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Paradigms, Praxis, Problems, and Promise: Grounded Theory in Counseling Psychology Research

Ruth E. Fassinger
University of Maryland

In this article, the author presents an overview of the qualitative research approach termed *grounded theory* (B. G. Glaser, 1978, 1992; B. G. Glaser & A. L. Strauss, 1967; A. L. Strauss, 1987; A. L. Strauss & J. Corbin, 1990, 1998). The author first locates the method conceptually and paradigmatically (paradigms) and then outlines the procedures for implementing it and judging its quality (praxis). The author follows with a discussion of selected issues that arise in using the approach (problems) and concludes by noting the appropriateness of grounded theory for counseling psychology research (promise).

In 1986, just as I was finishing my graduate degree, I was invited to write an article on structural equation modeling for the first special issue of this journal ever to be published (Wampold, 1987). I was quite enamored with structural equation modeling at the time, and I was most eager to share this quantitative approach with the professional community that I was about to join. Now, in 2004, I find myself once again invited to write an article on methodology for this journal, but it is a methodology of a very different sort, and I write with a very different voice. Nonetheless, I am excited once again about presenting an approach to research that I believe offers great promise in addressing some of the most important and pressing questions in our field.

I begin with this observation because I think that my experience typifies a growing trend among my counseling psychology colleagues toward an embrace of alternative methodologies, that is, approaches to research that are not rooted in the positivist tradition that has characterized psychology since its inception (and very likely formed the basis of the research training that most of us received). While I still very much value and use structural equation modeling (and, of course, other quantitative methods) in my own work, I have been compelled—by the research questions and populations of interest to me—to seek out alternatives to these methods. And, perhaps like others trained as "dust bowl empiricists" who are discovering qualitative approaches for the first time, my understanding of, and comfort in, a completely different paradigm has evolved slowly over the past decade as I attempted to bridge different assumptive worlds, learning through trial and error and stretching the limits of my own scholarly credulity. Thus, I come to this work with that unique mixture of zeal and bewilderment that characterizes the novice, and it is from this perspective that I offer this article on grounded theory (GT).

In this article, I first locate the method historically, paradigmatically, and conceptually, noting its particular strength as an approach that bridges other qualitative methods (paradigms). I then outline how the approach is practiced in some detail, including the assumptions and debates that undergird its procedures and the standards by which its quality can be judged (praxis). I follow this with a brief discussion of selected methodological and practical issues that arise in attempting to implement the approach (problems). I conclude by noting the appropriateness of the GT approach for counseling psychology research (promise). Consistent with the qualitative focus on researcher reflexivity, I use the first person and include examples from my own work throughout the discussion to highlight my positionality as a GT researcher.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ruth E. Fassinger, Counseling and Personnel Services, Benjamin Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742. E-mail: rf36@umail.umd.edu

GT: Paradigms

GT has its roots in sociology and originally grew out of the collaboration of Glaser and Strauss (1967), who sought to develop a research methodology based on the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism, a sociological approach developed circa 1920–1950 that posits fluid and dynamic processes of interpersonal relating in which meaning is created within and derived from those social interactions (Kendall, 1999). It is assumed that people construct their realities through social interactions in which they use shared symbols (e.g., words, clothing, gestures) to communicate meaning. Grounded theorists interrogate the meanings created in these social relationships, attempting to discover how groups of people define their realities on the basis of their understandings of interpersonal interactions (Cutcliffe, 2000). Following their 1967 introduction of GT, Glaser and Strauss continued developing and articulating the approach (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987) and also applied it in the health arena (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1975). However, in the early 1990s, they diverged sharply in their perspectives regarding the theory-generation aspects of GT (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), a controversy (to which I return later) that has generated much debate among grounded theorists attempting to implement the approach appropriately. GT has grown from its sociological roots to be adopted widely by researchers in a variety of fields, particularly in health and nursing but also in education and business as well as a number of psychological specialties such as social, clinical/counseling, feminist, organizational, and environmental psychology (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). Indeed, GT has been described as "the most influential paradigm for qualitative research in the social sciences today"

(Denzin, 1997, as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 487), and it now has a journal (*Grounded Theory Review*) and a Web site devoted specifically to it. Several extant variations of GT currently are being practiced (e.g., see Annells, 1997), not to mention the large number of researchers who utilize elements of the method (e.g., coding procedures) to carry out investigations that may or may not be true GT studies or even qualitative in their intent or paradigmatic foundation (Cutcliffe, 2000; Kendall, 1999; Parry, 1998).

The GT approach is so named because its ultimate aim is to produce innovative theory that is "grounded" in data collected from participants on the basis of the complexities of their lived experiences in a social context. Theory is derived inductively through an iterative, concurrent process of data collection, coding, conceptualizing, and theorizing, wherein new data are constantly compared to emerging concepts until no new themes, categories, or relationships are being discovered, at which point the properties of, and relationships among, constructs are specified in the form of a substantive theory about the social behavior under investigation. To explain in GT terminology, a constant comparison method of analysis is employed, using (open, axial, and selective) coding of data garnered through theoretical sampling procedures in which continued sampling is based on the emergent theory constantly being verified and modified, until theoretical saturation is reached and a GT is articulated. The approach is considered reflexive in that the influences and processes of the researcher are made explicit, and this reflexivity is captured in auditing and memo-writing procedures, which involve monitoring the researcher's analytic decisions and documenting the researcher's emerging theoretical ideas, respectively.

Both Ponterotto (2005) and Morrow and Smith (2000) place most current formulations of GT within a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm. This is due, presumably, to GT's ontological acceptance of multiple, socially constructed realities and truths, its epistemological dependence on the transactional connection between participant and researcher to construct deep meanings mutually, its axiological focus on explicit description of the expectations and interpretive lenses of the researcher, and its rhetorical convention of expressing theoretical postulates by giving voice to participants' experiences by means of extensive quotations. Ponterotto, however, acknowledges that there is debate regarding the paradigmatic home of the GT approach, and contemporary grounded theorists offer a range of perspectives, from Charmaz (2000), who finds the Glaser/Strauss/Corbin versions of GT mired in positivist rhetoric and advocates a more obviously constructivist GT (see also Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994, 2003), to Rennie (1999, 2000), who asserts that GT begs the realism–relativism issue and can best be understood as methodological hermeneutics. I would argue (consistent with Annells, 1997; Charmaz, 2000; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994, 2003) that, depending on the way that GT is conceptualized and used, it may range from essentially postpositivist to poststructural, and even critical, in its overall intent and impact.

For example, an investigation conceptualized as a GT study in which constructs were derived from data collected by means of structured telephone interviews as a follow up to a Web-based survey and analyzed into categories that are presented with minimal attention to interrelationships among constructs falls nearer to the postpositivist end of the continuum. The interview follow up does at least create contact between participant and researcher, acknowledging that no one data collection method is perfect and that triangulation might result in discovery of additional information. Moreover, the use of a structured interview and the detailed coding and categorizing procedures of GT attempt to bring specificity to data gathered in a more natural setting. Both of these are essentially postpositivist aims (see also Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). The main shortcoming of this kind of investigation, in terms of maximizing the potential of GT methods, is that it fails to incorporate the richness of possibility for theory generation, the hallmark of the GT approach.

On the other hand, a study conceptualized as a GT investigation in which data were gathered from multiple samples of diverse individuals through lengthy and comprehensive face-to-face interviews, where articulation of tentative theoretical frameworks guided the collection of additional data from subsequent samples, where analytic procedures continually involved participants and were directed toward articulation of substantive theory, and where the overarching goal was to bring about social change by giving voice to and empowering the marginalized can be seen as much closer to poststructural or critical theory in the focus on power imbalances due to oppression and the ultimate goal of social change. Although I have used postpositivist versions of the GT approach in my own work where limitations were dictated by situational constraints, it is the poststructural/critical (and specifically feminist) version of the GT approach that most effectively addresses populations (diverse women), issues (challenges to career development based on marginalization and oppression), and goals (a socially just world) that are of interest to me personally and professionally.

Thus, the adaptability of the GT approach positions it uniquely as a paradigmatic bridge between postpositivist, interpretive/constructivist, and poststructural or critical approaches to qualitative research. Researchers comfortable with the traditional "received" view of science can find in GT a way to preserve some of their most cherished beliefs about the value of experimental methods in psychology while venturing slowly into more naturalistic approaches, embarking on a path that Charmaz (2000) labels "objectivist grounded theory" because it acknowledges the "obvious and subtle positivistic premises" (p. 510) that permeate classical GT. On the other hand, those prepared to abandon positivist models in favor of more radical reinterpretations of the scientific enterprise can locate themselves in any number of positions along the qualitative paradigmatic continuum (e.g., constructivist, postmodern) while using a GT approach (see Annells, 1997). Particularly for counseling psychologists interested in diversity and social justice aims, GT can be integrated easily with poststructural and critical (e.g., feminist) approaches to address some of society's most pressing problems.

GT: Praxis

In the actual practice of conceptualizing and implementing a GT study, it should be remembered that ontological, epistemological, and axiological considerations influence the methodological processes of the GT approach, which can be represented in a variety of forms (e.g., see Annells, 1997). For the purposes of this discussion, I describe the method as outlined most recently by Strauss and Corbin (1998) while incorporating aspects of other perspectives and debates regarding the GT approach (e.g., Charmaz, 2000;

Glaser, 1992; Kendall, 1999; Rennie, 2000). I also include brief mention of my own experiences in conducting GT studies and use specific examples from a recently published study of the career development of women with disabilities (Noonan et al., 2004) to illustrate the process. I discuss conceptualizing and locating a study paradigmatically, collecting data, coding/interpreting data (including saturating categories), developing theory, theoretical sampling, memo writing and auditing, and evaluating the quality of a study.

Conceptualizing the Study

I already have outlined some of the paradigmatic considerations in using a GT approach, but it would be difficult to overstate their importance. Annells (1997) presented myriad methodological modifications that might be considered in organizing a GT study based on varying aims but emphasized the importance of first determining (a) the paradigmatic or philosophical underpinnings of the inquiry (i.e., postpositivist, interpretive/constructivist, postmodern/poststructural/critical), (b) the theoretical assumptions that form the foundation of the inquiry (likely rooted in some form of symbolic interactionism whereby social context is centralized in the inquiry), (c) the intended product of the inquiry (e.g., a substantive theory vs. a constructed interpretation of a list of categories), and (d) how the inquiry will address the dual problems of representation (of the "other" in the work) and legitimation (standards that will be used for judging the rigor of the study). As an example of these considerations, our study of women with disabilities was conceptualized through the assumptive lenses of critical (specifically feminist) theory, with specific interest in how women with disabilities develop and implement satisfying work within a social context presumed to be challenging due to antidisability prejudice and other forms of oppression related to gender, ethnicity, and the like. We intended to generate some form of theoretical framework based on the narratives of approximately two dozen women (see Creswell, 1998, who recommends 20–30 interviews per study), and we selected participants who were diverse in age, race/ethnicity, type of disability, sexual orientation, occupation, and family variables. Our overarching goal was to represent their experiences clearly and effectively (e.g., using their own words) so that practical benefits (e.g., understanding of an often-ignored population, improved career services) might ensue. We used a team approach because I believe that the diversity of perspectives and the opportunities to manage unwanted bias contribute to the rigor of research and also because (consistent with critical/feminist aims) I typically use research teams to provide mentoring and support to diverse female graduate and undergraduate students.

Decisions also must be made about the extent to which the researcher should become familiar with the existing literature prior to initiating the study. Although recommendations vary, there seems to be a consensus toward minimal familiarity with the literature in the early stages of conceptualizing the study and collecting data. The researcher must strike a delicate balance between enough knowledge to focus the sampling and data collection effectively and yet not so much immersion in existing perspectives that the investigation becomes circumscribed by preordained constructs and limited expectations (see Cutcliffe, 2000, and Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003, for excellent discussions of this issue). In my own work, there is usually a paucity of literature from which to draw, and in our study of women with disabilities, we initially formulated our investigation by borrowing from literatures in antidisability prejudice, rehabilitation, and women's career development more generally. The GT approach assumes increasing incorporation of the scholarly literature as data analysis (and, specifically, theory development) proceeds. This analytic process typically is manifested in published articles as an explicit comparison of the findings of the present study to the existing literature, for example, noting that women with disabilities face difficulties in accessing social support that are similar to the those described in many studies of women's career development but that their struggle is exacerbated by physical limitations and the fragmented nature of disability communities (Noonan et al., 2004).

Personal struggles with my own research and mentoring of students in qualitative approaches have heightened my awareness regarding the importance of the attempt at the outset of an investigation to locate oneself and others into a qualitative mind set, especially given that everything most of us have been (and still are being) taught keeps moving us assumptively into the positivist domain. Even when I am personally confident regarding the direction my work is taking, it is easy to be sidetracked by student questions (e.g., "Have I really read enough literature yet?") or criticisms of colleagues (e.g., "How can you possibly generalize from 21 participants?") that come from the positivist paradigms in which we all are so conversant. I am asked frequently to justify my work using the rhetoric of a paradigm that is antithetical to my scholarly aims (and, in fact, the writing style in my first published GT articles exhibits this conflict). In short, it is difficult to stay "grounded" in GT!

Collecting Data

Charmaz (2000) pointed out that descriptions of GT methods have given scant attention to data collection, focusing rather on data analytic procedures. Thus, there has been little to guide GT researchers regarding the amount and kind of data that might be gathered. Data most commonly consist of narratives of some sort, usually transcribed interviews or transcriptions of observational data, but also can include other kinds of documents (e.g., field notes, clinical case notes, historical documents, organizational reports, autobiographies, service logs). Moreover, as data analysis progresses, researcher self-reflective memos, existing literature, participant feedback, and outsider perspectives also become part of the data set and are brought into the analysis (see Polkinghorne, 2005, for a thorough discussion of data collection).

Given that many GT researchers use interviewing as the primary data collection method (indeed, Creswell, 1998, asserts that it is the method of choice for GT), it is unfortunate that so little has been written about interviewing techniques and decisions in GT. For noteworthy exceptions, see Patton (2002), who has presented extremely detailed suggestions and guidelines for conducting interviews more generally, and Rennie (1995, 1996), who has written very personal accounts of the complications of doing GT research on psychotherapy process. Although there are wide variations in the intent and structure of interviews (see Patton, 2002), the approach to interviewing most often reported in the GT literature appears to use at least some degree of structure in organizing and presenting questions to participants but allows them to tell their stories largely in their own words as they react to mostly

open-ended questions (followed by probes or prompts when necessary) delivered in a flexible interviewing style on the part of the researcher and in a context of established rapport. To avoid imposing constructions on participants, prompts are minimal and more related to process (e.g., encouraging more elaboration) than to content (e.g., paraphrasing) (Rennie, 1995). Strauss and Corbin (1998) have suggested a funnel-like approach, moving from broader to more specific questions during the course of the interview (presumably in an effort to clarify participants' earlier statements). Rennie concurs with this idea and applies it to studies involving repeated interviews with participants by recommending increasingly directive questions based on an emerging theory being verified by the researchers.

It also is worth noting (although rarely mentioned explicitly in the literature) that pilot testing the interview questions and structure is very useful in preventing subsequent confusion or truncated responses from participants. In addition, in the spirit of including participants as fully as possible throughout the research process, it is desirable to allow them to verify the accuracy of their transcripts and clarify the data they have provided. This is not without complication, however, as participants sometimes react negatively to seeing their actual words and verbal eccentricities depicted on paper and want to correct their transcripts in unnecessary ways (e.g., modifying their grammar or correcting the spelling of names that will be deleted in published work anyway). To illustrate these interviewing points using our study of women with disabilities, we pilot tested our interview protocol using several women who fit our sample demographics but who also were well known by us and therefore ineligible for participation. Our final interview questions funneled information by first asking participants to broadly describe the career path that had brought them to their present position, and we then followed up with more specific questions regarding educational experiences, family and cultural background, challenges and barriers to their careers, supports and facilitative factors in their careers, the influence (if any) of their disability on their careers, and a number of other more detailed questions. We mailed participants copies of their transcripts for correction and clarification and incorporated any additional information into the data record.

Interviewing (particularly in lengthy or repeated face-to-face encounters) necessitates attention to a much more complex set of interpersonal demands than does simply gathering complete information from the participant (see Haverkamp, 2005, for extensive discussion of the axiological and ethical considerations in gathering qualitative data). In general, the more extensive the contact between researcher and participant, the more unstructured the interview questions, and the more difficult or threatening the issue being discussed, the greater the likelihood for unpredictable narratives and unexpected self-disclosure (thus rendering informed consent moot; Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999). Indeed, it is not uncommon in my own work for participants to begin an interview (that clearly is going to focus on their experiences as women in the workplace) by asserting that they are probably poor choices because they "haven't had it as bad" as other women, but then to find themselves tearfully relating incidents of egregious mistreatment soon into the interview. Knowing that the women in whose lives I am interested may well tap into emotional pain in giving voice to their experiences, I have wrestled a great deal with how to design and conduct interviews appropriately, to negotiate what Fine (1994) refers to as "the ethics of involvement and the ethics of detachment" (p. 75), especially as my graduate students often are the interviewers. It is tempting to me personally—both as an experienced feminist clinician and as a scholar with presumed expertise in some arenas—to fall into quasi-therapeutic or at least educative responses to participants' content, and there is a difficult conflict between my need to gather data from participants unbiased by my own projections of important issues and my strong belief in empowerment through support and education, which some participants clearly need. One of the ways in which I address this dilemma (and a strategy beginning to be noted in the literature as a kind of debriefing; e.g., see Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999) is to explain to the participant that, although I must move on to information gathering in that moment, I will return to the painful issue at the conclusion of the interview; we then discuss it after the tape recorder is turned off, and I try to ensure that she has helpful resources. However, my own ambivalence about this practice is revealed by the fact that it is only recently that I have encouraged its use by my graduate students, and only when I am absolutely certain of their knowledge and skill.

Another issue to consider in planning and conducting interviews is the extent to which the researcher is acknowledged as a cocreator of the interaction (e.g., Fine, 1994; Patton, 2002), and this differs depending on the philosophical underpinnings of one's approach (e.g., a critical/feminist standpoint assumes and obviates the researcher's values and perspectives in both the process and products of research). Manifestations of this issue are found, for example, in discussions of the need to avoid leading participants with biased questions and prompts. Rennie (1995) cites the example of a colleague who discards interview transcripts if they are judged to be too actively influenced by the researcher's questions and prompts, an admirable if somewhat expensive (and perhaps impractical) solution to a thorny problem. Perhaps most crucial to ensuring acceptable interviews is the thorough training of interviewers. In my own work, for example, this training involves each interviewer on my research team completing the following sequence: (a) learning the GT approach and the basics of conducting an interview, including the distinction between research and clinical interviewing; (b) reading transcripts and listening to tapes of former interviewers in similar studies I have conducted; (c) practicing interviews with research team members; (d) conducting two to four pilot interviews with participants who will not be included in the final sample (we discuss each interview extensively during team meetings, and I require team members to listen to at least two pilot tapes made by others and provide feedback); and (e) continuing to discuss each interview as the actual study is implemented, with several team members listening to a tape if there is any question raised about its adequacy. In addition, interviewer reactions to each interview are recorded in detail on a field notes form developed for each study, and we return to these data in the analysis process.

Debates about interviewing also occur regarding whether the researcher must be a member of the group or groups with whom he or she is interacting. Much of my own interviewing is with populations who have been oppressed or marginalized in some way, and this has led me to reflect deeply on the process of establishing rapport and trust. Initially in my work, I attempted to ensure some demographic match between interviewers and participants (resulting in expensive and unwieldy logistics when I sent

pairs of researchers to interview lesbians of color because few members of my team were both lesbians and women of color!). However, wanting to talk to women with disabilities and having no women with obvious physical/sensory disabilities on my team forced me to consider other ways of establishing trust. Over time, I have come to acknowledge much more clearly and strongly the subjectivity and complexity inherent in the relationship between the researcher/interviewer and the participant, and I have become increasingly comfortable with practices that function to enhance the relationship, for example, culturally appropriate gestures of respect such as offering small gifts to participants (see Gomez et al., 2001) or incorporating personal assistants or sign language interpreters directly into the conversation during an interview (e.g., Noonan et al., 2004).

Coding/Interpreting Data and Articulating Theory

In the GT approach, data are coded according to an increasingly abstracted process aimed at the generation of a theoretical statement about the phenomenon under investigation, and the detailed coding procedures made explicit by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) are accepted and used widely among qualitative researchers, even if those researchers do not espouse other aspects of the GT approach. Although the three types of coding (open, axial, selective) are discussed sequentially in most GT accounts, they actually occur recursively according to a method of constant comparison, wherein each new piece of data is compared to existing data to generate coherent categories of meaning. Charmaz (2000) has noted that the constant comparative method includes (a) comparing data from different individuals, (b) comparing data from individuals to their own data at different points in their narratives, (c) comparing incidents with other incidents, and (d) comparing categories with other categories. As the overarching goal is to create a theory grounded in the lived experiences of the participants, the point of coding is to interpret/construct meaning out of narrative data from a number of individuals or incidents.

Open coding. The first level of coding is open coding, in which transcribed data are broken down into units of meaning (concepts), labeled (often with words close to those of the participant), and interrogated (for alternative interpretations, conditions surrounding the meaning, and gaps left unfilled)—the first steps in theorizing from the data. The size of concepts or units of meaning is disputable; Charmaz (2000) describes line-by-line coding as originally outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Morrow and Smith (2000) specify units of meaning as small as a word and as large as a paragraph, and Rennie (1995) reports working with units of meaning as large as a page or two of data. My own experience includes a range from several words to several pages but most typically several lines or a short paragraph (e.g., Richie et al., 1997). These coded units of meaning are compared to other coded units of meaning, the concepts gradually being grouped together into categories that encompass those concepts. As additional data are gathered, coded concepts continue to be compared to existing data and (re)categorized; the categories constantly undergo modification to incorporate new information and are continually interrogated for coherence and explanatory capacity. In my own work, this often translates into new category lists generated weekly, with all relevant concepts (identified by participant initials and a sequential record number for data management purposes) listed under each category.

For example, transcripts from our study of women with disabilities contained the following narrative incidents from three different women responding to a broad question about how they thought about their disability:

> The adjustment process is a lifetime project. (AB, 47)
>
> I should have picked up the pieces and made the adjustment, and not dwell on it. The problem is that the rest of the world is dwelling on it. Every time you go out there, you are reacting to all this ridiculous attitude problem, the architectural barriers, the financial discrimination, and this place will not hire you and this company will not insure you and that potential lover will not look at you . . . So that reopens the wound maybe 20 times a day and yet you are supposed to have made the adjustment. You have to work through a lot of stuff in a continuing way. (CD, 107)
>
> There is no adjustment process. I know that probably sounds strange to somebody. There is no sense of not being whole if this is how you are born. I suspect that if somebody were born with no legs at all, they would still have a sense of themselves as being whole. (EF, 23)

Through an open coding procedure, the first unit of meaning might be given a concept label of "adjusting to disability occurs over a lifetime," the second might be given a concept label of "adjusting to disability is an ongoing process," and the third might be given a concept label of "no adjustment process due to being born with a disability." In successively abstracted categorization, all three statements are incorporated into a broader category labeled "adjustment to disability." Each level of abstraction in categorization is more encompassing than the previous level, and each can account for all variations of the concepts listed under it (in this case, all statements are subsumed under a general category that includes various units of meaning related to adjusting to disability).

Axial coding. The second level of coding in a GT analysis is axial coding, in which relationships among categories are organized and further explicated, grouping them into more encompassing (key) categories that subsume several (sub)categories; thus, axial coding puts the fractured data back together in the form of categories and their interrelationships, the next step in generating theory. A constant comparison method is used, with four different kinds of comparisons: (a) comparing and relating subcategories to categories, (b) comparing categories to new data, (c) expanding the density and complexity of the categories by describing their properties (attributes of a category) and dimensions (ordering of the properties along a continuum), and (d) exploring variations (e.g., disconfirming instances) in the data and reconceptualizing the categories and their relationships as necessary. Data collection and incorporation cease when categorical saturation is reached, that is, when no new information is being discovered about the categories or their properties, when the categories are dense and complex enough to capture all of the variations in participants' experiences, and when the relationships among categories have been delineated satisfactorily.

Returning to the previous example, adjustment to disability eventually was sorted, through axial coding, into a broader key category labeled "disability identity," which subsumed both the category and the original concept under consideration (as well as other categories such as "acquisition/development of disability").

At this point, identifying the properties and dimensions of the categories becomes important, and although Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) offer fairly minimal guidance in propertizing and dimensionalizing the categories under consideration in the nascent theory, this step is critical in helping the researcher to consider what categories actually mean in terms of individual participants (e.g., whether they fit participants' experiences as described) and what the relationships are among categories. Properties refer to the attributes or characteristics of a category or key category, and dimensions refer to the relative positions of derived data (from observations or participants) along a continuum. For example, the key category "disability identity" contained a number of properties, including one labeled "acquisition/development of disability" and another labeled "disability adjustment process." Dimensions of the first property included a continuum ranging from "congenital/birth" to "acquired in adulthood," and dimensions of the second ranged from "no adjustment" to "ongoing adjustment." Observations/participants then can be placed along the continuum, providing a reasonably clear picture of the data.

In my own work (where participants are identified by initials), when we propertize and dimensionalize our (key) categories and place participants along our continua, we can see with great clarity the patterns for each individual participant across all properties in that key category, as well as the patterns in the overall sample. Returning to our example, AB acquired her disability through an accident in early adolescence, and CD slowly became disabled through childhood due to a degenerative disease; both were placed toward the middle of the continuum for the first property (acquisition/development of disability), and their statements suggested placement at the "ongoing" end of the continuum for the second property (disability adjustment process). By contrast, EF, whose disability was congenital and who specified no adjustment process, was placed at the appropriate ends of the continua for those properties. Visual inspection of the patterns when all participants were placed on the properties and dimensions rendered very clear in this sample the connection between whether a disability was congenital or acquired and the extent to which the participant indicated an adjustment process as being important.

Recall that the point of propertizing and dimensionalizing in axial coding is to help identify and specify interrelationships among categories and key categories to formulate substantive theory that fits the experiences described by the sample. In our example, the key category "disability identity" was grouped with several other similar key categories ("gender identity," "racial/ethnic/cultural identity") to compose yet a broader category, or construct, labeled "identity constructs." Examples of other constructs that emerged in the axial coding process include "disability impact," "family influences," and "career attitudes and behaviors," and each subsumed several key categories; disability impact, for example, included the key categories "antidisability prejudice/ableism," "stress and coping," and "health and personal care."

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) have advised conducting the advanced phases of axial coding in terms of a rather elaborate (and controversial) paradigm model involving conditions, context, actions/interactions, and consequences. The model is designed to help researchers think more systematically and complexly about their data and to examine more clearly the cause-and-effect implications of their emergent theories. However, the proscriptive nature of this level of the coding process has been criticized by Glaser (1992) and others (e.g., see Kendall, 1999) as imposing a structure on theorizing that is inconsistent with the notion of allowing theory to emerge from the data. Much of the debate about these more recent articulations of GT has revolved around the issue of theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is defined by Wilson and Hutchinson (1996) as a researcher attribute that combines interpersonal perceptiveness and conceptual thinking and is exhibited in an overall posture of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. In terms of utilizing GT methods, theoretical sensitivity is assumed to be reflected in how theory is derived from the data and the extent to which its generation can be proscribed through formal procedures such as the axial coding procedures introduced by Strauss and Corbin. The specificity and discovery orientation of their axial coding procedure is identified by some scholars as being excessively verificational in its use of an inductive–deductive cycle of theory generation and theory testing, and Glaser judged it to be a sharp movement away from the original inductive procedures of allowing theory to emerge from the data. Indeed, Glaser contended that Strauss and Corbin's axial coding led simply to conceptual description and a preconceived product rather than to substantive theory.

Many argue for a middle ground, integration, or reformulation of the opposing positions (e.g., see Cutcliffe, 2000; Kendall, 1999; Rennie, 2000), and the extent to which GT researchers actually use all aspects of axial coding as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) is variable. My own work exhibits gradual loosening of adherence to this structure over time, as I came to wonder whether the similarities among my nascent theories generated from different populations were simply artifacts of structures imposed in the axial coding process. Nonetheless, the structure does stimulate the researcher to ponder the context and conditions that give rise to the categories, the social actions and interactions that are implied by those categories, and the consequences that ensue from those actions, so it has value as a catalyst for critical thinking even if not followed absolutely.

Selective coding. The final stage of analysis in GT involves the creation of substantive theory, although there is great variability in the actual products of GT studies as well as considerable disagreement about what constitutes an acceptable theory. This analytic stage begins with "selective" coding, in which a central or "core" category is selected that integrates all of the other categories into "an explanatory whole" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 146). A core "story" is generated, which is a brief narrative of the most important aspects of the data, subsuming all of the other categories and articulating their relationships to the core story. As in previous stages of analysis, the emerging theory is constantly compared to the data to ensure that it is grounded in participants' experiences, and it also is compared to the existing literature to enrich understanding and explanatory power. To aid in theory generation, Strauss and Corbin advise the creation of a "conditional/consequential matrix," an analytic diagram of concentric circles of influence designed to stimulate researchers' thinking about the relationships among micro and macro conditions, actions, and consequences in the articulation of substantive theory; the point of the matrix is to highlight context and make "explicit linkages between interaction and conditions that affect it" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 188). Creswell (1998) notes, however, that this step of analysis rarely is reported in published studies, and presumably, it is subject to the same criticisms as those of axial

coding—that the detailed procedures involved in creating the matrix are excessively proscriptive and therefore antithetical to the aims of inductively derived theory.

Returning to the study of women with disabilities, our selective coding procedures involved the selection of a core category/construct labeled the "dynamic self." The core story of this category/construct highlighted the contributions to the dynamic self of its key components, namely, "identity constructs," "personality characteristics," and "belief in self." When the core category/construct and its story had been enunciated, the process of attempting to define the interrelationships among the core and other categories/constructs began. Each team member created a visual representation or model of her ideas, and many hours of team discussion, debate, and reformulation ensued while we together created the best visual depiction of the interrelationships among constructs (and their subcategories). During this time, we repeatedly checked each participant's original narrative against the emerging theory (in practice, this consisted of each team member becoming an expert on the transcripts of two or three participants), and we also searched the scholarly literature for confirming and disconfirming evidence. Although we did not use Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) matrix specifically, we did focus explicitly on the contextual conditions in which our participants' reported experiences were embedded, and these were incorporated into the final model in the form of "sociopolitical context," which included the key categories "social movements" and "advocacy." When we completed this final stage of analysis, we had created a model of the career development of women with disabilities; the model had the dynamic self at its core, surrounded by six domains of influence (family, career, social, developmental, disability, and sociopolitical), and the model was conceptualized as dynamic (i.e., constantly changing) and mutual (i.e., the six domains both influencing and being influenced by the self).

The last step in GT research is presenting the results of the investigation for public appraisal, and there are rhetorical conventions that typify different qualitative approaches (see Creswell, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). Reporting of GT studies typically includes fairly extensive quotations from participants, presumably to demonstrate the grounding of the theory in participants' lived experiences and to highlight their unique voices. The method of representing participants themselves is variable; sometimes pseudonyms are used after brief descriptions of each participant are presented, sometimes participants are identified throughout by demographics of interest in the study (e.g., "the blind lawyer"), and sometimes representative stories are created out of the composite experiences of several similar participants. As noted previously, the actual product of the investigation may vary. Creswell describes products such as lists of propositions or hypotheses, visual models, narrative summaries, and representative stories, but published studies include a full range of products, from a simple list of categories derived using only the first coding stages of the GT method to fully articulated substantive theories.

There is, however, debate about what sort of product can legitimately claim to be a theory, and Glaser has decried the current preponderance in the literature of "theory bits" that never are fully developed into coherent theoretical statements (Glaser, 2000, as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 491). Although Glaser and Strauss's early (1967) work distinguished between "substantive theory" generated from one GT study and more "formal theory" developed from multiple GT studies, this definition of formal theory may be confusing to researchers versed in the terminology used for traditional conceptual theories (e.g., personality or counseling theories). According to the most recent definition of Strauss and Corbin (1998), a substantive theory must include "a set of well-developed categories" that are "systematically interrelated through statements of relationship" into a "framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, . . . or other phenomenon" and the statements of relationship must "explain who, what, when, where, why, how, and with what consequences an event occurs" (p. 22). Thus, a theory must offer a coherent, contextualized explanation (vs. merely a contextual description) of a phenomenon, and interrelationships among the constructs undergirding the theory must be articulated; moreover, a GT must emanate directly and clearly from the data. However, both Glaser and Strauss, in their various writings, have acknowledged flexibility in determining when data analysis is complete and have asserted that the emergent theory is always open to testing and modification. In my own GT work, the articulation of theory typically is the ultimate goal; however, while I generally follow most of the recommended steps in theory generation quite painstakingly, my training-induced reverence for traditional formal theory usually prevents me from describing my own clumsy formulations as anything other than tentative models or frameworks.

Theoretical Sampling

One of the hallmarks of the GT approach is the use of theoretical sampling, a process in which continued sampling occurs concurrently with data analysis that has commenced immediately upon receipt of the data; the introduction of new data is directed by the gaps, unanswered questions, and underdeveloped ideas in the emerging theory. The point of theoretical sampling is to explicate and verify the categories and their interrelationships that are gradually emerging through the coding process—to refine the theoretical ideas—and the value of early data analysis lies in its capacity to probe the emerging theory with specific cases or incidents that will lead to greater clarity, density comprehensiveness, and explanatory capacity of the theory. The underlying assumption that sampling will cease when categorical/theoretical saturation is reached implies an avoidance of oversampling, that is, unnecessary redundancy in the data due to excessive numbers of observations or participants.

In many GT interview-based studies, theoretical sampling takes the form of interviewing additional participants or returning to previous participants for clarification and elaboration of earlier interviews. However, it should be noted that sampling in the theoretical sense also includes continued return to the existing data to select incidents, scenes, or events (e.g., negative cases) with which to interrogate the emerging theory and incorporates information gleaned from other elements of the data collection process (e.g., participant feedback, documents such as researcher memos, existing research literature) (Charmaz, 2000). Thus, additional sampling does not always depend on new observations or participants to saturate categories, although this is, in large part, dependent on the overall sampling procedures undertaken at the outset of the study. Although most GT researchers acknowledge the importance of theoretical sampling, there is some disagreement regarding the timing and extent of theoretical sampling within the context

of an overall sampling procedure, based on the concern that the directional nature of theoretical sampling introduced too early in the study may bring the analysis to closure prematurely (see Charmaz, 2000); this seems especially likely with very small samples (e.g., five or six participants or observations). Contemporary thinking appears to advocate purposeful sampling in the early stages of the study (collecting initial data from an information-rich group of participants), followed later by theoretical sampling, as theory verification necessitates more focused information (e.g., see Charmaz, 2000; Cutcliffe, 2000).

In my own work, I have chosen to use criterion-based/maximum variation sampling to identify as demographically diverse a sample as I can within the population of interest to me, assuming that I will get the widest range of experience possible within that group; I also oversample, having decided that the risk of redundancy is acceptable to me given other constraints on my work (e.g., limited windows of interviewing time), and I conduct interviews that are sufficiently lengthy to produce the depth and breadth that I think I will need (e.g., Gomez et al., 2001; Noonan et al., 2004). As coding progresses and new data are constantly compared to existing data, I am able to return to interviewees for additional clarification and information (and sometimes do), but in practice, this rarely is necessary given the (relatively) large, diverse, and comprehensive data sets that I have amassed. Theoretical sampling is accomplished through the continuous addition of new participant data until saturation occurs; this generally is obvious long before all of my participant data are incorporated, but I always include all data (even if redundant) into my analyses, thus ensuring completeness and allaying my fears of having missed important information as I verify emergent theory.

Memo Writing and Auditing

The GT approach is explicit in the outlining of procedures that make researcher reflexivity apparent. Memo writing on the part of the researcher occurs continually throughout the research process and provides a record of conceptual, procedural, and analytic questions and decisions. Memo writing captures the evolving ideas, assumptions, hunches, uncertainties, insights, feelings, and choices the researcher makes as a study is implemented and as a theory is developed, providing a means for making transparent the interpretive, constructive processes of the researcher. Memos become part of the data record and are incorporated into the analytic procedures as well as into the final products (e.g., articles, books) resulting from the inquiry. In my own work, memos consist of ongoing notes kept by each individual researcher as well as detailed minutes from each team meeting that record in detail the discussions and decisions made in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interrogating our data.

Although typically discussed in terms of inquiry rigor rather than researcher reflexivity, the process of auditing is yet another way that the interpretive lenses of the researcher are obviated and scrutinized in GT (indeed, in any qualitative study). Strauss and Corbin (1998) make only passing reference to the "audit trail" that consists of the sum of the documents related to a GT inquiry, but most GT researchers incorporate and describe some sort of auditing procedures used in their studies. Auditing usually occurs at two levels: peer debriefing and inquiry auditing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing involves checking and interrogating the researcher's coding, categorizing, propertizing and dimensionalizing, and theorizing and thus remains very close to the content of the data, whereas inquiry auditing monitors the overall process and product (usually substantive theory) of the inquiry to ensure that it has been conducted in adherence to acceptable procedures. Auditing can be accomplished in a variety of ways, using researchers internal to the inquiry as well as outside of the meaning-making aspects of the study. In my own work, *auditing* is the term we use to encompass all of the monitoring we do of individual contributions to the work (e.g., identification of researcher expectations and biases at the outset of the study, parallel peer coding and checking of data, ongoing team review of work, review of the work by colleagues outside of the inquiry, scrutiny of team members' work by me personally) as well as of the overall process of the research, which often is done by colleagues both during the inquiry (e.g., through the thesis and dissertation process) and at the completion of the study (primarily through the journal review process).

Evaluating the Quality of a Study

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided the foundation for much of what has been written regarding the standards by which a qualitative study can be judged, and Morrow (2005) presents an extensive discussion of rigor in qualitative research. Overall, the central organizing principle is trustworthiness, which is likened to the traditional validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity/neutrality standards applied to quantitative studies. Trustworthiness, or the conceptual and analytical soundness of the inquiry, can be ascertained further through the more specific criteria of credibility/authenticity, transferability, dependability/auditability, and confirmability (see also Gasson, 2004).

Creswell (1998) has pointed out that the GT approach incorporates continual verification as such an integral part of the data analytic process that rigor is addressed through the careful implementation of the method itself. Accordingly, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have presented their own criteria for judging the quality of a GT study. They note that their intent is to supplement existing qualitative research standards with those applicable to theory-building research in particular, and they focus on two sets of criteria: (a) those that specify the adequacy of the research process and (b) those that establish the empirical grounding of the study (and, more specifically, the emergent theory).

The first set of seven criteria is designed to explicate the detailed procedures that were followed in implementing the study and carrying out the analysis in particular. These include (a) the basis for selecting the original sample, (b) major categories that emerged in initial data analysis, (c) indicators that suggested these major categories, (d) the ways in which these categories directed subsequent theoretical sampling and how representative of the data from the final sample these categories proved to be, (e) the formulation of hypothesized relationships among categories, (f) the ways in which hypothesized relationships were scrutinized and modified on the basis of discrepancies in the data, and (g) the process of selecting the core category. These criteria obviate the importance of theoretical sampling in the GT approach, in that emerging categories from early analysis clearly guide the interrogation and incorporation of subsequent data.

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) second set of eight criteria focuses on the empirical grounding of the study and thus pertains to the processes used to develop and refine the theoretical ideas that are the presumed outcome of the study. These include (a) how concepts were derived and labeled, with clear indication that they are grounded securely in the actual data; (b) what the systematic linkages are among concepts; (c) how well the categories are developed (e.g., dense, with many properties and dimensions) and conceptually related; (d) how well variation is incorporated into the theory; (e) how well the conditions (e.g., contextual factors) that dictate variation are built into the study and explained; (f) whether process (e.g., fluidity, movement, change) in the phenomenon of interest has been incorporated into the theory; (g) whether the theoretical findings are significant (i.e., contribute new knowledge or produce guidelines for action); and (h) whether the theory stands up to continued scrutiny and becomes part of the scholarly discourse in its relevant arena. Strauss and Corbin also note the importance of researcher creativity and skill in communicating the complexity of a GT study in writing as critical to the successful adherence to these standards of rigor.

In my own work, I have found it exceedingly difficult to capture the richness of the GT analytic process in the limited page space and constrained style demands of journal articles, and I deeply admire the drama and creativity that some researchers appear to capture in their narratives in book form (e.g., see Charmaz, 2000). The two components of the approach that I most regret losing in the inevitable cuts resulting from the journal editorial process are the rich words of participants themselves (i.e., lengthy quotations) and extensive presentation of the memo-writing/interrogating/theorizing process in which our team has engaged throughout the research process. Regarding the latter, I have discovered that specifying numbers (e.g., assigning participant percentages to the use of words such as *most* and *a few*; presenting actual numbers of concepts, categories, key categories) may help readers interpret analytic decisions, but it is virtually impossible to capture accurately the detail and complexity of an audit trail. Regarding the use of participants' words, I have found that reviewers (and presumably readers, on whose behalf reviewers argue) sometimes object to language that appears extreme when I use participants' words in my own narrative (e.g., describing feelings about work as "passion") and that it is important to note clearly the deliberate borrowing of participants' language, regardless of whether a direct quotation is included.

GT: Problems

Woolley, Butler, and Wampler (2000) assert several strengths and limitations of the GT approach. They note its appropriateness as a way to build (vs. test) theory where little is known about a phenomenon and praise the capacity of the method to capture subtleties and allow a fresh, creative look at a phenomenon with as few preconceptions as possible. However, they note that the methodology is labor intensive, draws heavily on the conceptual skills of the researcher, requires explicit acknowledgment of researcher biases, is difficult to report succinctly because it relies on extensive examples from narratives, and can be used only with small samples.

In some ways, the most appealing aspects of the GT approach also render it difficult to use in practice. Its paradigmatic and methodological bridging capacities make it a particularly useful approach for novice qualitative researchers who still may be tied to the positivist assumptions and goals that permeate the field of psychology (including counseling psychology) but who wish to venture into more naturalistic realms. However, this very flexibility leads to criticism from both quantitative researchers, who view GT, regardless of its systematic and detailed procedures, as insufficiently rigorous, and other (particularly postmodern and poststructural) qualitative researchers, who view the (post)positivist elements of GT with skepticism (Charmaz, 2000). In my own work, I have encountered this conflict directly in journal reviews; in earlier articles, I was asked (presumably by quantitatively oriented reviewers) to justify the GT approach using positivist rhetoric, and now (with more qualitative researchers serving in reviewer roles), I receive feedback justifiably critiquing my work for failing to obviate choices regarding more debatable aspects of GT.

Another element of GT that makes it useful for novice investigators is that it is highly structured, particularly the Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) versions of the method. This structure makes it relatively easy to learn and highly effective at keeping the researcher tied closely to the data throughout the entire analytic process. Also, its focus on researcher reflexivity lends itself well to the use of research teams, which capture nicely the dialectical, iterative, interactive approach to the data and are particularly useful for mutual monitoring of biases and constant discussion of emerging theoretical formulations. Again, however, the method has been criticized for its excessive fragmentation of data (and thus experience) in the name of theorizing (see Charmaz, 2000), and the very structure that provides such analytic specificity and requires so much researcher reflection can also become ponderous in practice because it is extremely time consuming (and expensive), even when multiple investigators are used. The most enthusiastic researcher can experience flagging energy under the weight of so much data to interpret and integrate, especially after the first experience of reducing a 300-page dissertation or hundreds of pages of an audit trail to a journal article of 40 pages and realizing the amount of detail and richness that is lost. Rennie (1995) describes his attempts to manage the unwieldiness of GT data analysis by skipping the initial step of open coding to formulate categories immediately, an acknowledged departure from the method as originally outlined by Glaser and Strauss and probably successful because of this researcher's extensive experience with studies of similar therapy processes. In my own work using diverse samples of women to produce an overarching theory of career development, I have conceptualized the overall endeavor as an amalgamation of smaller studies. Thus, as theoretical sampling is accomplished (in part) through the addition of each sample, I have begun later studies with tentative category lists generated from previous samples if I have reason to believe that my new sample will produce narratives with some elements of similarity. Moreover, I trust that the self-corrective, verification processes of the constant comparison method will ensure that important data are not lost (cf. Charmaz, 2000). However, these are difficult and debatable decisions, and Annells (1997) recommends the use of a mentor for researchers new to the GT approach.

One way that some researchers attempt to ease the difficulty of the GT approach is through the use of computers to aid in data analysis (e.g., Rennie, 1996). The programs NUD*IST and Ethnograph are designed specifically to be used in GT analysis

(Charmaz, 2000), and researchers are also using Atlas-TI and other computer programs to assist with data management, data search and retrieval, and visual mapping of relationships among categories. The use of computers, however, is not without controversy, and opponents cite the fragmentation of data that are meant to be interpreted holistically and the distancing of the researcher from the nuanced interpretive process as arguments against the practice. Moreover, there is danger that computer programs "may unintentionally foster an illusion that interpretive work can be reduced to a set of procedures" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 520) and thus dismiss the deep reflection that constitutes theoretical sensitivity at its best. In my own work, I have settled on a compromise position, wherein I use a data management package (FOLIOVIEWS) simply to organize data for ease in retrieval and complete all other aspects of the data analysis without computer assistance.

GT: Promise

When I wrote about structural equation modeling almost two decades ago, there were no published articles in counseling psychology to which I could point as exemplars of the approach. Fortunately, this is not the case concerning GT. Counseling psychologists have been publishing GT research for at least a decade (see Ponterotto, 2005), and more than 20 GT studies have appeared during this time in the two flagship journals in our field: the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and *The Counseling Psychologist.* These studies have examined a range of topics that typify many of the current interests in counseling psychology, including counseling process, vocational behavior, supervision, adjustment and coping, multicultural counseling, mentoring, and even an analysis of Division 17 presidential addresses. Moreover, a number of these studies explicitly address issues of diversity. Any of these studies can serve as models for counseling psychologists who wish to try using a GT approach, and the relevance of each study's particular paradigmatic location and analytic methods will depend largely on the goals of the researcher.

Perhaps the greatest promise of the GT approach for counseling psychology is at the level of praxis. It has been noted by many scholars that, in general, qualitative inquiry parallels clinical reasoning because of the inductive nature of many qualitative approaches to assimilating knowledge. However, GT holds as its core tenet the construction of theory out of lived experiences of participants, and as such, it integrates theory and practice in ways that few other approaches can boast, constituting a methodological exemplar of the scientist–practitioner model. Indeed, if GT is integrated further with a critical paradigm focused on oppression and power, it comes closer than any other approach—quantitative or qualitative—to exemplifying a science-practice-advocacy model of professionalism in counseling psychology (Fassinger, 2000, 2001; Fassinger & O'Brien, 2000). In short, the paradigmatic and methodological flexibility of GT, its clear and structured analytic procedures, its focus on generating experience-near theory regarding important social contexts, and its applicability to a wide range of issues of interest to counseling psychologists make it a qualitative approach offering much promise in illuminating some of the most pressing problems that counseling psychologists might address. It is my hope that this article stimulates interest, curiosity, methodological risk taking, and challenging scientific discourse regarding our work as scientists, practitioners, and advocates for a socially just world.

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