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# What Is Grounded Theory Good For?

Vivian B. Martin

*Central Connecticut State University*

Clifton Scott

*University of North Carolina - Charlotte*

Bonnie Brennen

*Marquette University, [bonnie.brennen@marquette.edu](mailto:bonnie.brennen@marquette.edu)*

Meenakshi Gigi Durham

*University of Iowa*

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# What Is Grounded Theory Good For?

Vivian B. Martin

Department of English, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT

Clifton Scott

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC

## Bonnie Brennen

Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

## Meenakshi Gigi Durham

University of Iowa, Iowa city, IA

Grounded theory (GT) made its appearance in the social sciences in 1967 with publication of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Glaser and Strauss advocated for systematically discovering and interpreting empirical data to generate theory, in contrast to testing or verifying theory derived from a priori assumptions. In the intervening 50 years, GT has spread into a wide range of fields including journalism and mass communication. Variations of the method have been developed, and debate has ensued about its relation to positivism and constructivism as well as pragmatism and postmodernism and about its value for critical race theory, feminist theory, and indigenous and other critical methods and theories. When and how is it best used? Is it misunderstood or misused by some? Is it more than a method?

We asked senior scholars with expertise in GT to reflect on these issues, beginning with Vivian Martin, coeditor with Astrid Gynnild of *Grounded Theory: The Philosophy, Method, and Work of Barney Glaser* published by BrownWalker Press (2012). Martin, professor and chair of the Department of Journalism at Central Connecticut State University, argues the method has been misunderstood even by those who use it, often conflated with qualitative studies, with only two GT studies published in journalism and mass communication. It is practical and subversive, she observes, with the ability to develop new concepts and link ideas across disciplines. She advocates a closer adherence to Glaser's original intentions for the method.

Responding to Martin is Clifton Scott, associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Scott is the author of "Grounded Theory" in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, edited by Steven Littlejohn and Sonja Foss published by SAGE (2009). While agreeing with Martin that the name often is misapplied, Scott argues for less preoccupation with policing the purity of the method in favor of developing multiple approaches appropriate to it as a methodology.

Reacting to both Martin and Scott, Bonnie Brennen critiques the original GT approach as neglecting "methodological self-consciousness," which would uncover researchers "theoretical assumptions, power relations, class positions and personal experiences." Brennen, the Nieman Professor of Journalism in the Diederich College of Communication at Marquette University, is the author of *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*, second edition, published by Routledge in 2017.

Finally, Meenakshi Gigi Durham, responding to all three, expresses optimism about GT's potential to spur new inquiry through exploration of social life, while she proposes that, like all theory, it be seen as necessarily dynamic and evolutionary. Durham is a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa and associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She is the editor with Douglas M. Kellner of *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, second edition, published by Blackwell (2011).

Lana Rakow, Associate Editor  
Louisa Ha, Editor

## Grounded Theory: Popular, Useful, and Misunderstood

More than 50 years after it was introduced, grounded theory (GT) methodology is still misunderstood, especially by many who claim to use it.

Admittedly, these are aggressive words with which to open, but setting up parameters is the most productive way to explore the issue of what GT has to offer to journalism and mass communication research. Although GT is perhaps the most cited qualitative method in the social sciences ([Bryant, 2016](#)), many studies labeled as grounded theories have not employed the methodology ([Bryant & Charmaz, 2007](#)). Some researchers conflate GT with qualitative research, assigning the label to studies that merely employ interviews or start without a strict research question. Others adopt the phrase “a grounded theory approach” and then proceed with vague understanding of protocols such as open coding or theoretical sampling. Glaser, who has been outspoken about what he calls the remodeling of GT, has argued that researchers have used GT and its associated jargon to legitimize their use of qualitative studies ([Glaser, 2009](#)). Such works produce highly descriptive studies, but not grounded theories.

A GT, as Glaser often says, is the study of a concept ([Glaser, 2010](#)). The concept explains observed patterns. Through constant comparisons of data, researchers build more and more abstract concepts that they eventually integrate around the core concept. *Supernormalizing*, which was a concept [Charmaz \(1991\)](#) developed through the study of people who had suffered a heart attack and other chronic illnesses, is the process of overcompensation to prove one is all right. Supernormalizing and its general implications are evident in any number of areas where people have experienced accidents and setbacks. That is what makes it a powerful GT.

I met Barney Glaser, codeveloper of GT, in Paris in 2002, at one of his troubleshooting seminars. I was working on my dissertation on people’s negotiation with news media in everyday life, which would become a GT on *purposive attending*. I, along with other fledgling grounded theorists, went on to organize seminars and other activities to support Glaser’s classic version of the method (see [Holton & Walsh, 2016](#), for a solid introduction to classic GT). Less a purist than some in the classic GT camp, I also value Kathy [Charmaz’s \(2014\)](#) constructivist version of GT which makes explicit the role of researcher and participant in constructing meaning. I am uncomfortable with works that cite only [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#), and the subsequent editions). The book conflated qualitative research with GT, obscuring its openness to quantitative data, and introduced ideas not in the original method. [Glaser \(1992\)](#) asked his former collaborator to withdraw the book, but Strauss refused. [Corbin & Strauss’s \(2014\)](#) revisions muddle the matter more with the view that GT is a family of techniques rather than a strict method. Such writings, along with some of the polemics and unclear explication in the original GT text ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)), have hampered the method.

## What GT Can Do for Journalism and Mass Communication Research

GT is an established method in disciplines that focus on practical problems such as nursing, information systems, and education. Based on my understanding of the method, I count just two fully executed grounded theories in journalism and mass communication: my own ([Martin, 2008](#)) and [Gynnild’s \(2007\) creative cycling](#), which explains how news professionals work amid constant change. Journalism

and mass communication has its share of studies based on interviews and masterly textual analysis, but it has not been at home for innovative qualitative methods. In recent years, the field has seen a number of ethnographies of newsrooms. But such studies are descriptive and have not yet provided concepts for broader understanding. Applying GT techniques to existing studies might result in concepts that better link theory and practice.

In building theory from the ground, grounded theorists develop new concepts, often linking many ideas not previously connected across the many research silos that make up the field. When I studied people and their daily relationship with news—using everything from interviews with people I observed reading newspapers in the coffee shop to observations from a book club where conversations about news invariably erupted each week—my coding of data, memo writing, and eventual integration of literature led me through theories of interpersonal communication, political behavior, and identity work, to name a few of the seemingly disparate subfields bearing on communication.

An unrealized component of GT is the creation of formal GT. A formal GT starts with the concept the researcher developed in the narrower substantive theory and is applied across a range of other spheres. My current work on *defensive disattending*, which grew out of my work on purposive attending and news, address the ways in which people avoid uncomfortable phenomena. It utilizes interviews, commissions studies, popular and academic literature as data in news-attending, controversial political discussions, the NFL's denial of brain damage caused by concussions, racial discourse, and organization secrecy in federal agencies prior to 9/11 ([Martin, 2011](#), [2017](#), [in press](#)). Defensive disattending is a theory of the social interaction of denial. Traces of well-established theories of communication such as the Third Person Effect and Selective Exposure are in the data; with naturally occurring data, the processes connecting these concepts become clearer, as originally envisioned by [Glaser and Strauss \(1965, 1967\)](#). Formal grounded theories have not emerged in any of the disciplines for several reasons, perhaps the most significant barrier being the challenges of interdisciplinary work. Disciplines steer practitioners in directions that are assumed to further the discipline. Formal grounded theories do not care about disciplinary boundaries. This is also true of the better substantive theories as well.

There is a subversiveness to GT that will probably always produce pushback. Researchers need boldness to take a GT to the end. In discussing the mangling of the method, Glaser sometimes says that even a little GT is better than none. But it would be helpful to social science inquiry if researchers were more conscious of the shortcuts they are taking.

*Vivian B. Martin*  
*Central Connecticut State University*

## From Method to Methodology and From Originalism to Pluralism: Grounded Theory Grows Up

Professor Martin's essay is perfectly titled. I can hardly think of a better short description of the current state of affairs regarding grounded theory (GT) methodology. It certainly does seem to be increasingly popular in part because it is indeed quite useful. And it is indeed badly misunderstood in most of the ways Martin describes. Also, it probably is true that communication researchers have been at the forefront of such linguistic abuse—labeling studies as taking a “grounded theory approach” when the only thing they have in common with the methodology is an emergent research design and a delay in

the development of research questions. I also agree that social science would benefit significantly if more researchers using GT were willing to go as far as developing formal grounded theories that are also grounded in quantitative data and lend themselves eventually to hypothetico-deductive analysis. However, I respectfully disagree with the remainder of her commentary.

In this response, I argue that GT has benefited from the pluralistic development of multiple approaches that diverge, converge, and overlap. GT is indeed misunderstood, but I believe that most of these misunderstandings have resulted from an originalist, often puritanical desire to construe the methodology as singular in addition to the sloppy use of the GT label she rightfully criticizes. So Martin and I agree on the problem, but rather than arguing for a return to the original archetype, I contend that GT is best considered an overarching methodology, a tradition that includes a range of particular methods that can be combined profitably for an array of purposes.

What we now call GT methodology is probably best understood as a family of related but distinguishable methods. And I believe we should take the root metaphor of family more seriously. Just as members of families often share names, spaces, and points of view but also often disagree and even define themselves in opposition to one another, so too do various approaches to GT. I grew up in a small town where your family name definitely meant something. However, people seemed to know that last names didn't tell you *everything* you needed to know. Yes, I was one of those Scott kids, but which one? My brother and I have plenty in common. In some ways, we look and sound alike, and we definitely share many of the same values. But we are very different individuals who have taken divergent, though I believe equally legitimate, approaches to our lives based on personal values that are generally quite similar though in some cases quite different. And like many younger siblings, my personal development was a mixture of modeling myself after him in some ways and modeling myself in opposition to him in others. We didn't always get along very well as kids. But as mature adults, we are close friends and deeply proud of each other's accomplishments even though I suspect neither of us would want to do the kind of work the other does. Why can't GT methodologists do the same? Isn't it time we grew up?

Indeed, I believe it is critical to the future of GT work that scholars develop and employ a more mature, variegated, and granular system of labels for categorizing these different approaches. In the 21st century, to say that you are "taking a grounded theory approach" is to avoid saying anything particularly meaningful. It is a great way to seem as though you are being descriptive while not really saying anything sufficiently specific at all. Labeling one's methodology this way is not unlike claiming regression as your method of analysis in quantitative research. Which form of regression? Multiple? If so, exploratory or confirmatory? Or did you mean logistic regression? More specific terminology is needed so as to foreground the purposes of the specific GT subtypes we employ.

Distinguishing more between "method" and "methodology" is one good way to be more specific and technically descriptive in the way we discuss and carry out GT. A methodology is a framework of methods logically justified by a coherent goodness of fit between one's research questions, modes of data collection, and methods of analysis. To say that GT is a methodology is to characterize it as an overarching approach to research that can be carried out in a variety of ways. The problem is that scholars have generally done a poor job identifying, rationalizing, and labeling the multiple ways that GT be carried out. The felt need among methodological experts to police the purity of scholarship labeled correctly or incorrectly as GT via comparison with [Glaser and Strauss's \(1967\)](#) original statement probably does more harm than good.

Fortunately, we are seeing more and more of just such a distinction. As [Charmaz \(2014\)](#) exemplifies, a number of writers have begun to describe GT work and others with multiple labels that account for important differences in the way GT work can be carried out. Nevertheless, when I am asked to review work that authors have labeled as GT, they never seem to be aware of these distinctions. And their application of the methodology they claim to be using is indeed muddled in just the manner Martin describes.

So Martin and I agree on the problem, but we diverge when it comes to the general solution. Although Martin nods in what seems like mild appreciation for constructionist approaches to the methodology promoted by [Charmaz \(2014\)](#) and others, she generally advocates for originalist views of GT that conform to [Glaser and Strauss's \(1967\)](#) initial prototype. She is critical of those who base and document via citation their understanding of GT in Strauss and Corbin's popular text, which she believes corrupted or spoiled GT by providing additional vocabulary for describing the methodology, by conflating GT and qualitative field research more generally, and by excluding the possibility of using quantitative data and analysis of variables.

My preferred solution would involve less preoccupation with adherence to an originalist view of GT and a much greater attention to developing consensus around specific subtypes. If, as Professor Martin suggests, GT is mainly about conceptual development, then wouldn't a more developed version of the methodology 50 years later allow for the possibility that there are multiple approaches to carrying out the methodology that can be identified, labeled, and evaluated separately? Fifty years later, part of "growing up" for GT may be collective recognition that although the label has been misused over the years, there are still multiple methods that can be combined in a range of ways to form methodologies befitting the GT label. We can acknowledge that what has too often been called GT research does not fit the label well at all. At the same time, we can also pursue a "big tent" approach to GT that is faithful to the methodology's original ideals without suggesting that there is only one, narrow pathway to the goal of practical theory. Just as GT values refinement of concepts with additional data, so should we as we learn more about GT.

*Clifton Scott*  
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

## Demystifying Classic Grounded Theory

I am not a social scientist; I study media from a humanities tradition where context is central and understanding is the ultimate goal. My work is grounded in cultural materialism, [Raymond Williams's \(1977/1988\)](#) theory of culture, which sees the communication process as a means of production, created through the discourse of groups and individuals that is produced within particular political, historical, and cultural contexts. As a qualitative researcher, I maintain that all research should clearly articulate an explicit philosophical (theoretical) framework. Agreeing with [Cliff Christians and James Carey \(1989\)](#) that philosophical orientations, research values, cultural traditions, and ideologies create fundamental differences between qualitative and quantitative methods, I am cautious about appropriating methods from different research traditions. It is from this vantage point that I react to both Professor Martin's and Professor Scott's commentary and consider the continued usefulness of grounded theory.

The specific vocabulary, rules, and procedures of grounded theory were developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 in an attempt to bring order to the messy endeavor of qualitative research ([Lindlof & Taylor, 2011](#)). As an alternative to survey research, grounded theory has embraced key tenants of positivism including an understanding that scientific truth is knowable and discoverable through rigorous reiterations of sampling, coding, and analyzing data at different levels of abstraction ([Jensen, 2012](#)). The coding process in grounded theory emphasizes the denotative or definitional meaning of words to the exclusion of connotative or the representational aspects of language. Since its inception, grounded theory's emphasis on what is currently happening has unfortunately neglected a sustained consideration of relevant political, historical, cultural, and situational contexts ([Charmaz, 2017](#)). To this day, grounded theory, as originally designed, remains devoid of reflexivity, or methodological self-consciousness, a concept that helps researchers understand how their theoretical assumptions, power relations, class positions, and personal experiences influence their work ([Brennen, 2017](#)).

Recently, researchers like sociologist [Kathy Charmaz \(2017\)](#) have developed a contemporary model of grounded theory known as Constructivist grounded theory. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Pragmatism, this new version views reality as being socially constructed, considers truth conditional, and seeks out diverse research perspectives. Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes a critical qualitative inquiry of the data and interrogates the role of the researcher and the research process. Relying on reflexivity, it analyzes language, emergent actions, and meanings as well as the researcher's and the research participants' worldviews, relationships, and experiences.

Although both Professor Scott and Professor Martin mention Charmaz's work in their commentaries, it is mainly because Charmaz clearly articulates the differences between Constructivist grounded theory and the original conception of grounded theory. Both Professor Scott and Professor Martin differentiate between the "classic" version of grounded theory and other grounded theory approaches. Professor Scott suggests that the classic version should be conceived of as an overarching methodology, as a way of differentiating it from newer types of grounded theory. In contrast, Professor Martin only considers the classic version of grounded theory as authentic, and she rejects contemporary reconfigurations of grounded theory because of their lack of rigor and/or their poor use of the concepts. Interestingly, Professor Martin writes that she has only seen two "fully executed grounded theories" published as journalism and mass communication research—and one of those is a study of her own.

If Professor Martin's assessment is correct, then I would suggest that grounded theory should be considered a failed method—at least in the realm of journalism and mass communication research. I suggest that there must be something wrong with this method if only two fully realized research examples have been completed in the past 50 years. Perhaps it is the complex rules and the esoteric vocabulary, or maybe it's the repeated stages of sampling, coding, and interpreting data without the guidance of an explicit philosophical framework. It might even be the cult-like status of practitioners of classic grounded theory who suggest that researchers who have not been mentored by Glaser or Strauss "created extensions and workarounds that have sometimes muddled the execution of the method" ([Gynnild & Martin, 2011](#), p. 2).

From my vantage point, I believe that researchers use specific methods to help them answer their questions. Most qualitative researchers begin by considering the research questions they wish to answer and deciding on a theoretical framework to guide their work. Following those decisions, they choose a method or multiple methods to help them answer their questions. Qualitative researchers do not begin



with a method (like grounded theory) and then frame their research questions based on their method. Methods are tools designed to help us; they are not reified imperatives that cannot be changed, modified, or discarded as needed.

Showcasing classical grounded theory as an innovative methodology for journalism and mass communication research, Professor Martin dismisses studies using participant observation, textual analysis, and interviews as being “descriptive” rather than conceptual. If she is unwilling to embrace Constructivist grounded theory, perhaps she should seek out the qualitative research being done in journalism studies, media studies, and science and technology studies. If she does, she will discover that much of this work showcases philosophically and theoretically framed studies; provides relevant political, historical, and cultural context; uses a variety of innovative methodological approaches; and incorporates stellar analysis and reflexive interpretation as well as including a nuanced understanding of key concepts relevant to journalism and mass communication.

*Bonnie Brennen*  
*Marquette University*

## Grounded Theory Unbound: Fundamentals, Fissures, and Futures

Theory and theorization, as a whole, are frequently misunderstood: The very fact that *Roget's Thesaurus* lists “sentiment,” “supposition,” and “conceit” as its synonyms indicates that “theory” is popularly viewed in terms of speculation and idle musing. “My theory that I have—that is to say that it is mine—is *mine!*” declares John Cleese in a classic Monty Python sketch, playing not only to the notion that theory is idiosyncratic and exclusive but that those who theorize are preposterously silly, as well.

This sort of loose grasp on theory pervades academia, too. Theories can be taken out of context, dehistoricized, overextended, used as “straw men,” or inserted as obligatory exordia to research papers while never being applied to the interpretation of evidence. So it is unsurprising to read Vivian Martin’s observation that grounded theory has been misunderstood, even mangled, by scholars purporting to endorse and use it.

When the book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)) burst on the scene, it launched a Kuhnian paradigm shift, upending social scientific approaches to theories as deductive propositions verified through empirical research. By contrast, grounded theory started with fieldwork, with “the exploration of social life in its manifold, often ignored and unsuspected aspects rather than confirmation of known and taken-for-granted theories” ([Wagner, 1968](#), p. 555). Most importantly, grounded theory called attention to techniques of theory generation, as opposed to staid routines of verification; grounded theory and its motif of discovery reminded researchers of the vitality and innovation that energize intellectual breakthroughs.

Grounded theory differs from classical theory in that it is a *process* rather than a set of laws or axioms. [Glaser and Strauss \(1965\)](#) described it as a method of constant comparison, “designed to aid analysts . . . in generating a theory which is integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data” (p. 437). In the grounded theory approach, data collection and theorization are understood to be closely intertwined and mutually informative research practices. “Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” ([Strauss & Corbin, 1994](#), p. 273).

Because grounded theory is “a highly structured but eminently flexible methodology” ([Glaser & Holton, 2004](#), p. 3), it has found eclectic application across disciplines to investigate a diverse range of problems. It tends to be associated with qualitative methods, but both Glaser and Strauss have pointed out in various writings that it is perfectly conducive to quantitative scholarship as well. Grounded theory cannot be yoked to a particular methodological tradition or protocol, and in fact, it lends itself to methodological introspection and adaptation during the research process: Research methods are “all guided and integrated by the emerging theory” ([Glaser, 1978](#), p. 2). Thus, as Clifton Scott astutely notes in his essay, grounded theory is a methodology rather than a singular method—an overarching framework for designing a study through an iterative and sensitive process of conceptualizing data as it emerges in real time. It is in this sense a meta-method. As [Glaser \(1978\)](#) himself put it, “The analyst operationalizes the operationalizing methodology called grounded theory” (p. 2).

Professor Martin notes that over the years, Glaser grew increasingly dissatisfied with the varying interpretations of grounded theory, especially its conflation with qualitative data analysis and its misconstrual as a pretext for pure description. As Professor Martin notes, Glaser took issue with his former collaborator Anselm Strauss over the publication of *Basics of Qualitative Analysis* ([Strauss & Corbin, 1988](#)) in which he saw grounded theory being misapplied as a “forcing procedure of analysis” untrue to its intrinsic spirit of flexibility and creativity; he was keen to “keep its perspective pure and safe from remodeling” ([Glaser, 2016](#), p. 13).

I’m struck by the idea of keeping a theory “pure and safe.” The word “theory” derives from the Greek *theoria*, or “optic.” Theory is vital for research because it serves as a tool for illuminating the meanings and interrelationships at work in the phenomena we observe; it sheds light on the evidence we compile, giving us ways to understand it in relation to the questions we are asking. It is necessarily variable, as phenomena emerge at specific historical junctures and in specific contexts. Theories develop as the world changes, and theoretical adaptation and evolution are part of knowledge construction. Grounded theory, in particular, operates via radical contextualization. It derives from data, emerging at the site of the research and looping back into the research process. Because it is sited, its materializations are varied depending on the conditions of its construction and reconstruction.

Professor Brennen raises the issues of contextualization and reflexivity in her deliberations on grounded theory, commenting that “classic” grounded theory is perceived to be devoid of these crucial aspects of qualitative inquiry. Yet Barney Glaser has insisted that grounded theory, even in its “pure and safe” form, cannot escape reflexivity. He writes, “Generating theory is done by a human being who is at times intimately involved and other times quite distant from the data—and who is surely plagued by other conditions in his [*sic*] life” ([1978](#), p. 2); he adds, “To be sure, grounded theory is a *perspective* on both data and theory” (p. 3). Far from being antithetical to reflexivity, this position is in line with Kathy Charmaz’s formulation of “constructivist grounded theory,” as well as with Anselm Strauss’s elaboration of grounded theory. The precept that grounded theory is an iterative and contextual process implies that it is sensitive to the historical, material, political, and cultural conditions in which it takes shape. [Strauss and Corbin \(1994\)](#) note that

[r]esearchers and theorists are not gods, but men and women living in certain eras, immersed in certain societies, subject to current ideas and ideologies, and so forth. Hence, as conditions change at any level of the conditional matrix, this affects the validity of theories—that is, their relation to contemporary social reality. (p. 279).

Thus, while I sympathize with Glaser's anxieties about the ways in which grounded theory has been adulterated and misinterpreted, I believe it is also important to acknowledge that theory cannot be effectual if it remains static: Theory must be understood as dynamic and evolutionary. Grounded theory's ongoing vitality lies in the fact that it has been the starting point for provocative and innovative reenvisionings of the craft of research, new visions that take into account "situatedness, variations, differences of all kinds, and positionality/relationality . . . in all their complexities, multiplicities, instabilities, and contradictions" (Clarke, 2005, p. xxviii). As Professor Brennen notes, grounded theory might be considered a "failed method" if it were to remain trapped in a strictly policed "classical" protocol, resisting forward movement and thoughtful reinvention as the scope of communication research broadens and becomes more complex. Barney Glaser and Vivian Martin are correct in their caution that grounded theory should not be facilely conflated with other forms of qualitative data analysis or established theories. But grounded theory has the potential to mobilize new directions in communication inquiry because of its hidden strengths: its exquisite sensitivity to context, its focus on generating new theory germane to emergent findings, its openness to methodological bricolage, and its powerful heuristic scope.

Meenakshi Gigi Durham  
University of Iowa

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