: 293-310.
32. Cutcliffe J. Methodological issues in grounded theory. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 2000;31:1476 - 84.
33. Thomas G, James D. Reinventing grounded theory: some questions about theory, ground and discovery. *British Educational Research Journal*. 2006;32:767 - 95.
34. Urquhart C. The evolving nature of grounded theory method: the case of the information systems discipline. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007: 339-360.
35. Liamputtong P. Qualitative research methods; 3rd Edition. 3rd ed. Sydney: Oxford University Press; 2009.
36. Birks M, Mills J. Grounded Theory: a practical guide. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2011.
37. Liamputtong P, ed. Research methods in health: foundations for evidence-based practice. Sydney: Oxford University Press; 2010.
38. Walsham G. Interpretive case studies in IS research: nature and method. *European Journal of Information Systems*. 1995;4:74 - 81.
39. Fernandez W. The grounded theory method and case study data in IS research: issues and design. In: Information Systems Foundations: Constructing and Criticising Workshop; 2004; The Australian National University; 2004. p. 43 - 59.
40. Dey I. Grounding categories. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE publications Ltd; 2007: 167-190.
41. Procter S. The contribution of inductive and deductive theory to the development of practitioner knowledge. London: Chapman and Hall; 1995.
42. Dick B. What can grounded theorists and action researchers learn from each other? In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of Grounded Theory. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007: 398-416.
43. Urquhart C. An encounter with grounded theory: tackling the practical and philosophical issues. In: Trauth E, ed. Qualitative research in IS: Issues and trends. Hershey PA: Idea Group Publishing; 2001.
44. Walker W. Witnessed resuscitation: a conceptual exploration. Birmingham: The University of Birmingham; 2010.
45. Stern P. On solid ground: essential properties for growing grounded theory. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2007: 114-126.
46. Backman K, Kyngas A. Challenges of the grounded theory approach to a novice researcher. *Nursing and Health Sciences*. 1999;1:147 - 53.
47. Hutchinson SA. Grounded theory: The method. New York: National League for Nursing Press; 1993.
48. Carpenter DR. Grounded theory research approach. Philadelphia: Lippincott; 1999.
49. Gibson B. Accommodating critical theory. In: Bryant A, Charmaz K, eds. The SAGE handbook of grounded theory. London: SAGE Publications; 2007: 436-453.
50. McCann T, Clark E. Grounded theory in nursing research: part 2 - critique. *Nurse Researcher*. 2003;11:19 - 28.