

"Let the Fear Go and Trust the Process" - Experiencing Grounded Theory Over a Lifetime: Odis E. Simmons in Conversation With Astrid Gynnild

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"Let the Fear Go and Trust the Process" —Experiencing Grounded Theory Over a Lifetime

Odis E. Simmons in Conversation With Astrid Gynnild

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grounded theory
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Abstract: Odis SIMMONS was among the first students who learned grounded theory method (GTM) directly from the co-founders GLASER and STRAUSS. Except for GLASER himself, SIMMONS is probably the grounded theorist who has taught the method to most students globally. In this interview SIMMONS provides key insights into learning, doing, teaching, and applying classic grounded theory (GT) as a general research method. With his double background as a therapist and a teacher in higher education, SIMMONS elaborates on fears that students might have during the research process and how they are overcome. He explains the ideas behind his own approaches to *grounded action* and *grounded therapy*, which for a long time resided in the GTM background but are gradually getting more widespread. In the interview, he also brings new knowledge on the diverging perspectives of GLASER and STRAUSS which, according to him, existed from the beginning. He argues, in an including manner, why classic GTM and constructivist GTM should be considered two different methods and urges educators to openly discuss the differences.

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About the Interview

The interview was carried out via the Zoom video platform, with the interviewer and the interviewee sitting in their home offices in Norway and in the USA, respectively. A small portion of the video interview was presented virtually at a GTM conference in September 2022. The full video recording was later transcribed and edited, resulting in the more comprehensive interview presented here. The interview was read and approved by SIMMONS in late fall 2023. [1]

About the Interviewee

Odis E. SIMMONS enrolled at the University of California, San Francisco in 1970, and became an early student of both GLASER and STRAUSS after their seminal work "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" (1967) had been published. SIMMONS received his PhD in sociology at the University of California, San Francisco in 1974. He has taught classic GTM to hundreds of students since he first started in 1971. His first academic position was at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma and he then went to Yale University in Connecticut where he directed the self-care program in the Medical School. From there he and his wife decided to move to the Northwest. After 14 years as a therapist, SIMMONS accepted a faculty position at Fielding Graduate University, where he developed his own program in classic GTM. He held the position at Fielding for 16 years until formally retiring in 2014. Following up on his teaching career, SIMMONS has written "Experiencing Grounded Theory: A Comprehensive Guide to Learning, Doing, Mentoring, Teaching, and Applying Grounded Theory," published in 2022. SIMMONS was a close friend of Barney G. GLASER until GLASER died in 2022, and he is a fellow of the Grounded Theory Institute. [2]

1. Teaching GTM

Astrid GYNNILD: Odis, it was a great pleasure to read your new book! I really find it a comprehensive, intelligible guide to vital aspects of doing GTM. And still I am curious to know: After fifty years of teaching GTM—what were the most important things you learned on the way?

Odis SIMMONS: I think in working with students, it is to inspire them and deal with their fears. I remember Barney once saying, "You know, people don't have fears," and I said, "Yes, they do." I worked with hundreds of students, and GTM to them is kind of intimidating. Barney's books are very thick reads. They are super. But when people read them, their heads spin and it kind of scares them. What I try and do is just tell them to let the fear go, and that this is not about judging you or your intellect or anything, it's just about helping you move to the next step. When you are teaching, you are not only a teacher. You are a coach and sometimes a therapist. But basically, I think in teaching GTM, just be yourself. Be kind, be thoughtful when you are being critical. Be cautious. And you have to get to know all students and the things that may trigger them. You got to pay attention to your students. I found it helpful that I was inspired. I am still inspired by GTM, after all these years. It has transformed my life in so many positive ways. And if you show that inspiration yourself, it is infectious for people. [3]

Astrid GYNNILD: What else would you say are the main problems that students new to GTM typically encounter?

Odis SIMMONS: Trying to get them to trust the method. I think one of the reasons that a lot of people in my early years at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) moved towards STRAUSS (SIMMONS, 2022), is because the way he viewed it made it easy. When you are doing a classic GT, it is hard to imagine the end, what is it going to look like. And that is the source of a lot of the

fear. And so, I found I had to constantly coach people: "Trust the process! It has worked for many, many people, it will work for you! Let the fear go." Once again, it goes back to fear. And then what happens is there are certain key places where they have difficulty. The first one is, typically, getting rid of their preconceptions. And I worked with mostly professionals, from professional acting—not acting in the sense of theater, but professionals in fields like education, social work, sometimes criminology and so forth—and they come in with a whole lot of preconceptions. I found this like in the therapy field; there is a culture. And in like any culture, there are expectations and assumptions and beliefs and so forth, and it was sometimes difficult to get them to let that go. But I would just coach them through it, and when working in groups, other members of the group would point it out, "Hey, that's a preconception." And they would share that back and forth. That's often the first thing. [4]

But I also found that there's a point at which they just don't get that, and so we move to the next stage. What I discovered is that when *they* discover their own first concept—then they get it. The second thing that is very important is to help people learn how to conceptualize, because a lot of people see concepts as way loftier than they really are. The way I explained it in the book, and the way I explained it to them is: All a concept is, is a word or a short phrase for a pattern. That is all it is. Identify the pattern, sometimes that is more difficult than finding the word (SIMMONS, 2022). And once people get that, and they discover their first concept, it just lights them up, and off they go. Now they feel confident that, "Hey, I think I can do this!" [5]

Now, probably the most difficult one to get people over is theoretical coding (GLASER, 2005). People want to pick the theoretical codes and do it backwards. It is difficult to get them to understand that "No, you've got it backwards," because they do not have a head full of theoretical codes. You know, if you come from a field like sociology, there are a lot of theoretical codes. In fact, the first ones I was introduced to by Barney was what he called the bread-and-butter codes of sociology. It was the six Cs, context, contingencies, causes and whatever the other three were. But a lot of professional people have not read a lot of real theory. They read a lot of what I call high-level opinionizing that they think is theory, but it is not. I love GLASER and STRAUSS's (1967) definition of a theory: A theory is a theory because it explains something. It does not matter what form it is in. And so, to get across to people that what you are trying to do is find people's main concern and develop a theory around that. Explain how and why they are acting that way. And then there is the writing. A lot of professional people do not have a lot of experience at writing in an academic context. One of the reasons I finally decided to retire was I just got so exhausted with trying to help people learn how to write. [6]

Anyhow, those are the most difficult points I see: Getting rid of preconceptions, getting over the fear of concepts, and learning how to identify patterns and data; naming them and dealing with shortcutting, particularly at the stage of theoretical sampling. And then helping them write in a more sort of academic tone. [7]

There is another one in there, too, which is writing memos. Trying to get them to understand "just write!" As I wrote on Barney and memoing in my book (SIMMONS, 2022): When somebody would call him, excited about an idea, he would say, "Memo it!" Click. And hang up the phone. I remember the first time, in my first quarter with him, he said "Okay, go home and write some memos!" And everybody was like, "Well, Barney, what's a memo?" And he went, "Doesn't matter, just go home and write some." The point he was trying to get across was to write it in your style, in your way. Forget about grammar. You can delete it later, you can add to it, you can change it. It does not matter, just write the idea up while it still has a magical quality (GLASER, 1998). That was somewhat difficult to get across to people, particularly to working professionals who had a busy life and so forth. [8]

2. Early History and Career

Astrid GYNNILD: You have elaborated on a few things that classic GTM requires from the researcher. If we take into consideration that GLASER wrote more than 30 books about the method, classic GTM is probably one of the most well-explained methods there are. How come, then, that it is so often misunderstood?

Odis SIMMONS: I think the issue has been teaching. There need to be more teachers. My career plan, that I learned from Barney, was "Don't get trapped into a conventional academic career!" I decided early on that I am going to do what I want to do, how I want to do it, and let the chips fall where they may. And trusting in emergence (GLASER, 1978), basically. It has worked very, very well. But I noticed when I first started teaching GTM, the difficulty that people were having understanding Barney's books. STRAUSS was a clearer writer, so it was easier to understand STRAUSS. I knew people who spent their careers trying to fill up a bookshelf full of books and journal articles they had written, and I decided that is not the path I want to take. I wanted to teach GTM to as many people as I possibly could, learn from that, and then, when I was done, write it up. Which is exactly what I have done. And almost everything I've published over the years I have published because somebody asked me to. I did not get involved in, particularly in sociology, the king-of-the-hill-games, and intellectual gun-slinging, as I called it. Barney called it the rhetorical wrestle (GLASER, 2014, p.5). I just did not want to get involved in all that. I just wanted to teach as many people as I possibly could and find practical uses for grounded theory. That is what I did. And I guess that is why we are here. That is how I met you. [9]

Astrid GYNNILD: Yes, you are right. And would you say then that classic GTM students differ from other GTM students? Does it require something extra to be a classic grounded theorist?

Odis SIMMONS: Yeah, possibly. People who have had a lot of training in methodology in academic settings probably feel more comfortable with a more structured method. The people who enter classic GTM—I think they are kind of a little more exploratory, you might say. In a sense, it is somewhat difficult for me to tell; when I was at Fielding, the students I worked with were so excited, and when they got around other students who were not in the GTM program we had, it was

infectious. And they would say, "I want some of that." And so, "Can I join?" But I think it is people who wanted the independence that classic GTM provides for you. It is like you own it entirely. You follow the method, and when you are finished, it is entirely yours. It is not a product of somebody else's structure. It tended to attract people who were not quite as willing to go off on a track where they could not see the end. If there is a personality involved, it is probably people who are a little more willing to take risk. [10]

Astrid GYNNILD: But at the same time there are all these misconceptions—what classic GTM is and what it is not. Some even think it is a kind of objectivist, positivist approach. You have written quite extensively about these issues in your book. The way you see it, where do these misconceptions stem from?

Odis SIMMONS: I think part of it, once again, is that neophytes have difficulty understanding Barney. Even when I was a student, I do not know what it was, I just zeroed in on Barney's brain very quickly, and we became very close friends. Lifelong friends. I miss him dearly. But after the seminars, some of the other students would approach me and say, "What did Barney say today?" I sometimes had that problem with him, but less so than most people. But I think it is the lack of teaching. There just have not been enough people out there to teach grounded theory, to teach classic grounded theory as it was intended to be. And they often end up going to STRAUSS and CORBIN (1990) or CHARMAZ (2006). And I do not mean to be critical of those people. I like CHARMAZ a lot. She and I were at University of California in San Francisco at the same time. But in much of it, I think that she was just flat wrong about her interpretations of GTM (see Section 6). And I think the reason there is she was more a student of STRAUSS, and I was more of a student of GLASER. [11]

And some people, in a sense, were a little leery of Barney, because he would do things like "go home and write some memos." He was also developing these ideas in our seminars, which was incredibly exciting. And he treated everyone as colleagues. Anselm was a much more kind of traditional, conventional academic. And I absolutely loved Anselm, I learned a huge amount from him. But he was a symbolic interactionist. I know this well, because almost all my undergraduate professors were symbolic interactionists. STRAUSS was more structured in his teaching, his seminars were more ordered, sort of quiet, not a lot of passion. Barney's seminars were like sometimes an intellectual riot, you know. They were a lot of fun, too, for me, but it made Barney a little more difficult to understand. [12]

Astrid GYNNILD: Would you concur, then, that classic GTM requires a certain kind of atmosphere to thrive? I am reminded of the theory on troubleshooting, "Atmosphering for Conceptual Discovery" (GYNNILD, 2012a), as Barney was very focused on striking the right tone in a group. Whose responsibility do you think it is to create that kind of an atmosphere, or, how does it come into being?

Odis SIMMONS: I think part of it is the personality of the teacher. But most people who teach classic GTM, or who are interested in classic GTM, and who have done research using classic GTM, are generally open people, or they would not have succeeded at it. They would have bailed out when it became scary. I

remember that interview you conducted with Barney years ago in New York, and how he just kept saying, "I just do me" (GYNNILD, 2012b, p.244). So much of my teaching has always come out of me just being me. I tend to be an open person who likes everybody, and who wants everybody to succeed. I am not competitive, you know. It took me a while to decide to even become a grounded theory fellow, because I saw some of our fellow fellows—they somehow wanted to compete with me for Barney's affections. I wanted Barney to love everybody and everybody to love Barney. I think that your personality comes across in your teaching. You have read my book, so you know. [13]

In my anger management program, even though I used grounded action, and I think very successfully, a part of why it worked was just me being me. And that is being authentic and genuine. I even feel unauthentic in saying things like that. I do not feel comfortable talking about myself that way. But it is just, you know, be an engaging person. Have fun in what you are doing. Be free and always use some humor. But I do not mean using the opportunity as a stand-up comedian. Like I told my anger management students, we can have some fun in here. We can laugh and it is not just me. If you have got something funny you want to say, say it, but let us just not get carried away with it. It is making people feel at ease, as you pointed out in the article on atmosphering (GYNNILD, 2012a). It is creating a relaxed, fun, encouraging, exciting, open, collegial atmosphere. [14]

It is so much to do with atmosphering. And you can get people to relax and to have faith in "trust the method" (p.42), "trust in emergence" (McCALLIN, NATHANIEL & ANDREWS, 2011, p.70), that is why Barney kept saying those things. If you can get them to do that and keep an eye on the ones who are having struggles. And maybe set aside some time to individually help them over whatever they are struggling with. I think there has only been maybe two or three people over the years I have taught who I thought they just cannot do this. I had more optimism about who could learn grounded theory than Barney did. I always found a way. [15]

Astrid GYNNILD: I note that you are talking very much about trust. It is all about creating a trusting atmosphere where people can feel safe enough to not start thinking about their fears?

Odis SIMMONS: Absolutely, yes! And this is not my creation, but I would tell people "There is no such thing as a stupid question. If you have a question, I guarantee you, other people here have that same question or a similar question, and they will really appreciate you for asking it, so they do not have to. So, let the fear go, there is no such thing as a stupid question." And if somebody asks a stupid question, do not treat it as a stupid question! When I was doing anger management, sometimes people would say really stupid things. And rather than saying, "That was stupid," I would say, "That's an interesting point, let me expand on that," and then create it into something useful. And never, ever put people down. Never embarrass them. Barney said something years ago in one of his seminars that struck me as well. That was, "There's no such thing as a smart question." That is, do not try and impress me. It ain't going to work. Just like when

I was doing a couple's counselling, I could tell in the first session; each of them was trying to get me on their side. And I would say, "Okay, I see what you're doing, don't try it. And get it over with." [16]

3. Open Questions

Astrid GYNNILD: In your book you also write quite a lot about questions and what questions to pose, like you were explaining now. You seem to be very concerned about questions that *appear* to be open, but in reality they are *not*. What do you mean by that?

Odis SIMMONS: Well, let us see if I can think of an example off the top of my head. Say you are asking a student some questions about a teacher. A question that seems open may be something like, "What do you think about this teacher's teaching style?" That seems open. But that may not be what is relevant to that person. And so, a better question would be something like, "Tell me your thoughts about this teacher," because that will allow them to talk about whatever dimension of that person's teaching they want to talk about, the one that is most important to them. And the teaching style may not be it. It may well be that they are open and caring, they explain things thoroughly, or whatever else. What I tried to get across to people, and what works for me so well in doing therapy, was these very open questions. My opening question with almost all new clients in therapy was, "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" Just take it from there. [17]

Another thing that is important to avoid is yes-or-no questions—unless you have a very specific reason for it. Because they will say yes or no, and that shuts the topic off. Another one is asking two questions at once. You ask one question and then you move to a second question, and the person usually responds to the second question and forgets the first one. Try and ask just one question at a time, and let that person run that out. Then probe on that question and ask the other question later. Because sometimes, if you let them talk, they will answer the first question. But the more closed your questions are, the more you are shaping their responses. [18]

This argument about classic grounded theory being constructivist—I think it is like "What?" Because it is about, as Barney puts it in more vernacular terms, what people are working on (GLASER, 2002). How is that constructivist? I differentiate it in the book (SIMMONS, 2022) and in the article that I wrote for your reader (SIMMONS, 2012). Let us look at three different types of constructivism: One is just the sort of constructivism behind the way people create meaning. That is endemic to human society. You cannot avoid that, but that does not mean that you should jump on that wagon. Then, there is a constructivism of the researcher. And then there is a constructivism of the people you are studying. It is the people-you-are-studying's constructivism that you need to focus on. Not your own. One of the problems with constructivist grounded theory is that too much of your own is allowed in there. And there is no need for it, so why do it? [19]

Astrid GYNNILD: You also discuss the difference between what you call fundamental constructivism and the other types that you just mentioned. As far as I remember, you argue that this fundamental constructivism should not be misperceived as a positivist or objectivist approach?

Odis SIMMONS: Well—fundamental constructivism—what I am referring to there, basically that is symbolic interactionism; that meaning is created through the interaction between human beings. One of my early mentors, Stanford LYMAN, absolutely a brilliant man, unfortunately deceased now, wrote a book called "A Sociology of the Absurd," along with Marvin SCOTT (1970). Their point is: The universe is inherently meaningless, all meaning in the universe is our creation, the creation of people interacting with one another. That is essentially the symbolic interactionist view, that there is no inherent meaning anywhere. There is only the meaning we make up in our interactions with one another, and that gives rise to culture and all sorts of things like that. You cannot avoid that. But you do not have to adopt it as the driving force of grounded theory. [20]

4. Authorships

And then, as a sociologist, for example, you are socialized into a culture that has all these pre-existing concepts and ways of interacting with one another, in ways of thinking. And I loved it. That is one of the reasons I became a sociologist. But that is a professional construction. What GTM, what classic GTM is about, is how the people you are studying construct their meanings in their lives, based on those meanings. Because, as symbolic interactionists say, people create a definition of the situation, and then they act on that definition. And that's what gives meaning, shape, direction, etc., to their lives. And that's what you're studying. And this is what it is. It just baffles me that people don't understand that. How can you say that—when what you're studying is the way people construct their meanings, that is, their relevancy and their way of going about life—how can you say that that is constructivist from the perspective of the researcher? It just baffles me. [21]

I remember when I first met STRAUSS, he was in Europe, I think in Geneva, working with the World Health Organization. That was when I first got to UCSF, when I started there in beginning of October 1970. I had a real good idea by then of what Barney was, his view of things. But at the first session I took from Anselm, he said, "Well, you want to go do a literature review to see what's been done, so you don't repeat it." And I said, "Barney said not to do that specifically." Anselm replied, "Here are the dimensions you want to look at." I recognized them immediately as symbolic interactionism. He later coined out his axial coding. And I said, "Barney said not to do that." And immediately, I understood they are not talking about the same thing. I said that to Barney on the way home that day, but he did not quite register it. It was not until the book by STRAUSS and CORBIN (1990) came out, that it really hit him. And he was very upset by that. Only then did he realize. And he said this in the red book that he wrote, "Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis" (GLASER, 1992) that Anselm had not understood him all along. And he was right. But it took him a long time to see that. [22]

Astrid GYNNILD: A short version of our conversation was presented at a conference open to any variety of GTM. What challenges do you see when different approaches to GTM are invited to meet in the same virtual space?

Odis SIMMONS: It is so hard for me to understand how people can misinterpret classic GTM so thoroughly. I give the reasons I think that may have happened in the book, about the backgrounds of the two people and so forth. I do want to say something though. And that is that constructivist GTM is not bad research. The issue is not that it is bad. The issue is that it is not really GTM as it was originally intended. This happened because—and again, it is hard for me to say some of these things as I do not want to appear critical of anybody because these are all people I like, who have made a great contribution—but Anselm, he was a symbolic interactionist. And he was a darn good symbolic interactionist. I learned a huge amount from him. And he was a sweet, kind, generous man, so supportive of me. But he never really understood Barney. One of the perks of somebody who had Anselm's status in the sociology profession which, at that time, Barney did not have, is that you could get other people to write. And you put your name on it by adding whatever. That is the way the Discovery book (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967) was written. Barney wrote, as he said himself, the first nine chapters of the book or something. And then Anselm added a chapter on literature and so forth, things that are not really that central to the understanding of classic grounded theory. But this was a perk that not only Anselm used, but in fact also people like Leonard SCHATZMAN (SCHATZMAN & STRAUSS 1972), a wonderful man and symbolic interactionist who had been a student of STRAUSS. He wrote a really good book, and I have had many discussions with him in his office about this book. I was somewhat surprised when he finished, that Anselm's name was on it, because Anselm kind of went over it. [23]

Now, Barney actually mentioned this in that interview that you did with him years ago, that Anselm was very good at figuring out (GYNNILD, 2012b). Today, this may be seen as exploitative. But it was part of the profession. The perk of achieving the top of the hill was that you would get really good students. Then they would write, and you would put your name on it. And they would benefit, because their name was associated with your name, and it would be more apt to be published by a good publisher and so forth. I do not mean to imply that it was exploitative, but that is, I think, why Anselm did not really fully understand what we now call classic GTM. And that is how it kind of went off in that constructivist direction that CHARMAZ (2006) followed, for example. Once again, I do not want to be critical of CHARMAZ, she was a lovely person, and we had a very nice relationship, until that article I wrote for your reader (SIMMONS, 2012). I never heard from her again after that. I sent her the article, and I said, "If you see anything in here that you disagree with, and that you would like for me to correct, let me know." I never heard from her again. That is the last time she ever communicated with me. I think I upset her. But that is the nature of the academic world. [24]

Astrid GYNNILD: The concept that comes to my mind when talking about these issues is what Barney called academic capitalism, that you profit on making other people work for you on your own ideas. In what ways would you say that classic grounded theory is different?

Odis SIMMONS: I am not sure if I understand your question.

Astrid GYNNILD: Is classic GTM less exploitative, is it at a distance from academic capitalism?

Odis SIMMONS: First of all, it is very democratic. I mean, you own it. You do it, you own it. And in a sense, what we are talking about here is, like I say—some people would see it as exploitative. That is a separate issue. That could be done to anybody with any methodology. But I do not really see that happening in classic GTM. I think there may be two reasons I can think of. I had many students say, "Would you co-author a book with me?" And I would tell them "No, absolutely not. I'm not going to do that. This is your GT. You want a book? You do it!" [25]

That is one of the reasons. And so many people out there who have done classic GTM were former students of mine or students of students of mine. And now there are students of students of students of mine, which was my original intent. I am thrilled. If I die tomorrow, which God forbid I won't, I will be happy. The other thing is that because people develop a sense of independence when they do this, it is their creation. I do not know that they have a need to have somebody sign on with it. Classic grounded theorists learn through the method, if nothing else, this sense of creative independence. And they do not need somebody else to do it. I know a lot of professionals, non-academic professional people—they are not in it to write a book or to publish; they are in it to advance their profession. To get a degree and advance their profession. They are not even that inclined to publish, which is unfortunate in a way. [26]

5. Grounded Action and Grounded Therapy

Astrid GYNNILD: Let us turn to some key concepts relating to your GTs on grounded action, and grounded therapy. Could you explain the difference between *operational theory*, as developed by you through grounded action and grounded therapy, and GTM, which you call *explanatory theory*?

Odis SIMMONS: When you are doing an academic GT, like for a dissertation, you are doing a GT that explains something. That is the explanatory theory (SIMMONS, 2022). But way back, there were a lot of people wanting to get into GLASER and STRAUSS' seminars who could not, so they were referring them to me. I started a seminar in my living room for other graduate students in the area. One of them asked this question one day. She said, "GLASER and STRAUSS said that you can use GTM as a basis for action, but they didn't say how to do it." I thought, "Yeah, that's really true. They didn't say a whole lot about that, although they did talk about applying GTM." And I said, "Well, let me think about it." Afterwards I went in my office and wrote up the outline that still is pretty much what it was then, with these various stages of doing it. [27]

The issue in sociology always was, you cannot be objective and get involved in applied. Applied sociology was kind of looked down on at the time, which is why there are far more psychologists than there are sociologists, and nobody pays any attention to sociologists. And part of it is their own fault, because they said, "Well, you know, we don't want to get involved in that." And there is a whole history of sociology involved there, that I certainly do not have the time to go into here. But one of the things that intrigued me about GTM was that it would enable you to become more objective and then create interventions based on that. And that is how that process occurred. It took me years to find an opportunity where I could fully do it. It was actually in 1992, which was just about the time that Barney left UCSF, when I started an anger management program, and the field was open for me. It worked so well. I put that example in the book (SIMMONS, 2022) because it shows *how* when you get at, as Barney put it, what is actually going on. And you *identify* what is actually going on. Your action problem may be different than you originally saw it, because even that is emergent. When you find that, you can figure out, okay, now what do I need to do to address that? And from there: What dimensions of this problem can I access? [28]

There is a practical property to that, too. You only have so much time, you only have so many resources and so forth. But given all that, what are the specific actions I can take to start to engage with that, and help resolve that action problem, as it is now constituted? I had some attempts to try part of that process, and they worked. But when I did that anger management program—it is hard for me to describe how much fun it was to do that, to take these people who had had nothing but problems in their life. And like this one student of mine came, and she wanted to sit in on it. She said, "I just witnessed a miracle." She had tried to do anger management using the traditional model, like I was trained in, but it did not work because it really was not about anger per se. It was about what *produces* that anger in people, which I call *Dangerfieldism* (SIMMONS, 2022, p.173) based upon the stand-up comic of "I Don't Get No Respect" (WITTER, 2020). It was an issue of, I discovered, power and respect. And people do not understand those concepts. They do not know how to get respect and to use power. So, that is what it was about. Power and respect. It was not about anger. I discovered it using sort of the explanatory theory, in this case it was a very crude one, as I only had a couple of months to come up with it. I discovered through *GTM* that the original problem that was given to me was not the actual problem. *GTM* works so phenomenally well. I am still excited about it. [29]

The first time I read the Discovery book (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967), I was pretty naïve. I had read some real heavy, classic sociology that was kind of like, wow, I do not know if I can do that. But when I read "Discovery," I thought, "You mean that isn't the way it's always done? It just makes so much sense." The idea of coming up with a theory first—it makes much more sense that you collect the data, you analyze the data, and you generate your theory. Why else would you do it any other way? [30]

Astrid GYNNILD: When you are talking about your anger management program, one could easily claim that there are grey zones between grounded action, as you worked with it, and grounded therapy, which you developed as well.

Odis SIMMONS: In a sense, the key to both grounded action and grounded therapy is to be as little pre-conceptionist as possible. One of the favorite examples I gave in the book is this woman who was suffering rather severely from anxiety attacks, so much that she was afraid to go into public (SIMMONS, 2022). I had seen her son and his wife in a couple counseling, and they asked me if I could see her. And I said, "Sure," and if they could get her to come in. In my first session with her, I asked, "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" She basically recited what her kids had told me about her, which is, "I'm suffering from anxiety attacks. I'm afraid to go into public. My kids have to do my shopping for me." And she had seen a psychiatrist twice, who had prescribed drugs. And she said, "They make me feel like a zombie." [31]

I said, "Tell me about a day in your life." Very open question. She said, "I get up in the morning, I go in the kitchen, I make a cup of coffee." And I said, "Do you like your coffee weak or strong?" She said, "I like it strong. It helps me wake up." Because she got this zombie feeling from the drugs. And I said, "How big is your cup?" She said, "Well, it's not really a cup, it's a beer stein my son brought me from Germany when he was in the army." And it was like one liter. I said, "Do you eat breakfast?" And she said, "No, I've never been a breakfast eater." And so, I said, "So, okay, so you get up in the morning, and right away, on an empty stomach, you have the equivalent of maybe three, four, five cups of very strong coffee, and you wonder why you're nervous all the time." I said, "Next time your kids go to the store, get some decaf, and wean yourself off the caffeine." She had been diagnosed as having a depressive disorder and an anxiety disorder, and was medicated. In fact, she was just drinking too much coffee. And she was a widow. Her husband had died, and she was still grieving over that. That psychiatrist did not see that. Just asking that question, "Tell me about a day in your life," in that open way, it just opened up a whole different universe for her. [32]

As I say in the book (SIMMONS, 2022), some years later I was standing in a chain pharmacy, waiting in a long line. I was looking around, and this woman, I saw her kind of running towards me. She got up close, and just grabbed me. She squeezed so hard, I thought she was going to break my back. And she said, "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, you saved my life." And then, she told me what her life was like now. That all emerged from, "Tell me about a day in your life." Rather than coming in like the psychiatrist did, with all these preconceived, what I call psychologizing and personalizing pathologizing ways of viewing people, what I call nutcracker therapy. And that is so endemic. It is like the person, there is a nut inside, and they have got this shell of defenses. And you got to break through that defense and so forth, you know? I just asked her, "Tell me about a day in your life." It makes a huge difference. So, really the key is being as non-pre-conceptionist as possible, and let it emerge from there. [33]

Astrid GYNNILD: This is a wonderful story. You have told it several times, and I think it is getting better each time.

Odis SIMMONS: Am I elaborating on it?

Astrid GYNNILD: It is very lively! It seems that in Europe, the number of psychologists is growing as well, these days. If you have good advice to therapists in general—what would it be?

Odis SIMMONS: Give up your preconceptions. I always hesitate to be critical, but I think the worst therapists I have ever known have been the most highly trained. And the best I have ever known are the ones who were not all that trained. They just had that natural ability. They have credibility with people. Authenticity. They care. People recognize that. I did counseling and therapy for 14 years. The difference is that counseling is about here and now, therapy about there and then. If I learned anything, it was that the most healing thing of all is having somebody listen to you on your terms. I believe the German word for it is *Verstehen*. The way I put it is: Become those persons to the extent that it is humanly possible and let them give their point of view. Let them talk about themselves. Do not judge them. Do not interpret it. Just listen and be supportive. That is, to me—that is therapy. I remember Stanford LYMAN, when I was at University of Nevada that one year. He and I both left afterwards, we did not care for the program. It was a good program. We just did not like their perspectives. We had a seminar outdoors one day, and he was talking about labeling theory. And people were getting carried away with labels as if they were conspiracies. And when he was talking about the myth of mental illness, Stan said, "Wait a minute. You know, folks, there is such a thing as crazy people." [34]

And yes, there are people who are seriously mentally ill. But the vast majority who come in for therapy and counseling, including even psychiatry or clinical psychology, are ordinary people with ordinary problems. Stop pathologizing them. Listen to them, hear what they have to say. Be empathetic, be sympathetic, but not in a sing-songy offensive way. Just be human with them, you know. In this context, be their friend in a way. I used to get a lot of criticism from colleagues who did not think in this way. But I was right, and they were wrong. What I did worked marvelously well. That was finally, actually after some years, recognized by others. One of the reasons I finally got out of that profession was that they started sending me the most difficult clients. I worked well with them, but it wore me out. [35]

Astrid GYNNILD: I see both grounded action (SIMMONS, 2022; SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003) and grounded therapy (SIMMONS, 2022) as future-oriented approaches. Maybe their real breakthrough as solution oriented sociological interventions is still ahead. But would you say that developing grounded action and grounded therapy—is that an extension of GTM? Is it a modification of GTM, or what are they?

Odis SIMMONS: I think it is the use or the application of the foundational ideas of GTM. Grounded therapy is a little looser with that than grounded action. It is a little less methodological, you might say, than grounded action. Grounded action

has specific steps and it is basically applying the precepts of GTM in action enterprises. I have had students who have also developed ways of using grounded therapy for teaching. I had one student many, many years ago who used GTM as a way of conducting meetings. It just boils down to not being pre-conceptionist and let it emerge. Let it emerge. And listen to what people are saying. [36]

6. Different Methods

Astrid GYNNILD: My next question follows up on what you were saying about grounded action and GTM. Would you not say that it is natural for any method to continue to evolve as science moves forward? I mean, speaking of the remodeling of classic GTM (GLASER & HOLTON, 2004) and the different versions—time is passing, and suddenly you get a multitude of ways of doing what was originally conceptualized as GTM?

Odis SIMMONS: Well, I do not object to so-called constructivist GTM. It is definitely extremely useful and a step forward for symbolic interactionists. The problem I have is that it is being called GTM. Because that creates a distortion. And I see them as having a lot of overlap, but two different methods. STRAUSS saw GTM as a method (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). GLASER saw it as a methodology (GLASER, 1978). STRAUSS saw it as one of other forms of qualitative analysis (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). Barney saw it as a whole package, a methodological package from beginning to end. That is the way I always taught it. And constructivist GTM (CHARMAZ 2006; CHARMAZ & KELLER, 2016), I guess it is a methodology too, in a sense, having never done it. I hesitate to. I have read a lot about it, but having never done it, I have not had the phenomenological experience of doing it that way. And so, it is hard for me to understand *why* you would do it that way, when you do not *need* to do it that way. But now it is going to continue. I mean, I think Barney finally gave up: "Okay, they're using the word GTM, at least." But I think what needs to happen is that people like you, people like the fellows, having a clear understanding of the differences and teaching that understanding in a respectful way. I would tell students, "If you want to use constructivist GTM, there is somebody on the faculty here who could help you, but I'm afraid I can't do it, because I just can't make myself to do it wrong, sort of thing." I mean, GTM wrong, as I saw it. But I think it boils down to this: We need more people teaching classic GTM. If people want to use *constructivist*, okay, that is what that is called, I appreciate that CHARMAZ (2006) gave it that title. Then some people used to call GTM *Glaserian grounded theory* method (ARTINIAN, GISKE & CONE, 2009; STERN 1994). He did not like that because it made it too personal. So now it is *classic*. [37]

Astrid GYNNILD: That sounds like a good conclusion from your side on this. I saw somewhere you had written that you are happily retired from university. I am very excited to hear what is going to happen next from your side with GTM. What are you working on?

Odis SIMMONS: Right now, I am working on being relieved with what I have done with the book and waiting for whatever that brings about. My wife, Joe, has been

a GTM widow for years. I turned 81 last October. I cannot fool myself and think I am going to be around for another 50 years. But I have delayed maintenance around my house for so long, I have got to take care of this place. We live in the woods, in the middle of three acres. If anything sits for more than five minutes, it is going to rust, mold, mildew or grow moss on it. That is the nature of what is going on outside my house. So right now, I am trying to focus more on that than on GTM. But it is hard for me. At this point, I do not want to read people's texts and review them and do the stuff I did for years working with students. I love, absolutely, as you can see, love to talk about GTM. I guess one of my hopes is that people will pick up on the power of grounded action and grounded therapy and try it. I think I might be more inclined to talk to people about that than GTM. There are a lot of people, like you, who could talk about classic GTM very, very effectively. But there are not that many, you know. Mitch OLSON and Michael RAFFANTI (2006), two of my former students, they have done grounded action, they know it (OLSON, 2008; OLSON & RAFFANTI, 2006). But there just are not a lot of people who have tried that. I am hoping that the chapters in my book inspire people to give it a try. Just like GTM, it has relevance, and it works! [38]

Astrid GYNNILD: Absolutely! Your chapters on grounded action and grounded therapy are truly inspirational, as are the rest of the chapters in "Experiencing Grounded Theory" (SIMMONS, 2022). And our conversation is coming to an end now. Is there anything that you would like to say that you have not said yet?

Odis SIMMONS: Let it emerge. Just do it, let it emerge. And I guess, for the people who may be reading this: Teach it. You know, I did love to inspire classic grounded theorists to find opportunities to teach it. The reason I feel that my professional life has been successful is because I have taught it, taught it, taught it. And the more you teach it, the more apt you are to find people who find classic GTM to be not only less scary; they do not need the preconceptions. I think they will do better if they want to do classic than if they use constructivist, because of the preconceptions and the limits on analysis (GLASER, 2002). It is important for classic grounded theorists as well as for constructivist grounded theorists to understand the differences, teach the differences, and let people make an informed choice. And do not be going at one another. It is all good research. It is just that, in my personal view, classic is better research. That is my personal view. But there is room for everybody. [39]

Astrid GYNNILD: That is a good message. Thank you.

Odis SIMMONS: And have fun. Have fun. It is fun. You can see, I am enjoying the heck out of this. Because GTM can be very enjoyable once you just let it emerge and give up the fear! [40]

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