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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dunne, C., & Ustundag, B. G. (2020). Successfully Managing the Literature Review and Write-up Process When Using Grounded Theory Methodology - A Dialogue in Exploration. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.1.3338>

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Successfully Managing the Literature Review and Write-up Process When Using Grounded Theory Methodology —A Dialogue in Exploration

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Key words:

grounded theory
methodology;
literature review;
qualitative
research;
dissertation;
methodology

Abstract: For researchers unaccustomed to using grounded theory methodology (GTM), it can be daunting. To help address this issue, in this article we present a dialogue between a doctoral candidate who is using GTM and an academic who has experience working with this methodology. Through dialogue, we tackle several important points relating to the methodology, focusing on two key aspects which often create challenges for researchers new to GTM: 1. how and when to engage with existing literature, and 2. what significant implications which using this methodology has for the overall written structure of a grounded theory study, not simply the presentation of the grounded theory itself. This format, which ends with a reflection on the dialogue, aims to facilitate a clearer understanding of the methodology, clarify problematic issues, and offer practical guidance on how to apply it, thereby shedding light on "the long, rocky walk through the dark forest of the research process using the GT methods" (WU & BEAUNAE, 2014, p.249).

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1. Introduction

In this article we explore two important topics related to the use of a grounded theory methodology (GTM). Firstly, we discuss the issue of engaging with existing literature when adopting GTM. Although this topic has received attention to date, it can still create challenges for researchers who opt to employ the methodology. As such, we offer specific guidelines on how to manage it. Secondly, we discuss a topic which has received far less attention to date, but which can create significant confusion and anxiety when it comes to writing up a grounded theory study. Specifically, we are concerned with how using GTM can influence the overall structure of the final written output, be it in the form of a dissertation or other report, and not simply the presentation of the constructed grounded theory

itself. This topic is important because GTM can be seen not just as a methodology, but as a theoretical framework that shapes the entire research process. Therefore, it is axiomatic that it would inform the actual structure and presentation of the final written output. In dealing with these issues, we opted to adopt a dialogical format, as we believe this is engaging, easy to follow, informative, and reflective of a thought process that many grounded theory researchers go through. By offering explicit advice and examples, we believe that we can help those who are relatively new to GTM recognize and overcome these challenges. As the conversation evolves, we move from the question of managing the literature review, to the question of structuring the final write-up. We believe that clarity and flow of the exchange offer value to readers in a novel manner. [1]

2. Dialogue

2.1 The choice

DUNNE: Buse, I understand that you are using GTM for your doctoral research. May I ask you why you chose GTM and why you believe it to be an appropriate approach for your particular study?

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Well, the specific objective of my PhD research has been to conduct an in-depth exploration of the experiences of international Muslim students in a particular higher education institution, in this case an Irish university. At a more abstract level, I am seeking to develop a theoretical model which reflects the lived experience and perspectives of a particular group. In my case, the desire to explore the experiences of a group which has received very little scholarly attention fits well with a qualitative research approach, largely because such an approach affords me greater flexibility to examine the topic and pursue themes that might emerge in the data, and it also enables me to explore these themes in depth. As well as that, the scarcity of research conducted on this topic suggests that a grounded theory approach would be appropriate, given that it seeks to generate theoretical insights grounded in raw data, and shed light on a phenomenon which to date has remained largely unexplored. This is a point which is regularly articulated by proponents of GTM, such as COYNE and COWLEY (2006) and McCANN and CLARK (2003). [2]

DUNNE: I see. And so your decision to use GTM has been informed fundamentally by the primary research concern, the attention—or lack thereof—afforded to the topic to date, and the specific nature of the research questions?

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Precisely Ciarán. Although, coupled with the need for a good fit between the research concern and the chosen methodology, I actually think it is important to say that the researcher's epistemological perspective and personal characteristics are also salient factors in selecting a methodology. In terms of epistemology, RAMALHO, ADAMS, HUGGARD and HOARE (2015) make a point about the importance of clarifying one's stance at an early stage. As regards the researcher's personality, my point here is that the researcher drives the research, and therefore his/her capabilities are of huge importance to the overall process. When it comes to GTM, Barney GLASER (2010), who is, as you know, one of the

creators of the methodology, identified three key prerequisite abilities which a grounded theory researcher should possess; namely, the ability to conceptualize data, tolerate confusion, and tolerate regression. Researchers who have difficulty tolerating such confusion and regression, he argues, will very likely struggle with applying the methodology. Furthermore, BIRKS and MILLS (2015) point out that GTM suits researchers who like to write, rather than read, as it is a very active methodology. As such, while the overarching research concern and specific research question must align with the grounded theory approach, I would certainly recommend to novice researchers that they carefully reflect upon their own character and skills, along with the state of related literature, prior to fully espousing a grounded theory approach. [3]

DUNNE: I think the point you raise about the characteristics which a researcher using GTM might ideally possess is an interesting one, and seldom discussed. Indeed, I recall using GTM for my own doctoral study and finding the need to engage with the ambiguity of the process challenging. While part of the attraction of GTM, for me at least, was the protocol and tools it offers, there is still, by necessity, a significant level of unpredictability. This is because the raw data can lead us down unforeseen theoretical avenues or dimly lit alleyways where we are required to embrace uncertainty. That said, it is worth remembering that GTM emerged from a historical context during the 1960s in which quantitative ideology dominated, partly because qualitative research was, as Cathy CHARMAN (2006) contends, accused of being "impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic and biased" (p.5). So, it is fair to say that the introduction of GTM by GLASER and STRAUSS in 1967 could therefore be seen as an effort to address this imbalance. It challenged the hegemony of quantitative methods, by offering systematic guidelines aimed at enhancing the quality, transparency, and rigor qualitative studies. GLASER and STRAUSS saw the need for an approach that would challenge common deductive reasoning, which was often based on *a priori* assumptions, and they envisioned a methodology that would privilege the raw data relating to a given phenomenon, data in which a new theory would be grounded, thereby bridging what they perceived to be the problematic disconnect between theory and empirical research. Their espousal of techniques such as coding and categorization, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and memoing, was creative in terms of the novelty and value it offered. Clearly there was an appetite for such a creative approach, given that GTM has, over the years, become an extremely popular approach in qualitative research. [4]

2.2 Discreet approaches to grounded theory methodology

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: From talking with others who have chosen GTM, it's certainly evident that it has been used across a wide variety of disciplines. That said, I think it's also fair to say that its evolution has not been smooth, as the dissemination of its use has prompted multiple definitions and interpretations. Arguably the most evident schism has been the split between GLASER and STRAUSS themselves during the 1990s, and GLASER's concern with diverse interpretations of the methodology. Since its introduction, GLASER has not deviated from the "classical" vision of GTM (an approach which facilitates the

"discovery" of theory within data), the techniques and protocol associated with it (e.g., the simultaneous collection and analysis of data), and a positivistic epistemological perspective (that the theory is "discovered" by the researcher). However, as THORNBERG and DUNNE (2019) have recently reminded us, many researchers are uneasy with the notion of discovering a theory, and instead subscribe to a constructivist epistemology in which the researcher is seen as actively involved in constructing a grounded theory. [5]

DUNNE: Yes. I know that Cathy CHARMAZ has been at the forefront of this constructivist school of thought, challenging claims of objectivity and the idea of an unbiased and detached researcher. Indeed, the conversation between CHARMAZ and KELLER (2016) is very insightful. While her presentation of GTM (CHARMAZ, 2006) actually follows a similar analytical framework to that of GLASER and STRAUS (1967), her constructivist approach reflects important contrasting ontological and epistemological perspectives. What I mean by this, is that rather than espousing the classical notion of discovering theory within the data, which dictates an external reality waiting to be uncovered by the researcher, constructivist GTM places a special emphasis on the subjectivity of every researcher. In essence, in CHARMAZ's approach to GTM, a researcher does not only collect and analyze the data, but rather, along with the participants, co-constructs the data through the process of interaction. This in turn implies that the data will partly reflect the researcher's perspective and will, to some extent, be informed by the dynamics—such as power relations—which exist between the researchers and the participants. These dynamics may be particularly important when engaging with disenfranchised or historically oppressed groups in society and their influence should not be underestimated. [6]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: I know that for some scholars, a recognition of the researcher's influence is seen as a shortcoming, one which somehow undermines the validity of the findings and ultimately, the contribution to knowledge. However, for me, recognizing the researcher as an integral part of the research is actually an attractive part of constructive GTM which ultimately adds to the originality of the research. That said, I do appreciate that some may have concerns relating to the credibility of such findings or disproportionate bias. However, through the use of reflexivity, whereby the researcher is highly aware and questioning of their own actions and their role in the process, one can achieve credible, compelling and defensible results using constructivist GTM. As well as that, the audit trail that connects the raw, unrefined data with the final constructed grounded theory, provides a crucial transparency which essentially reveals the researcher's *modus operandi* when coding and creating theoretical categories. Personally, I think that for those of us who do accept the constructivist stance, whereby the researcher is seen as representing part of the overall data set, there is still the opportunity for a degree of reconciliation with the classical approach by recalling GLASER's (2001) declaration that "all is data" (p.145). This is a conversation which GLASER (2002) himself elaborates on, although his position is, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the concept of constructivist GTM is "a misnomer" (§1). [7]

2.3 The literature review dilemma

Indeed, connected with this idea about the ubiquity of data, another important and controversial issue in GTM is the role of extant literature in the process. This is a very common challenge, particularly for novice grounded theorists, and crucially has a major impact on the overall structure of the actual written report or dissertation. This latter point is rarely discussed, and I know several doctoral students who have really struggled with how to structure their grounded theory thesis in a cogent and logical fashion. I definitely think this is a topic that needs more attention. After doing all the primary and secondary research, not knowing how to actually present it effectively can be a serious issue. [8]

DUNNE: I certainly have some thoughts on your last point Buse, and hopefully useful advice, but in order to deal with that, let's firstly clarify precisely why the literature review has proven to be a most contentious issue within GTM. As I'm sure you know, the fundamental issue stems from GLASER and STRAUSS's (1967) original and controversial dictum that when using GTM, the researcher should initially *ignore* the theoretical literature on the topic and focus exclusively on the area of study. However, given that an early, detailed literature review in advance of primary data collection is a central component to most strategies of inquiry, this recommendation has fueled much debate. Scholars such as DUNNE (2011), THISTOLL, HOOPER and PAULEEN (2016), THORNBERG (2012), and THORNBERG and DUNNE (2019) have written at some length about the ideological and pragmatic rationales underpinning this abstinence from early engagement with the literature. Put simply, the basic reason for advising against this stems from a concern that the overall research process, including data collection, analysis, and theory development, could be undermined, hijacked, or "contaminated" by conducting an early literature review, as the researcher may be disproportionately influenced by existing theories, ideas or frameworks and either deliberately or inadvertently impose these upon the grounded theory research process. Doing this would, in essence, comprise the ethos of privileging the data over existing theory. [9]

To be quite blunt, this stance is simply unacceptable to many researchers, and can constitute a major barrier to adopting a grounded theory approach to research. Importantly, however, we must not do a disservice to GLASER and STRAUSS, but rather keep in mind that the fundamental question is not *whether* a literature review should be conducted, but rather *when* and *how* it should be undertaken. [10]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Speaking honestly, for many early stage researchers, such as doctoral candidates like myself, the idea of avoiding early engagement with extant literature poses very serious challenges. For example, a lack of familiarity with the field prior to data collection might lead to inadequately informed decisions regarding the direction, questions, and objectives of the research. In addition to this, novice researchers often face quite rigorous institutional requirements. In order to be granted the ethical approval of the university. For example, doctoral students are typically required to present their work in detail,

particularly their rationale for the study and their chosen methodology. This requires a solid knowledge of the research field and a compelling justification for the methods used. Furthermore, WU and BEAUNAE (2014) have pointed out that supervisors, in particular those who may be experts in a given domain, yet unfamiliar with GTM, may expect their research student to display a broad understanding of the field and existing studies. Not doing so might be interpreted as indicating substandard academic skills, or even a lack of commitment to the overall research process. That is precisely why it is important to discuss your choice of methodology with the supervisor at a very early stage. For me, the fact that early engagement with literature is not strictly avoided in constructivist GTM offers a flexibility which genuinely works to the advantage of early stage researchers. I would also say that it helps to have a supervisor who is very familiar with GTM and understands the controversy around this particular topic. [11]

DUNNE: In my opinion, having been a novice researcher and more recently a supervisor, it is imperative that an individual using GTM takes a clear and informed stand on this particular topic. While practical and very legitimate factors such as institutional requirements and ethical approval may certainly be important, the researcher must adopt a position which also recognizes the original concerns raised by GLASER and STRAUSS. For several decades there has been ongoing debate about the value and practicality of avoiding early engagement with the literature, with STRAUSS himself altering his stance on the question during the 1990s while collaborating with Juliet CORBIN. While the original dictum emerges from a healthy desire to privilege the raw data, its overall merit and viability is, in my opinion at least, highly questionable. For example, as we mentioned at the outset, GTM can be of great value when exploring phenomena about which there is a lack of knowledge. However, this creates a paradoxical situation whereby in order to determine that there is indeed a paucity of knowledge on the topic, the researcher has to engage with existing literature. What other way is there to conclude that there is indeed a lack of information on a given phenomenon without firstly undertaking an initial literature view? [12]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: That's a valid point Ciarán. But perhaps you could simply contact experts in the field?

DUNNE: Yes, I agree. But in order to know who the experts actually are, you still have to do research in the field. Some kind of literature review is unavoidable in my opinion. So, if we take that as a starting point ...

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Which some, like GLASER, might not accept!

DUNNE: Agreed! But let's say we do take it as a starting point, then we need to agree on how best to do it, rather than simply refute the need to do it. Furthermore, in his 1998 book, GLASER himself recommends that the researcher engage in vociferous reading in substantive areas other than that which she or he is exploring. But a further paradox emerges from this advice. [13]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: How so?

DUNNE: Well, how can we be sure of the boundaries and parameters of our own substantive area without first familiarizing ourselves with it? And what if the particular research concern is interdisciplinary in nature? This is very often the case nowadays. Where do the boundaries lie in that case? So, while I can genuinely appreciate, and indeed support, the initial concern about being disproportionately influenced by existing literature, I believe that the prescription they devised to remedy this was excessive and ultimately unhelpful. That said, I realize and respect that classical Glaserians would very likely disagree with me on this. [14]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: If I can add a few more comments here, I can give some examples from my recent personal experience of using GTM in my doctoral research. Firstly, it's useful to bear in mind that researchers, novice or experienced, typically opt for a grounded theory approach given its potential to produce novel and valuable outputs, often based on a deep understanding of the experiences of a specific group of people, which other approaches have so far not facilitated. However, this point should be examined with caution, because in order to actually arrive at the conclusion that previous empirical research or methods have not adequately satisfied our research objectives, a novice researcher should and must engage with the literature. How can we know if previous approaches have indeed been insufficient if we are directed away from familiarizing ourselves with them? So, I believe it is important that the researcher identify, at a relatively early stage, the common and not-so-common theoretical frameworks and methods used within the particular field of research they are entering. The way I see it, having a strong knowledge of the field of research ultimately lends itself to the production of original, valuable research outputs. All that said, I do agree that there is certainly a need for a protocol for engaging with the literature which addresses the valid concerns articulated by GLASER and STRAUSS when they first published their grounded theory approach way back in 1967. [15]

2.4 Stages of the literature review

DUNNE: We definitely need balance in this debate, because even though I myself offered a detailed critique of the original stance adopted by GLASER and STRAUSS in relation to the literature review (DUNNE, 2011), this does not mean that their underlying concerns were not valid. The aim, therefore, is to manage the research process in a manner which both recognizes and addresses these concerns in a *proportionate* manner. For me, proportionality is a central concept we need to keep in mind here. As you have mentioned, for doctoral students in particular it is often unrealistic to suggest abstaining from accessing extant literature until after the primary data collection. However, we can and should ask ourselves what literature is appropriate to engage with at what particular point in the process. With this in mind, it can be useful to conceptualize the literature review as three discrete, yet intertwined stages, each with its own purpose. This is a strategy which THORNBERG and DUNNE (2019) have recently espoused. While the researcher has an ongoing relationship with extant literature throughout

the process, in each stage a discrete type of literature is sought, explored, and ultimately integrated into the study. [16]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So what are these three stages?

DUNNE: Well, the first stage constitutes an *initial literature review*. This can take place at the outset of the research process, prior to primary data collection. The function of this initial literature review is to establish whether a given topic has been studied (or not), and if so, in what way, by whom, where, when, and for what reason. This allows the researcher to become familiar with the topic at a broad level, without nailing their colors to any specific theoretical mast. Indeed, I am the first to say that a healthy skepticism relating to existing approaches and frameworks should be encouraged throughout the process. While I recognize that this goes against the classical grounded theory approach, it does so in a way which nonetheless acknowledges the ethos behind it. [17]

This initial phase is, in my opinion, crucial in order to ensure that not only is the specific research concern a valid one that has not already been explored, but it also empowers the researcher on the basis that confidence is boosted with the knowledge gained from familiarizing oneself with the overall geography of a topic. Recalling your earlier point about the characteristics of a GTM researcher, this sense of confidence can be really useful as the research process unfolds in all its ambiguous, furrowed-brow-inducing, head-scratching glory! All that said, in recognizing GLASER and STRAUSS's concern about becoming contaminated by the literature at an early stage, it is important that as the researcher becomes familiar with the topic and existing approaches to its study, a concerted effort is made to avoid being disproportionately influenced by these. [18]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So what does this "concerted effort" look like? What should it entail?

DUNNE: Well, from personal experience I can say that exercises such as memoing, whereby the researcher writes reflective memos before, during and after this initial literature review, can be extremely useful in this regard. BIRKS and MILLS (2015) point out that comparing how these memos develop can help signal whether one or more framework is overly informing the evolution of one's thoughts on the phenomenon. If this is the case, the researcher should then justify why this is so, and possibly even query whether GTM is in fact the methodology they wish to use. The goal after all is to privilege the raw data, not an existing theory. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, I would posit that reflexivity is one of the most important and effective tools a researcher can employ to ensure a robust and transparent development of theory from the data. [19]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So, it sounds like this initial stage is akin to undertaking a type of macro "due diligence," if I can frame it that way. That is, familiarizing oneself with the state of knowledge relating to a specific topic, identifying lacunae that warrant exploration, and ensuring the actual research question has not been already examined and answered. So, assuming I do that, and am mindful not to impose a particular theoretical framework onto the plan for data collection and analysis, at what point does the second stage of the literature review commence? [20]

DUNNE: Well Buse, I would suggest that a GTM researcher should continue engaging with the literature during the primary data collection phase of the research. This marks the second stage, and it enables us to continue to effectively use the reflective approach we commenced in Stage 1. Since data collection in GTM is driven by theory generation and data saturation, it can be useful for the researcher to refer to the literature as the process of data collection and analysis take place. This is not to negate the principles of GTM, which advocate for data leading to theory generation. On the contrary, this type of secondary, or focused, literature review, is one in which the data collection *directs* the researcher in terms of what type of literature to engage with. That is, the researcher privileges the data and their engagement with literature is heavily informed by the data and emerging codes and categories. This secondary literature review resembles, and draws from, the constant comparison method proffered by GLASER and STRAUSS, whereby the researcher compares the emerging concepts from the data with existing studies and theoretical frameworks in order to flesh-out the emerging theory. Therefore, this secondary, focused literature review connects with important aspects of GTM, such as reflexivity and constant comparison, and can be key to developing a rich and robust grounded theory. [21]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Basically in Stage 2, rather than analyzing the data from a single, blinkered theoretical perspective, through the process of coding and categorization the researcher identifies emerging themes within the data, and then based on this, seeks out existing theoretical constructs which may enrich this iterative analytical process and assist in the development of the grounded theory. Is that correct? [22]

DUNNE: That's right. And to address possible proclivities towards, or accusations of, theoretical or ideological bias, we have a fully transparent coding process to refer to. This is key because, realistically, no two people will code exactly the same. For example, you might tend to code a piece of the data differently from me—you might primarily use nouns in your codes while I primarily use verbs. What is key, however, is that this coding is *justifiable* and *defensible* to others, and also *congruent* and *consistent* with the manner in which you have coded other data. Consistency and congruency will facilitate the creation of a transparent audit trail which can add huge value to the overall rigor of the study. [23]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: I understand. And then we come to Stage 3. What does that entail?

DUNNE: Well Buse, as the grounded theory takes shape, we come to the third and final stage of the literature review. Whereas the first stage is to locate and justify the research, and the second stage is to leverage existing literature to assist in the construction of a grounded theory which is rooted primarily in the raw data, the purpose of this final literature review is to elevate the grounded theory to a more abstract level and enable the researcher to contextualize, compare, and contrast her or his grounded theory with regard to extant theoretical concepts and empirical findings. This review also helps to refine the contribution to knowledge, and serves to more formally locate the study within or across disciplines, given

that the process of analysis and theory development may see the researcher drawn towards theoretical ideas which historically have not actually been applied in a given discipline, but which resonate powerfully with the data in the particular study. [24]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: I'm not sure I follow you here Ciarán. An example would help, I think!

DUNNE: Okay. Let's take my own doctoral research. I decided to explore intercultural relations among university students. From an early stage of the data collection it became evident that there was a low level of intercultural contact, despite quite high levels of diversity on campus. When exploring this, I identified a major theme within the data, namely the idea of individuals "gravitating" towards familiarity, a tendency which was underpinned by multiple variables relating to security, shared values, self-concept, and communication styles, among others. This recognition of a powerful "cultural gravity" mediating intercultural relations prompted me to search for socio-psychological theories which might shed further light on this, which led to my discovery—and I say "discovery" because it already existed!—of the long-established theory of homophily, first proposed by LAZARFELD and MERTON way back in 1954. This theory of homophily provided extremely strong support for my data and my grounded theory and genuinely aided me in locating my grounded theory within existing ideas. What was interesting, however, was that even though I had completed a postgraduate program in intercultural studies and felt I was well read within the discipline, discussion of this particular theory, which in many ways can be said to represent a fundamental *a priori* barrier to intercultural contact, was conspicuously absent from the field. In fact, when I later came to teach the program I myself had studied, I drew heavily on the concept of homophily to enhance the content. The same was true for THIBAUT and KELLEY's social exchange theory, developed back in 1959. This theory again offered compelling support for another powerful theme, that of "utility," which emerged in my grounded theory. Indeed, I still believe that this theory offers great potential to the field of intercultural studies which has not been fully recognized by scholars. So, this final literature review can also serve a valuable purpose by integrating previously external theoretical concepts into a given discipline. [25]

2.5 Managing the write-up phase

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So I understand the three stages and the rationale for them. However, what I am really interested in right now is how this three-stage approach impacts upon the actual *writing-up* of the thesis. After all, the structure of the thesis is the backbone of the entire output. Particularly when it is time for evaluation, the first thing that the examiners will see is the overall structure and the content of the thesis. If we agree that each of the three stages we discussed so far has its own rationale, objectives and benefits, how then should this be reflected in the actual thesis structure? Where in the written document should each stage be incorporated in a way that makes sense and adds value, rather than confusion, for the reader? [26]

DUNNE: This is genuinely a hugely important point, yet it has been given inadequate attention to date. Many researchers, and in particular doctoral students, are so focused on the challenges of using GTM that little attention is given to considering how to best present the *overall* study, not simply the grounded theory model, to an external audience. I recall in my own case, with just two months left before the submission deadline, even though I felt that the grounded theory I had constructed was both solid and novel, I was really struggling to figure out how best to structure the full written output. Should I include a formal theoretical literature review? And if so, where should it be inserted? Should I talk about external theories before, during or after presenting my data? This was frankly a headache I did not need, and one which researchers who adopt a more traditional approach do not have to deal with. [27]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So, is the point you're making that GTM is, in fact, more than a methodology, and as such it will shape the actual structure of the written dissertation in a manner which other methodologies typically do not?

DUNNE: Yes, I think that is a fair observation to make Buse. Thankfully, there are a few scholars who proffer some guidance on this. BIRKS and MILLS (2015), for example, offer useful insights in terms of both presenting a grounded theory and producing the overall report, be it in the form of the dissertation, thesis, or some other output, and argue that the profile of the audience must be considered. In the case of doctoral students, the audience is typically the examiners who wield a lot of power and have expertise in the field, yet they might not all be particularly knowledgeable about the grounded theory approach. Very often, as happened with me, when students come to the formal write-up phase, during which time other pressures may also be increasing, they are faced with the formidable yet previously unforeseen challenge of deciding how to actually structure the written output. So, because GTM is indeed, as you put it, more than a methodology, and given that it does not follow the traditional linear research process—literature review → findings → discussion model—it is axiomatic that the reporting of this process may deviate from traditional structures. Unfortunately, as I have attested to, this can create significant confusion and uncertainty for the researcher at a time when the finish line is in sight, but still frustratingly out of reach. [28]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So, what is the fundamental issue and how can it be overcome?

DUNNE: Well, researchers often face a particular dilemma regarding precisely where to include a theoretical literature review in the overall structure of a GTM report. While studies which do not use GTM typically include a detailed theoretical literature review *prior* to outlining the methodology and presenting the findings, in the case of GTM, including a theoretical literature in this way does not sit well with many researchers, largely because it seems at odds with the chronological sequencing of the actual study. When you think about it, most dissertations broadly reflect the chronology of the research process—the introduction, literature review, methodology, data collection, analysis, discussion and conclusion. But that is not the case with GTM. Furthermore, to include a theoretical literature review towards the start of the written document may seem premature, misleading and inefficient, given that the researcher will wish to discuss extant

theoretical concepts in relation to the grounded theory *after* the latter has been formally presented. As such, the possibility of repeating content emerges as a concern. In many ways, this is an example of how the aforementioned debate about when to engage with existing literature is one which ultimately shapes the structure of the final output. [29]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: So how can this challenge be overcome?

DUNNE: In the write-up phase, the attributes which the researcher has harnessed and developed during the overall process must again be used. In the same way that a researcher takes ownership of, and commits unwaveringly to, the research process, she or he must also take ownership of the write-up process and offer a compelling, cogent and unapologetic justification for the sequencing and structure of the final written output. Attempts to please, pacify or placate examiners will ultimately undermine the quality of the output and ironically leave it more exposed to criticism. Instead, from the outset the researcher should clearly flag to the reader that GTM transcends the scope of a traditional methodology, a fact which has important implications for the actual structure of the written output. An early justification and explanation for this should communicate to the reader that the researcher is deliberate and purposeful in designing the structure, thereby preempting many of the questions which the reader may have as they progress through the document, and hopefully minimize the potential for confusion and misunderstanding. [30]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Then I take it that the researcher should explicitly discuss the choice and implications of GTM in the introductory chapter. Since this initial chapter functions as a map or guidebook for the overall document, it can serve to orient the reader regarding the structure of the thesis.

DUNNE: Yes, I would certainly recommend this. However, that does not mean the researcher must include a detailed methodology chapter at the start of the thesis. Instead, I advise that you signpost the journey which the reader is about to embark on, explaining that the path which a grounded theory study follows may deviate from that to which the reader is accustomed. We know that the process of using GTM may represent a meandering journey of uncertainty for the researcher. However, we also need to keep in mind that reading and evaluating a grounded theory study can itself be challenging, and therefore offering the reader this map at the outset can certainly ease the travails of this journey by offering guidance, illumination and assurance. In this way, the reader knows *what* to expect and *when* to expect it, and also understands *why* it is presented at a specific point in the dissertation. Apart from this initial signposting, it is also useful to remind the reader at different points throughout the thesis that the structure is reflective of a grounded theory approach, particularly at times when deviations from the more traditional pathway are imminent. For example, if you opt to postpone the theoretical literature review until after the findings, but include a broad review of empirical studies to contextualize the study towards the start of the thesis, then it is important to flag this, rather than leave the reader confused as to why no theoretical literature review has been included in the opening chapters. Readers will be most receptive to the content when they are at ease

with the structure, and convinced of its logic and rationale, in the same way as a passenger on a boat will be better able to enjoy the voyage if they have belief in the captain's ability to navigate. The author should make a concerted effort to communicate this. [31]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Okay Ciarán. So, in the case of using GTM, could it be argued that you are essentially showcasing a dual expertise: one relating to the specific topic under investigation, and another relating to your ability to grasp, apply and effectively report a grounded theory approach?

DUNNE: Precisely. The reader must be able to buy into the researcher's choice of methodology and the resultant structure of the written output. Personally, following on from the introductory chapter in which the choice and implications of using GTM are clearly articulated, I would suggest that a literature review is included. However, this would not be akin to the conventional theoretical literature review, but rather it would offer a broad contextualization of the study. That is, mirroring the first of the three stages of the literature review we discussed, this chapter would highlight 1. the topic, 2. the rationale for its study, 3. the manner in which it has been studied to date, and 4. the gaps in knowledge, thereby culminating in 5. the articulation of an explicit research question. Indeed, this approach is supported by scholars like BIRKS and MILLS (2015). In terms of theoretical engagement at this point, in outlining the existing approaches to studying the phenomenon the researcher may refer to theoretical frameworks which have been employed, but should avoid any in-depth discussion of these at this juncture. It is advisable to do this for two reasons; 1. to avoid repetition, as if they are found to be relevant to the current study and resultant grounded theory, they will be discussed in detail *following* the presentation of findings, and 2. if they are found to be unrelated to the findings and the grounded theory, the value of including such an in-depth discussion is very limited and arguably a distraction to the reader. Crucially, CHARMAZ (2006) points out that when using GTM the researcher should ensure that existing theoretical concepts earn their way into the discussion. I think this is a very useful maxim to employ. This implies that theoretical constructs which do not relate to the constructed grounded theory, and which offer little value when comparing and contrasting findings, should not get a "free pass" into the written output simply on the basis that they may have been used in previous studies. The researcher must act as an informed and selective gatekeeper, keeping in mind the fundamental aim of the study and the ethos of privileging the data rather than pre-existing theories. [32]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Let's just say that I am writing up my dissertation and I want to reference some theoretical constructs at some stage prior to the discussion chapter. For example, in presenting findings, when discussing the codes and categories that emerged from the data, it may be apparent that certain emerging themes clearly relate to existing theoretical concepts. In this case, should I be mindful that the reader may expect this to be recognized, if not explored in depth, at the point when the theme is first presented? [33]

DUNNE: Absolutely. If you can visualize what it is like for the reader to read your dissertation, it can really help. Returning to the previous reference to "cultural gravity" in my own doctoral study, for example, even though it was not until the latter stages of my analysis that I came across the theory of homophily, when writing up the findings chapter which dealt with the theme of "cultural gravity," I explicitly stated that this theme resonated strongly with the existing theoretical concept of homophily, and immediately indicated that this connection would be explored in detail in the discussion chapter. I did this on several occasions throughout the findings chapters, and it ultimately served to communicate to the reader that I was not only intimately familiar with the data generated from my study, but I was also aware of how these data related to other, existing theoretical models. This again communicates ownership of the data to the reader, as well as an awareness of the broader context. Indeed, in situations where the reader is unfamiliar with GTM and may be frustrated with an apparent lack of theoretical discussion as they progress through the contextualization and findings chapters, this technique of flagging connections between your own emerging themes and extant theoretical concepts can be very useful, and in no way compromises the ethos of GTM. However, I would certainly not recommend going into detail about any extant theoretical construct in the findings chapter, but rather would concur with BIRKS and MILLS (2015) contention that the findings of a grounded theory study are best presented in isolation. To do otherwise could dilute the impact of the grounded theory itself and may also confuse the reader. [34]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: If that is the case, then the implication is that the theoretical literature review is primarily located in the discussion chapter, subsequent to the presentation of the findings?

DUNNE: If by "findings" you mean the actual grounded theory which has been constructed, then yes. It is at a point subsequent to the presentation of the grounded theory model that the researcher explains to the reader in detail which existing theoretical concepts or frameworks are relevant to the grounded theory. This could include discussing theories which are from other disciplines, but which resonant with the grounded theory—as was the case in my dissertation—and could also include challenging the dominance of, or revealing potential shortcomings in, a given existing framework. [35]

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: But just be clear, a constructed grounded theory could also support the findings of previous studies which had not used GTM, correct? As in, it could corroborate existing models?

DUNNE: Of course! Absolutely. The key point is that the researcher does not consciously or unconsciously privilege any established theory during the process. This was the very concern originally raised by GLASER and STRAUSS. In comparing and contrasting the resultant grounded theory with existing models, particularly those within a given discipline, the researcher demonstrates expertise in the field and the ability to think critically and abstractly about theoretical constructs. In my opinion, the value of the grounded theory study should certainly be identifiable in the discussion chapter, although like most studies, a formal articulation of the contribution to knowledge is typically included in the conclusion

chapter of the study, along with suggestions for further research. In writing up the study it is useful to keep in mind that the overall aim is to present the reader with a grounded theory study which is novel, compelling, valuable and accessible. One which offers transparency by clearly connecting the raw data with the final constructed theory. One which, as you already mentioned, demonstrates both your expertise in your particular field *and* your expertise as a practitioner and reporter of GTM. [36]

While all students who undertake a doctoral study are expected to have a very strong command of whatever methodology they are employing, the nature of GTM and the somewhat unconventional, iterative manner in which it progresses, means that there is often an added pressure or responsibility on the researcher to demonstrate their expertise in using this approach. This is done not only by the content, but also by means of appropriately structuring the written output. The researcher must demonstrate a confident ownership of the process and justify the resultant structure. As I mentioned, articulating this at the outset is highly recommended, given that it prepares the reader for what is to come and also shows that the researcher is aware that the reader might not be accustomed to the format of such studies. Essentially, the reader should be engaged and not confused by the written output, and it is up to the author to ensure this is the case. [37]

2.6 Summing up

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Ultimately, then, if I have understood correctly, I think we have identified several important points to keep in mind when considering or using GTM. Firstly, it is imperative that GTM is an appropriate choice of methodology—one that fits well with the research question(s), the prior attention given to the topic, and one with which the researcher is comfortable. In particular, notwithstanding the valuable guidelines offered by GTM, the ability to engage with ambiguity is an important attribute to have. [38]

Secondly, the researcher must be clear, and justify which grounded theory approach they are opting to use. This typically reflects their allegiance to a certain school of thought and epistemology, such as a Glaserian approach which seeks to "discover", or a constructivist approach espoused by scholars such as CHARMAZ (2011), which contends that GTM is not so much about "discovery" as it is about the researcher "constructing" a theory grounded in the raw data. [39]

DUNNE: That's right. As well as those points, being cogent and clear about how, when and why to engage with existing literature is key.

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: This is actually something I have been struggling with for some time, so to conceptualize it as three discrete, yet interrelated, stages is very useful. Keeping in the mind the primary objective of each of these stages is also really useful, as is applying reflexivity and other techniques which promote transparency and rigor. [40]

DUNNE: And finally, as we have mentioned, there has been relatively sparse attention given to the challenges associated with actually writing up a grounded theory study. It is important to recognize that the challenge of coherently structuring the written output is not insignificant, and must be very carefully considered in order to ensure that the quality of the output is evident. I think the key point here is to maintain communication with the reader throughout, explaining the implications of using GTM at the outset, mapping the journey in their minds, and then signposting the path throughout. By doing this, albeit not in a patronizing or overly repetitive manner, you will demonstrate expertise, ownership, communication skills, and awareness that the research is aimed at an external audience and seeks to make a meaningful contribution to a body of knowledge in a particular field.

ÜSTÜNDAĞ: Okay Ciarán. I'll endeavor to take all those points on board. Now back to my coding! [41]

3. Final Reflection

This article, presented as a dialogue, has the explicit aim of helping those who are using, or considering using, GTM to manage not only the process of conducting the research, but crucially the process of writing up the resultant theory and overall dissertation in an accessible, digestible, and useful manner. The value of research does not simply reside in the rigorous generation of defensible findings, but also in how these findings are disseminated. This in turn enables other scholars and broader audiences to benefit from the investment that has gone into a given study and the resulting outputs. Scholars active in the field of science communication in particular have been very aware of this for many years: the message must be delivered in a logical, comprehensible and engaging manner in order to be of benefit to audiences. Despite this, in GTM there has been relatively sparse attention given to this issue, specifically the significant challenges associated with the write-up phase of the process. The dialogical format of this article is an attempt to apply a novel approach that will facilitate the dissemination of its key messages, so that the comments, reflections, challenges, considerations, advice and guidance included in this article can reach the intended audience in manner which offers clear and practical assistance. [42]

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Citation

Dunne, Ciarán & Üstündağ, Buse Gamze (2020). Successfully Managing the Literature Review and Write-up Process When Using Grounded Theory Methodology—A Dialogue in Exploration [42 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(1), Art. 25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.1.3338>.