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The Qualitative Report

Volume 19 | Number 52

Article 1

12-29-2014

Tracing the History of Grounded Theory Methodology: From Formation to Fragmentation

Méabh Kenny

University College Cork, meabh.kenny@gmail.com

Robert Fourie

University College Cork, r.fourie@uce.ie

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Recommended APA Citation

Kenny, M., & Fourie, R. (2014). Tracing the History of Grounded Theory Methodology: From Formation to Fragmentation. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(52), 1-9. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss52/1>

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Abstract

There are very few articles, which track the history of Grounded Theory (GT) methodology from its tentative conception to its present divisions. This journal article addresses the dearth by tracing the history of GT methodology from its conception in the 1960's, discussing the context of its composition, character, and contribution. Subsequently, the article follows the maturation of GT which is characterised by a series of contentious and, at times, antagonistic academic debates. The crux of these debates centres on disputes over core tenets of GT and have resulted in three dominant and divergent configurations of the GT methodology: Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT. These factions can often create confusion for the researcher wishing to embark on a GT study. However, an examination of the history of the GT methodology sheds light on the logic of these schisms.

Keywords

Classic Grounded Theory, Straussian Grounded Theory, Constructivist Grounded Theory, History of Grounded Theory, Development of Grounded Theory, Differences between Grounded Theories, Grounded Theory Methodology, Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, Charmaz

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Tracing the History of Grounded Theory Methodology: From Formation to Fragmentation

Méabh Kenny and Robert Fourie
 University College Cork, Corcaigh, Ireland

There are very few articles, which track the history of Grounded Theory (GT) methodology from its tentative conception to its present divisions. This journal article addresses the dearth by tracing the history of GT methodology from its conception in the 1960's, discussing the context of its composition, character, and contribution. Subsequently, the article follows the maturation of GT which is characterised by a series of contentious and, at times, antagonistic academic debates. The crux of these debates centres on disputes over core tenets of GT and have resulted in three dominant and divergent configurations of the GT methodology: Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT. These factions can often create confusion for the researcher wishing to embark on a GT study. However, an examination of the history of the GT methodology sheds light on the logic of these schisms. Keywords: Classic Grounded Theory, Straussian Grounded Theory, Constructivist Grounded Theory, History of Grounded Theory, Development of Grounded Theory, Differences between Grounded Theories, Grounded Theory Methodology, Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, Charmaz

Grounded theory was the innovative brainchild of two American Sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. Prior to meeting each other, Anselm Strauss received his BS in Biology from the University of Virginia (1939). He subsequently completed both his MA and PhD in sociology in the University of Chicago (1942, 1945). In 1960, at the age of 44, Strauss undertook an academic post with the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), where he later established and chaired a doctoral programme in sociology, assuming the role of director (Dicke, 1996; Birks & Mills, 2011). Meanwhile, Barney Glaser received a BA degree from Stanford University (1952). During two subsequent years of military services, he also studied literature at the Sorbonne University of Paris (France) and the University of Freiburg (Germany). With a strong aptitude for academics, Glaser later proceeded to embark upon a PhD in Columbia University (1961). On completion of his PhD, 33- year-old Glaser pursued a research alliance with Strauss in the University of California, San Francisco. At the time, Strauss had applied for, and successfully received, a grant to pursue a funded four-year research endeavour. Subsequently, Strauss recruited Glaser and together they undertook a study relating to interactions between medical staff and terminally ill patients in hospices, which they later titled the *Awareness of Dying* (1965).

The Genesis of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was forged against the backdrop of Glaser and Strauss' disenchantment while undertaking the *Awareness of Dying* (1965) study. During this research Glaser and Strauss encountered and criticized the "overemphasis" of verifying theories to the detriment of actually generating the theory itself (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Moore, 2009). They asserted that the twofold process of firstly generating and subsequently verifying a theory should receive equal treatment within social research. However, they observed that "since

verification has primacy on the current sociological scene, the desire to generate theory often becomes secondary, if not totally lost, in specific researches” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). As well as encountering a misplaced emphasis on verification, Glaser and Strauss also criticized the dearth of social theory which is actually composed by empirical research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6). They stressed the need to generate theory which arises from (and accurately corresponds to) social research which they believed would be “more successful than theories logically deduced from a priori assumptions” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6). Glaser and Strauss contended that marrying theory construction with social research would produce a robust and astute hypothesis *grounded* in research. Consequently, Glaser and Strauss fashioned a pioneering methodology to address these issues and bridge the “embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2).

Glaser and Strauss entitled their innovative methodology *grounded theory* to encapsulate its overarching objective to ground theory in empirical research. Glaser later abbreviated grounded theory as GT (Glaser & Holton, 2004). This acronym’s will be utilised for the duration of this article. Glaser and Strauss reiterated that the ambition of GT is not verification of a preconceived theory, or capacious description, rather it is unambiguously defined by its exclusive endeavour to *discover* an underlying theory arising from the systematic analysis of data. Accordingly, the researcher arrives at a hypothesis (in the form of a theory) at the conclusion of the research which conceptualises the chief concern of the study. To achieve this objective Glaser and Strauss insisted that the researcher must approach the study inductively, with no preconceptions to prove or disprove, in order to uncover (and ultimately conceptualise) the principal concern of participants. The methodology stipulated that the researcher should not know (or predict) in advance where the unfolding research will lead or what the concluding hypothesis would encompass. Strauss later suggested that there was also (to a lesser extent) a deductive component to grounded theory, as during the latter stages of the research the theory would also be systematically verified against the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, the emphasis was nevertheless chiefly inductive. Thus, GT represented a significant departure from “previous books on methods of social research” as it encompassed an inductive approach to research with the goal of conceptualisation, rather than a deductive approach to a study with the objective of verification (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1).

Glaser and Strauss designed a number of distinct methodological techniques unique to GT. They stipulated that data collection and analysis occur simultaneously and should be conducted through the specific procedures of *theoretical sampling, coding, constant comparison, saturation and memo writing* (unfortunately there is not the scope in this article to explore these conceptualisations). Glaser and Strauss designed these exacting techniques to ensure that as data is collected, coded, compared, and organised into increasingly abstract categories, a budding theory will begin to emerge. This incipient theory is edited and refined by incoming raw data, to forge a reciprocal relationship between data and theory formation. This approach ensures that the increasing abstraction of concepts is unequivocally substantiated and grounded in the research itself. Therefore, Glaser and Strauss contended that GT successfully marries theory and research as it systematically *discovers* a theory within the substance of the systematic research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Glaser and Strauss asserted the value of this innovative methodology. They argued that during the process of generating a theory, not only do the concepts and hypothesis directly emerge from the data, but they have also been systematically refined by it. They also contended that because the theory has been carefully extrapolated from the empirical research, it generally cannot be repudiated by more data, or superseded with a negating theory, as “it is too intimately linked to data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4). As a consequence, they argued that “despite its inevitable modification and reformulation” over time, a GT is “destined to last” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4). Thus, Glaser and Strauss averred the potential and proficiency of their

methodology, insisting that “grounded theories – which take hard study of much data – are worth the precious time and focus of all of us in our research, study and teaching” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4).

GT soon began to transcend the immediate context it was created from. Two years after the publication of the *Awareness of Dying* study (1965), Glaser and Strauss (upon request) published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) to illuminate the GT methodology they had designed and employed during their research (Glaser, 2002). This text defined and demarcated the rigorous methodology and provided a GT handbook to guide aspiring researchers. Glaser and Strauss published a further two GT studies, *Time for Dying* (1968), and *Status Passage* (1971), and concurrently taught continuing qualitative research seminars, explicating GT, to graduate students at University of California, San Francisco (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Significantly, many of these students (one of whom was Kathy Charmaz) proceeded to undertake and publish their successive research with a GT framework and thereby disseminate the methodology. By 1970 Glaser founded his own non-profit publishing house, the sociology press, and later moved on from the university to pursue writing, publishing, consulting and teaching internationally (Birks & Mills, 2011). Meanwhile, Strauss remained in UCSF until his retirement in 1987, but continued as an Emeritus Professor (with an enduring commitment to research) until his death in 1996. Significantly, although their lives diverged, both Glaser and Strauss remained strongly committed to the GT methodology they had fashioned.

However, GT did not meet immediate acclaim in the wider academic arena. Strauss retrospectively observed that during the 1960s, the decade in which GT emerged, qualitative research “had sunk to a low status” even among sociologists, as it was deemed incapable of providing verification (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 275). Subsequent sociologists concur, and attest that at that time qualitative research was depreciated and disparaged to the extent that it was considered to be “impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic and biased” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). As a consequence, erudite quantitative and positivist methodologies became preeminent in the USA and the social science “discipline marched toward defining research in quantitative terms” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4). Strauss observed that within this climate it took approximately two decades for GT to rise in the estimation of their contemporary American sociologists and to begin to be appreciated (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Strauss attributed this slow conversion to the increasing number of books, journals, and papers either employing GT, or disseminating its methodology. He argued that collectively this literature served to illustrate the rigorous and systematic procedures of GT, prove the value of the methodology, and portray GT as visible and accessible to the academic world (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Significantly, as GT grew in acclaim, it also transcended the discipline of sociology to the extent that it is now utilised by academics from a host of disciplines including speech and hearing sciences (Skeat & Perry, 2008), nursing (Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009), psychology (Fassinger, 2005), medicine (Bhandari et al, 2003), cinematography (Jones & Alony, 2011), business (Goulding, 1999), information systems (Urquhart et al, 2010), social work (Gilgun, 1994), religion (Gottheil & Groth-Marnat, 2011), anthropology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) and education (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

The emergence of GT was seminal to the development of qualitative research, particularly at a time when qualitative research was disparaged. Charmaz insisted that *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) “made a cutting-edge statement” as it critiqued the prevailing methodological assumptions and pioneered a systematic procedure for qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). Glaser and Strauss proved that qualitative analysis could be methodical, rigorous, and structured (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). They also demonstrated the compelling logic and potent capacity of qualitative research to generate theories intimately connected with data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). Consequently, Charmaz confirms that the

epistemological challenge embedded within GT “transformed methodological debates and inspired generations of qualitative researchers” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7).

The Great Schism

As Glaser and Strauss continued to mature GT, their progression precipitated professional and methodological divergence. In the 1970’s and 80’s Glaser and Strauss each wrote a further exposition of GT, but published their books separately rather than collaboratively (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). By 1990 Strauss had forged an academic alliance with Juliet Corbin and together they refined particular features of the original (Classic) GT. Strauss and Corbin revised the original precept of a natural emergence of a theory from data, to be *discovered* by the researcher. Instead, they devised a highly analytical and prescriptive framework for coding, designed to deduce theory from data systematically (there is not the scope in this article to explore this). This rigorous and meticulous coding framework was underlined by the philosophy of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism. Although there was certainly a nuance of this philosophical inclination embedded within the original configuration of GT (due to Strauss’ influence), it was patently more significant and seminal in Strauss and Corbin’s reconfiguration of GT. Strauss and Corbin also challenged the tenet of abstaining from literature prior to embarking on the study, highlighting the difference between an “open mind” versus an “empty mind” (Jones & Alony, 2011, p. 99). Consequently, this transformation of the original tenets of GT fashioned the alternative *Straussian GT* which Strauss and Corbin assembled in their book, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990).

Glaser criticized Strauss and Corbin’s reconfiguration of GT. While the *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990) was still pending publication, Glaser wrote (and later published) two personal letters to Strauss articulating his disapproval. Glaser reproached Strauss in these letters stating “your work is fractured and scattered”, it “distorts and misconceives grounded theory, while engaging in a gross neglect of 90% of its important ideas” (Glaser, 1992, p. 2). Glaser protested, “you wrote a whole different method, so why call it ‘grounded theory’?” (Glaser, 1992, p. 2). Glaser contested that “it indicates that you truly have never grasped what we did, nor studied it to try to carefully extend it” (Glaser, 1992, p. 2). Significantly, Glaser’s reproach extended beyond a criticism of Strauss’ work, and culminated into a call for action:

Therefore I demand that you withdraw the book pending a rewriting of it. And then you and I sit down and go through each page of the book and iron out what I consider to be the misconceptions and then rewrite the book by mutual consent. (Glaser, 1992, p. 1)

However, Strauss and Corbin remained steadfast in their position and did not withdraw their reconfiguration of GT. They proceeded with the publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990). In contrast to Glaser’s rejoinder, they dedicated their book “to Barney Glaser with admiration and appreciation” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, preface).

Glaser criticised that “Strauss’ book is without conscience, bordering on immorality” (Glaser, 1992, p. 5). He counteracted their publication by writing a contending book titled *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs. Forcing* (1992). Glaser deliberately structured his book in the “exact chapter sequence and nomenclature” of Strauss and Corbin’s *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990) to specifically enable the reader to “follow the correlation and divergence” between both books (Glaser, 1992, p. 10). He also published his

aforementioned personal letters to Strauss in the preface of his book. Glaser believed “it is up to me to write a cogent, clear correction to set researchers using grounded theory on a correct path” to combat the “wrong ideas”, “errors”, and “misconceptions” that Strauss and Corbin’s book was propagating (Glaser, 1992, p. 3). Thus, Glaser described his publication as “a corrected version of Strauss’ book” and he saw himself as the defender of the original GT (Glaser, 1992, p. 3).

In successive years, Glaser, Strauss and Corbin continued to develop their diverging positions. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994) published a select few articles disseminating *Straussian* GT. Furthermore, in response to the affirmative feedback from their initial publication, Strauss and Corbin (upon request) published a second edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* in 1998, and a third edition in 2008. Sadly, Strauss had passed away in 1996, two years before the publication of the second edition. However, Corbin wrote in the preface that “although Anselm died before this book was complete, its writing truly has been a collaborative effort” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, preface). By the third edition, Corbin was careful to incorporate Strauss’ voice and distinguished specific sections which Strauss may not have been in accord with. Meanwhile, Glaser published copious books and articles defending and developing the original conception of GT, later identified as *Classic* GT, or *Glaserian* GT (1991, 1998, 2001, 2005). Having already established his own publishing house (Sociology Press), Glaser now launched his own non-profit website and organisation (Grounded Theory Institute), as well as a pertaining journal (*Grounded Theory Review: An International Journal*). He sought to propagate what he deemed to be the pure, authentic, and classic GT; to augment his position he expounded and developed many of the original tenets, including *theoretical sampling*, *theoretical coding* and *theoretical memos* (Hunter *et al*, 2010; Moore, 2009). As a consequence, Classic GT grew in clarity with successive publications, particularly as Glaser was defending, developing and defining it against *Straussian* GT (and other subsequent reconfigurations). Significantly, despite the contentious schism between these two factions of GT, Glaser and Strauss’ personal friendship and professional affinity prevailed until Strauss’ death in 1996 (Birks & Mills, 2011).

However, the reformation of GT did not cease with Strauss’ death. Neither did the schism remain within the dual confines of Classic versus *Straussian* GT. An alumni doctoral student from the sociology department of UCSF, Kathy Charmaz, engaged the academic debate and intrepidly fashioned a third variation of GT. Thus, she forged a new chapter within the history of GT.

The Constructivist Controversy

Charmaz enjoyed a unique introduction to GT as she learned it personally from both Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss themselves. Charmaz was among the first group of doctoral students in the newly established doctoral programme in sociology in the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), which was instituted and chaired by Anselm Strauss. She recounts Strauss’ swift and eager response to her work, articulating that Strauss followed her work “from their first day of meeting until his death in 1996” (Charmaz, 2006, p.vi). Interestingly, Strauss and Corbin even referenced three of Charmaz’s grounded theory studies (1980, 1983, 1990) in the bibliography of an article they published in 1994 (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Charmaz also described that she was taught GT by Barney Glaser, who at the time gave frequent seminars to graduate students at UCSF. She recalls positive experiences, describing that Glaser’s workshops “sparked with excitement and enthusiasm” (Charmaz, 2006, p. xii). Thus, she acknowledges that “my journey with GT began with Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, whose lasting influence has not only permeated my work, but also my consciousness” (Charmaz, 2006, p. xiii).

However, Charmaz was influenced rather than restricted by Strauss and Glaser. Charmaz described that she responded to Glaser and Strauss' invitation in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) to employ GT flexibly in the researcher's own fashion (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9). She accepted this proposal by taking the original tenets of GT and translating them into contemporary research paradigms which had evolved significantly since the conception of GT four decades previously (Charmaz, 2006). In particular she concentrated on interpreting GT within a constructivist paradigm to forge a distinctly Constructivist GT. Thus, Charmaz fashioned a third variation of the GT methodology which she propagated in a number of publications including *Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods* (2000); *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006); *Grounded Theory as an Emergent Method* (2008a); *Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method* (2008b); *Shifting the Grounds: Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods* (2009).

Charmaz's constructivist "interpretation" of GT reconfigured many of its instructions and assumptions (Charmaz, 2006, p. xi). In particular, she rejected Glaser's underlying philosophy of *discovering* an implicit theory. She proposed that "neither the data nor the theories are discovered" and insisted that "we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Charmaz also diverged from the "methodological rules, recipes, and requirements" of Strauss' highly systematic coding process perceiving it to be overly-prescriptive (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9). Instead she proposed flexible "guidelines" which would "raise questions and outline strategies to indicate possible routes to take" (Charmaz, 2006, p. xi). Thus she departed significantly from both Classic and Straussian *GT*, resisting both Glaser's underlined philosophy and Strauss' prescribed coding process.

Charmaz's rendition of GT provoked an unequivocal response. Glaser responded in his article titled *Constructivist Grounded Theory?* (2002), describing Charmaz's reconstruction as a "misnomer" (2002, p. 1). Glaser rejected many of the underlining principles of the constructivist paradigm but in particular protested against Charmaz's emphasis on descriptive capture which he depicted as contrary to the goal of conceptualisation within GT. He asserted that Charmaz's reconfiguration lacks the distinctive properties of abstraction, conceptualisation, and systematic theory generation inherent within "pure" GT (Glaser, 2002, p. 13). Glaser also criticized that her depiction of GT procedures such as coding, delimiting, and sampling are "missed, neglected or quashed", averring that she employed these theorising tools to fashion description rather than abstraction (Glaser, 2002, p. 3). He concluded that Charmaz has configured "at best conceptual description, under the guise of calling it Constructivist GT" and contended that "Charmaz talks the talk of conceptualisation, but actually walks the talk of descriptive capture" (Glaser, 2002, p. 3). Thus, Glaser concluded that Charmaz "is misled in thinking that the constructivist vision is in fact GT" at all (Glaser, 2002, para. 40).

However, Glaser's criticisms were directly challenged. Anthony Bryant responded to Glaser's rejoinder by publishing a journal article entitled *A Constructive/ist Response to Glaser* (2003). He outlined his disapproval at Glaser's comments, arguing that Glaser provides "very little to counter or clarify the arguments put forward by Charmaz" (Bryant, 2003, para. 23). Bryant reinforced Charmaz's position, arguing that the GT researcher cannot be rendered an impartial observer, as they inevitably yield an interpretive influence over their analysis, and actively *construct* rather than neutrally *discover* a GT. Bryant defended Charmaz, arguing that her reformation is not only a valid reading of GT, but it is "far more potent and coherent" than Classic GT and "rescues the key ideas of the method" (Bryant, 2003, para. 25). He concluded that while Glaser may have a "certain right" to "feel proprietorial" about his methodology, he

nevertheless “has to acknowledge that GTM¹ has outgrown his grasp” as there are other valid interpretations of GT (Bryant, 2003, para. 25).

In contrast to Glaser’s disapproval of reconfiguring GT, Strauss and Corbin embraced its potential. Although, Strauss died in 1996, prior to the birth of Constructivist GT, he (and Corbin) had affirmed that GT should “change with the times” and be attuned to “contemporary intellectual trends and movements” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 276). They identified a host of potential influences including ethnomethodology, critical theory, feminism, and postmodernism (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Both Strauss and Corbin welcomed this potential adaptation, reasoning that “no inventor has permanent possession of the invention – certainly not even of its name – and furthermore we would not wish to do so” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 283). Importantly, Charmaz avowed that while Strauss clearly held a different philosophical perspective, and would have disagreed with many of her ideas, she hopes he would have found them stimulating (Charmaz, 2006)

After Strauss’ death, Corbin responded specifically to the constructivist conception of GT and affirmed Charmaz’s position so wholeheartedly that she disclosed her personal acquiescence with the paradigm (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). However, Corbin was careful to clarify that Strauss may not have been in accord with this assertion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).. Significantly, the evolution of GT has certainly not ceased, particularly as Charmaz, Bryant, Corbin, and Glaser continue to publish material. Therefore, the history of GT continues to unfold.

Conclusion

Although this history of GT documents the schismatic nature of the three variations of GT, it is important to recognise that they nevertheless retain some familial resemblance. Despite Glaser’s protestations, Straussian and Constructivist GT still claim a kinship with the original Classic GT. Indeed Straussian and Constructivist grounded theorists continue to embrace a number of the original innovative methodological techniques (including theoretical sampling, saturation, the constant comparison and memo writing) which originated in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). As a consequence, although Classic, Straussian, and Constructivist GT, are undoubtedly distinct and diverging variations of GT, they nevertheless remain within the GT family albeit with some heated family arguments.

A post-script from the authors

There was not the scope in this article to examine the methodological or philosophical directives that distinguish the three factions of GT. However the authors’ accompanying article, “Contrasting Classic, Straussian and Constructivist Grounded Theory: Methodological and Philosophical Conflicts”, examines this subject.

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¹ Grounded Theory Methodology

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Author Note

Méabh Kenny is a PhD student under the supervision of Dr. Robert Fourie in University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. Méabh has a background in Social Work and her PhD is entitled: *A qualitative analysis of parental coping following early diagnosis of hearing loss in Ireland*. Méabh has selected Straussian Grounded Theory as her chosen methodology for this research. In the same way that the classical composer Johann Sebastian Bach inscribed SDG (an acronym for *Sola Dei Gloria*) at the end of his manuscripts, Meabh works with the aspiration that her work would sing the same praise. Correspondence regarding this manuscript can be addressed directly to: Méabh Kenny at the following: Email: meabh.kenny@gmail.com; Address: Dept. of Speech and Hearing Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health, Brookfield Health Sciences Complex, University College Cork, College Road, Co. Cork, Ireland, Europe.

Robert Fourie is a speech and language therapist and audiologist who is a full-time lecturer at University College Cork (UCC). He has a bachelor's degree in speech and language therapy, a master's degree audiology and a PhD in applied psychology. He has worked as a paediatric audiologist and also has speech and language therapist for Deaf and hard of hearing children. Contact information for Robert Fourie is: E-mail: r.fourie@uce.ie; Address: Dept. of Speech and Hearing Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health, Brookfield Health Sciences Complex, University College Cork, College Road, Co. Cork, Ireland, Europe.

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Article Citation

Kenny, M., & Fourie, R. (2014). Tracing the history of grounded theory methodology: From formation to fragmentation. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(103), 1-9. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/kenny103.pdf>
