

GROUND THEORY

TWO

PLANNING A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you to:

- Discuss the unique characteristics of grounded theory research
- Describe instances where investigation using grounded theory is indicated
- Outline the stages of planning a grounded theory study
- Identify elements of an effective written proposal to conduct grounded theory research
- Discuss the use of grounded theory methods in diverse research designs

Introduction

The first chapter of this text provided an important introduction to the philosophical and methodological foundations of grounded theory. Understanding the history, principles and methods of this approach to research ensures that you are well positioned to grasp the fundamental concepts that underpin data generation, collection and analysis in order to render quality grounded theory. In this chapter we will explore issues relating to planning in grounded theory research. A structured framework for planning your study is proposed, along with guidelines to assist you in using essential grounded theory methods in diverse research designs.

The grounded theory difference

The choice of any research design is determined by the aims of the particular study. Many qualitative studies seek to describe and explore phenomena. The essential grounded theory methods described in the previous chapter, and elaborated on throughout this text, go beyond simple description and exploration. Grounded theory differs from other approaches to research in that it serves to explain the phenomenon being studied. The strategies used in data collection and analysis result in the generation

of theory that explicates a phenomenon from the perspective and in the context of those who experience it. Theory as the product of the investigative processes is the hallmark of grounded theory research. This theory is directly abstracted from, or grounded in, data generated and collected by the researcher.

Not all studies purporting to be grounded theory actually result in a theory that demonstrates explanatory power. Some may claim to generate theory, yet the process of abstraction is inadequately demonstrated, leading to doubts about how effectively this theory is grounded in the data. Grounded theory methods are inherently effective in their own right and we will describe later in this chapter how they can also be employed to assist in achieving specific aims within diverse research designs. Simply employing selected grounded theory methods, however, will not generate grounded theory. Rather, a selective approach is more likely to result in descriptive, exploratory research that has been referred to as qualitative data analysis (QDA) by Glaser (2004) and the generic inductive qualitative model (GIQM) by Hood (2007). Both these authors contend that a failure to make the distinction between the value and purpose of exploratory descriptive research and grounded theory serves to devalue and erode the latter. Figure 2.1 indicates where many researchers who erroneously claim to have produced a grounded theory usually diverge from the distinguishing features of this approach. Often it is those elements of grounded theory research design that make possible abstraction and theoretical integration at the higher level (represented by the shading of the wheels in Figure 2.1), that are absent in such studies.

When is grounded theory appropriate?

How do you know whether grounded theory is appropriate for your intended study? Often researchers are attracted to the relatively straightforward methods that characterize grounded theory and do not thoroughly consider whether it is the best approach for achieving their research aims. Because of the unique nature of grounded theory methods, we can identify the type of instances where its use is appropriate. Grounded theory is indicated when:

- Little is known about the area of study.
- The generation of theory with explanatory power is a desired outcome.
- An inherent process is imbedded in the research situation that is likely to be explicated by grounded theory methods.

Grounded theory results in the generation of new knowledge in the form of theory; therefore areas where little is known about a particular topic are most deserving of research effort. Not much can be gained from energy expended to investigate issues that have already been explored extensively. Conversely, it should also be noted that while research designs with an interpretive component are usually not intended for generalization, there are often specific questions in unique situations that cannot be addressed by findings from studies conducted in similar yet disparate settings. All researchers should

be able to demonstrate that their proposed study will generate knowledge that is relevant and significant. In employing grounded theory, you should also be satisfied that it is new and unique. Barnett (2012b) for example, identified the potential for grounded theory to make a contribution on the topic of emotional disturbances in students, as an adequate theoretical foundation was lacking in this area. Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) too, found grounded theory an appropriate approach to investigate the relationship between psychological resilience and sporting performance in 12 Olympic champions, where little previous work had been done.

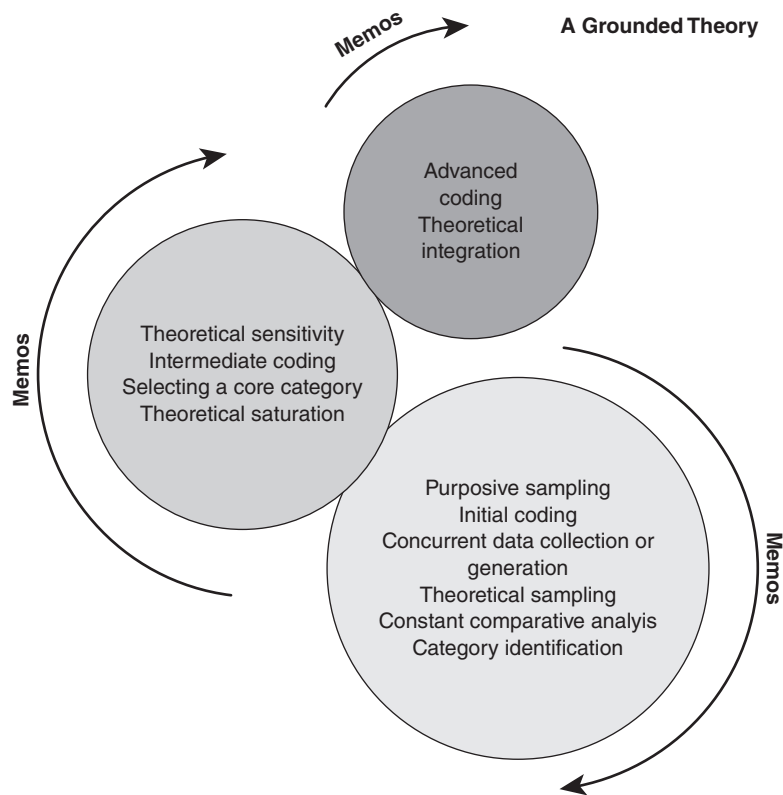


Figure 2.1 Grounded theory versus descriptive, exploratory research

As identified previously, grounded theory is the preferred choice when the intent is to generate theory that explains a phenomenon of interest to the researcher. When planning a study, therefore, you should be clear that the aim is to move your analytical processes beyond simple description through exploration. Innumerable descriptive, exploratory studies have been undertaken on a vast array of topics that have contributed significant knowledge to their discipline areas. If your purpose is to describe and explore rather than explain, you are encouraged to look to other approaches for research more suited to your specific aims.

The concept of 'process' is often described as a characteristic feature of grounded theory. Some debate exists as to the significance of process in grounded theory and how this concept can be defined. While Glaser (1978) discusses the specific concept of the basic social process at length, he notes that process is a possible, although not necessarily essential, element of grounded theory. Charmaz (2014), however, believes that process is central to grounded theory and advocates the use of 'gerunds' (the noun form of a verb) to emphasize action in the employ of essential grounded theory methods. Similarly, Saldaña (2013) makes reference to the concept of 'Process Codes' (see Chapter 6). Emphasizing process during analysis forces you to identify relationships evident in your study arena (Charmaz, 2014). The value of adopting process as central to grounded theory is enhanced when we broaden our conception of what we mean by the term itself. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 96) define process as an 'ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems'. Process, therefore, need not be limited to conceptions of time, phases or stages, but can be seen as occurring in all aspects of the natural, dynamic nature of life.

ACTIVITY 2.1 USE OF GROUNDED THEORY IN PUBLISHED RESEARCH

Access a database of literature from a discipline different from your own. Undertake a search of articles using the key term 'grounded theory'. You will need to limit your search further (for example, to recent years and full text articles) to make your results manageable. Retrieve a small selection of articles of interest to you (perhaps 10–12). Identify, using Figure 2.1, which essential grounded theory methods were employed by the authors.

Do the authors of these articles:

- Discuss existing knowledge in the area of study?
- Indicate that the generation of theory with explanatory power is the intended outcome of their research?
- Identify an inherent process in the research situation that has been explicated by their use of grounded theory methods?

Planning a grounded theory study

The popularity of grounded theory among novice researchers is often linked to its more tangible application in research design than is often the case in other approaches to research, particularly those that employ qualitative data. The intention of this chapter is not to present a universal overview of the planning process for a research project; you are encouraged to consult the various generic research texts for that purpose. Rather, the following discussion will focus on those aspects of planning that require specific attention in a grounded theory study. The stages of planning are summarized for convenience in Box 2.1.

BOX 2.1 STAGES OF PLANNING

- 1 Acknowledge assumptions
- 2 Clarify the research question and aims
- 3 Review the literature
- 4 Develop a research design
- 5 Identify ethical and legal issues
- 6 Determine required resources
- 7 Develop a timeline

Acknowledge assumptions

Researchers will often choose an area of research because of their passion for the topic or a personal interest that stems from experience. Clearly such interest is borne from the existence of some degree of knowledge about the intended area of study. Much discussion has been had in the literature about Glaser's (1992) directive that the researcher must maintain an open mind when entering into an area of study and to what extent this can, or indeed should, be done in reality. As we will discuss in Chapter 4, the ability to generate theory is dependent on the researcher being theoretically sensitive to the concepts evident in the data. A balance is therefore required between maintaining an open mind and being able to identify concepts of theoretical significance throughout the process of data collection and analysis. As a researcher, you must be able to avoid imposing your preconceptions on the developing theory while ensuring, as Strubing (2007) advises, that the knowledge and experience you possess is used effectively in the application of essential grounded theory methods.

Acknowledging your existing assumptions, experience and knowledge of the area of research is an effective mechanism for establishing where you stand in relation to your proposed study. By articulating your thoughts, feelings and ideas before you begin, you ensure that your study is transparent from the outset. How you choose to record your assumptions about your study is a matter of preference; however, we recommend the use of memoing as discussed in the following chapter. Drafting memos from the outset of your study establishes an audit trail of your research and gets you into the habit of logging your project from an early stage.

What issues constitute 'assumptions' about your research that you may need to identify? There are a number of factors that can be better understood once confronted through acknowledgement. These include:

- Your philosophical position (how you see the world) and how it relates to both the topic area of your study and your application of grounded theory methods and principles (as you will have done through completing the activity in the previous chapter).
- What you already know about the topic of your research, from both formal study and personal/professional experience.

- What you expect you will find from your research; while it is important not to influence the outcome, often it is only through acknowledging your predictions that such preconception can be avoided.
- Any apprehension, concerns or fears you have in relation to your study and how your strengths and limitations may impact on the process.

Undertaking any type of research study, particularly for a graduate student, is a process of learning. Setting your compass points at the beginning of your project is the most effective means of making sure that you do not lose your bearings along the way. Acknowledging your assumptions as part of the planning process for your study ensures that you yourself are grounded throughout all stages of your research adventure.

Clarify the research question and aims

In most studies, the research question directs how the study proceeds. In grounded theory, it is the research process that generates the question. A key characteristic of traditional grounded theory research is that the researcher enters the field of study without the narrow research questions or hypotheses common in other research designs. Glaser has consistently referred to the concept of 'emergence' in relation to grounded theory outcomes (see for example Glaser, 1978, 1992, 2004). As an iterative process, grounded theory progresses in response to the evolving data collection and analyses. While the study design can therefore (arguably) be described as emergent, this is in reference to the process, rather than the products, of research. Grounded theory does not spontaneously arise; rather, it is generated, developed and integrated by the researcher through the application of the essential grounded theory methods.

Originally, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed that even the research problem itself must 'emerge'. Strauss and Corbin's assertion in their 1990 text that the research question be narrow and function to establish boundaries to the research was a key element in the 'emergence versus forcing' debate that underpinned Glaser's (1992) subsequent rebuttal. Glaser's (1998) stance is based on his belief that for a problem to be of relevance, it must come from those for whom it has significance (or, we would suggest, be generated with them). Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998; and subsequently Corbin and Strauss, 2008) position is typically much more pragmatic and relevant to the contemporary, professional research situation. Current requirements for the conduct of research, some of which echo the dominance of the scientific method, do of course impose a need for the researcher to demonstrate a focused research topic. Whether this topic is expressed as a question, problem statement or hypothesis will be determined by the research design adopted by the researcher.

In undertaking a grounded theory study, you will no doubt be required to produce some type of formal proposal (discussed later in this chapter) that will include a statement of your intended research. In identifying the research question and specific aims for your research study, it is possible to find some middle ground between Glaser's (1992: 22) suggestion that the research functions from a position of 'abstract wonderment', and Strauss and Corbin's more defined approach. Where possible, state your research questions broadly and in terms that

reflect a problem-centred perspective of those experiencing or living the phenomenon to be studied. Avoid locking yourself into a specific topic of study as this will hinder your application of grounded theory methods and draw strong criticism from experienced grounded theorists who review your work. The research question will become refined early in the research process (Glaser, 1992). Until that occurs, ensure that your identified area of study is sufficiently broad to allow for the flexible and dynamic nature of the research methods to be employed. Examples of how a research question may be expressed are presented in Box 2.2.

BOX 2.2 EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1 How do asylum seekers adapt to emancipation in their adopted country following internment?
- 2 What influences managers in private institutions to seek professional advancement?
- 3 How do women in developing countries establish financial independence?

ACTIVITY 2.2 IDENTIFYING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Review your local newspaper. Identify potential topics for research. State these as research questions suitable for investigation using grounded theory.

Review the literature

Use of the literature in grounded theory is perhaps one of the most contentious and misunderstood aspects of this approach to research. The literature has significance at all stages of a grounded theory study but for convenience we can discuss the literature as being used: to enhance theoretical sensitivity; as data during analysis; and as a source of theoretical codes.

It is the use of the literature in the initial stages of a grounded theory study that has stimulated the most debate. As is the case with many approaches to qualitative research, a formal review of the literature is delayed in grounded theory to prevent the researcher imposing existing theories or knowledge on the study processes and outcomes. Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledge, however, that no researcher enters the field as a blank slate. Strauss and Corbin (1990) reiterate this position, but the failure of these authors to direct the researcher away from the topical literature in the early stages of a study resulted in Glaser (1992) voraciously reaffirming the importance of avoiding reading in the substantive area completely. In saying this, Glaser does, however, encourage the grounded theorist to engage with the literature from the very beginning of a study, but outside the topic area to avoid contaminating and constraining the analysis of data with extant codes and concepts.

In reality there is very little difference between the positions of these authors. None deny that a researcher will enter into a study with a broad range of knowledge about their proposed area of study (with much of this having no doubt been drawn from the literature) and neither promotes a thorough review of the literature before undertaking a grounded theory study. We suggest, however, that there are many ways in which a limited and purposive preliminary review can assist a researcher in the early stages, not the least of which is the early enhancement of theoretical sensitivity.

Reviewing the literature on the topic of a proposed study provides an indication of the extent of current knowledge and work undertaken in the field. Urquhart (2007) argues that this is an effective means of orientating the grounded theorist to the field of study, without necessarily prejudicing them towards existing theoretical concepts. Often a review of the literature is required in formal proposals for approval or funding of research to justify the need for the study. Where possible, contain the depth and breadth of your exploration of the literature to the minimum necessary to meet such requirements. Undertaking the exercise of articulating your assumptions, as described above, can be effective in identifying your existing knowledge and perceptions about the area of study and can serve to limit the impact that an unavoidable excursion into the literature can have on your research. Glaser's (1998) perspective on how literature can and should be used in the early stages of research is summarized in Box 2.3. Further to these comments he does advise that, where procedural dictates require a literature review before the commencement of a study, the researcher should take the opportunity to treat the literature as data (a concept we discuss in Chapter 5).

BOX 2.3 GLASER ON THE USE OF THE LITERATURE

Reading the literature is a problem for many people doing grounded theory. The traditional approach is to study the literature in a substantive area before one starts the research. Grounded theory's very strong dicta are (a) **do not do a literature review in the substantive area and related areas where the research is to be done**, and (b) when the grounded theory is nearly completed during sorting and writing up, then the literature search in the substantive area can be accomplished and woven into the theory as more data for constant comparison.

To state the point bluntly, these dicta have the purposes of keeping the grounded theory researcher as free and as open as possible to discovery and to the emergence of concepts, problems and interpretations from the data. The likely results of a pre-research literature review are inimical to generating grounded theory. They are:

First, the researcher can be grabbed by received concepts that do not fit or are not relevant.

Second, the researcher may develop a preconceived, 'professional' problem of no relevance to the substantive area, the research of which yields nothing but derailment from what is actually going on.

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Third, the researcher will become imbued with speculative, non-scientifically related interpretations and connections that find their way into the grounded theory, which are not relevant or do not work. Grounded theory provides its own emergent interpretations as part of it. There is no need for speculation.

Fourth, the researcher will likely become 'awed out' by other authors, especially the pundits in the field, which detracts from one's own self-valuation as a creator of theory.

Fifth, the researcher becomes rhetoricalized, thus sounding all the time like the literature and not sounding as the emergent theory would have it. Thus the researcher's theoretical sensitivity is eroded to rhetorical jargon.

Sixth and lastly, which literature is relevant is unknown until the main concern of the substantive participants emerges with its continual resolving. The relevant literature may be actually far afield from the preconceived literature and not known until much later. It in turn will shed light on the traditional literature as will the grounded theory. Thus time is saved from studying the wrong literature. It is focused on an exacting contribution to the relevant literature.

However, the researcher should be constantly reading voraciously in other substantive areas during their research. Choose areas that (a) will not preconceptually contaminate the emerging theory, and (b) will keep theoretical sensitivity, learning of theoretical codes and knowledge of the usage of social theory.

Source: Glaser, B.G. (1998) *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, pp. 67–8. Used with permission.

The greatest advantage that the literature affords a researcher in the early stages of a study is that it provides examples of how other researchers have employed grounded theory methods. There is an abundance of literature from various disciplines on the use of grounded theory methods in whole or in part. These works provide an opportunity for you to learn from the experiences of others and can inform your study from a methodological rather than substantive position. Be sure to evaluate the quality of such work (see Chapter 9), to identify any flaws in the application of grounded theory methods that may result in a perpetuation of methodological limitations in your own work and beyond (Cutcliffe and Harder, 2012).

In many research methodologies, theoretical frameworks may be drawn from the literature to direct a study and facilitate the interpretation of findings. As grounded theory seeks to generate theory that is grounded in the data and not influenced by preconceived ideas about the area of study, there is usually no theoretical framework employed to guide the research. While the imposition of an external framework as the basis of your study is inconsistent with the basic principles of grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss (2008) do suggest that theoretical frameworks have some practical value, mostly in respect of interpreting the findings. In Chapter 7, we will discuss the use of theoretical frameworks in the process of theoretical coding as your grounded theory takes shape.

Develop a research design

A research design is the blueprint for your study; it identifies your philosophical and methodological position and the methods that you will employ to achieve your research goals. In order to develop an appropriate plan to guide your research it is important that you fully understand the essential grounded theory methods outlined in the previous chapter, and elaborated on throughout this text, before embarking on your study.

In Chapter 1, we presented an overview of the methodological influences on the use of grounded theory methods. The original work by Glaser and Strauss (1967) outlined grounded theory methods in a general way compared with the more procedural approach suggested by Strauss and Corbin in their 1990 text and later editions. Grounded theorists such as Charmaz (2006) and Clarke (2005) developed new approaches to the use of grounded theory methods influenced by their diverse philosophical and methodological positions. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is not necessary to subscribe to one version of grounded theory throughout your study. Your own philosophical position will determine whether you align yourself with one particular author or another, or perhaps draw from each of them to varying degrees in your application of essential grounded theory methods.

When designing your grounded theory research study, you may find yourself frustrated by the need to consider the evolving nature of this approach. Alternatively you may relish the flexible and unrestricted potential that it affords you. This is particularly the case when a broad area of study is identified but the specific issue eludes you. Herein lies a particular strength of grounded theory methods. Exploit them where practical to allow the research problem to become delineated as you engage with the data.

You will, however, need to consider some practicalities of the research design. The fluid, dynamic nature of grounded theory is not an excuse for sitting back and seeing where the trail serendipitously leads you. Theoretical sampling will determine how data will be generated, from what sources and in what locations, as the study progresses. Overall *you* will determine how essential grounded theory methods will be used in your study and to what extent. In the planning stages of your study, however, consideration of these issues can avoid problems arising at later stages that can impact on the progress and quality of your research.

One of the most important things that you will do in the planning stage of your study is to specify the unit of analysis. In Box 2.4, Barry Gibson discusses how specifying the unit of study and maintaining a focus on this often overlooked factor was critical in his own research.

BOX 2.4 WINDOW INTO GROUNDED THEORY

BARRY GIBSON ON SPECIFYING THE UNIT OF STUDY

In the second chapter of *Discovery on 'Generating Theory'* there is a little section called 'Specifying a Concept' that has a nugget of information that virtually everyone who begins to do grounded

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theory for the first time seems to miss. The section simply talks about specifying the unit of analysis. The process is described as 'painstaking' and is crucial to generating a decent theory. Yet most people begin their grounded theories with little thought concerning their unit of analysis, assuming that the unit of their grounded theory is the individual or people who have problems. In *Discovery* the units of traditional sociological analysis are described as 'taxi-dance halls', 'ghettoes' and 'high schools' amongst other things. Clearly individuals will be operating in such settings but the focus of analysis is not on the individuals but rather the situation that is problematical.

I remember tackling this issue in my PhD. I was studying dental practices that were specially set up to treat HIV positive patients. In the first practice I looked at it was clear the dentist did not want to be treating such patients and his strategy was one of avoidance. These patients were clearly dangerous and carried the threat of contagion to this dentist. As a consequence he would not use local anaesthetic, which caused immense suffering to his patients. He also wore what one patient described as 'the lawnmower man suit' (goggles, visor, green scrubs, two pairs of gloves and mask). The suit was alarming to his patients. Looking at this clinic it became essential to find other units to compare it to. I needed to find places where dentists did not think treating such patients was contagious and therefore dangerous.

In order to find the other units I had to specify the properties of the clinic that were relevant to the emerging theory. One property was the number of dentists in the clinic. This clinic had only one dentist working in isolation. Traditionally solo dentist units are conservative so I needed other units where there were teams of dentists working together. Another property of the clinic was its location. The first clinic was in a location where there was a very small population of people who were HIV positive. HIV was still 'exotic' and unusual in contrast to other places. A third property was longevity. The first clinic was only recently established.

I ended up attending two other practices, one where there were two dentists and another where there were four dentists. These other practices were located in very different areas. In one, the population attending the clinic was derived from a wider environment where the principal means of transmission of HIV was through heterosexual drug use. The other clinic was serving a vocal and active homosexual community. Both of the additional clinics had been established for long periods of time in contrast to the first clinic. In the end it became clear that the definition of danger varied in each location and that this definition contrasted with that of risk and I had an emerging 'cutting point' theory. There was a 'cutting point' where dentists would clearly decide to treat, and decide to treat in a particular way. All of the properties of the first clinic mitigated against the dentist being able to treat his population with appropriate sensitivity. He was scared and felt he was operating in dangerous conditions. In contrast the other dentists saw themselves as in control. There was a risk of contagion but it was tiny. Being able to take control and define the situation as a situation of risk enabled them to treat their respective populations appropriately and with sensitivity. Because they were working in units where responsibility was shared they could support each other. The first dentist was isolated and scared and this showed in the way he treated his patients in an atmosphere of fear. Likewise he had only just started to treat them whereas the other clinics had a history of expertise going back over ten to twenty years.

It was a tricky process exposing the different layers of the cutting point and it took a very long time to build the analysis. In the end the common thing in each setting was the way the cutting point between risk and danger varied. Specifying the unit of analysis and paying attention to it throughout your study is crucial to developing a solid grounded theory. That one page in *Discovery* was worth so much to me at the time. It remains an essential element of how I understand grounded theory.

Identify ethical and legal issues

Grounded theory methods, while providing broad scope for the researcher in terms of explicating, exploring and explaining phenomena, can nevertheless be problematic. The requirement to identify potential ethical and legal issues at the outset of a research study can be difficult as it is not possible to know at this stage the nature of the data that will be collected, who it will be collected from or how many sources of data will be sought. Your local institutional review boards (IRBs or ethics committees) will assess any potentially problematic issues and it is therefore important that you consider and address these in your application for ethics clearance. Be prepared to defend your broad research focus and provide examples of data sources and strategies for collection and generation (for example, sample or initial interview questions). Demonstrate an understanding of contemporary legal and ethical issues. What privacy legislation may impact on your intention to access certain documents? What measures will you put in place to prevent, minimize or respond to distress in an interview situation when you do not know where the questions will lead? These questions must be considered in addition to the ethical and legal issues that may impact on any research that involves humans, regardless of the methodology.

Grounded theory research is evolving and flexible, ever changing and unpredictable; the direction of your study can alter as a result of the application of the essential methods inherent in this approach. IRBs serve a number of functions that are concerned with the protection of participants and the integrity of the research (Mills and Birks, 2014b). You may therefore find that you need to return to your IRB to secure approval for amendments should there be changes to participants or the nature of the data to be collected, regardless of whether you feel such changes have ethical or legal implications. In most cases you will find that obtaining approval for such amendments is a simple process, as was the case for Sbaraini, Carter, Evans and Blinkhorn (2011), who reinforced the changing nature of their study design with their IRB from the outset and with each subsequent application for amendment. With the use of grounded theory comes enormous potential for the conduct of rich research, but also the need for responsible conduct in respect of ethical and legal considerations.

Determine required resources

A realistic determination of resources required to undertake grounded theory research is necessary to ensure that your study stays on track. Grounded theory encourages the use of data of various types from various sources. Through theoretical sampling techniques, you will identify the most appropriate data sources as your research progresses. A number of resources will be required to assist you as you undertake collection and analysis of this data. Engaging with grounded theory as a dynamic research process, however, will limit your ability to identify specifically which resources you will require during the planning stage of your study. While you may not be able to account for every likely contingency, you will be able to establish at least the minimal requirements for your study. Most likely the biggest resource requirements (over and above your time) will have financial implications. Do you need to purchase equipment such as computer hardware, data management software

and/or digital voice recorders? Will you need to undertake training programmes or attend conferences/seminars? Where do you intend to commence data collection? Are you likely to be led to places that will require you to travel extended distances? Do you intend to offer participants reimbursement or compensation for their time? Will you need to employ a professional transcriber?

Thinking broadly about potential resource requirements and planning accordingly can prevent unnecessary frustration and delays as you become engrossed in your research. Before commencing your study, consider potential sources of funding and assistance that may reduce the financial burden and identify individuals who may offer support and direction when you need it most.

Develop a timeline

Establishing a timeline for your grounded theory study is an important strategy for keeping you focused on your research and ensuring that you achieve your goals as effectively and efficiently as possible. You will no doubt find that undertaking research, particularly at graduate level, is a journey from which you will grow both personally and professionally. You will follow many paths as you become immersed in your study, some of which may prove more fruitful than others. It is important to remember that your research is also a project, one that requires application and direction in order to secure its completion. Once again time is a flexible concept at the mercy of the fluid nature of the grounded theory research process and for this reason time-dependent planning increases in importance.

Establish timelines prior to commencement of your study to determine intended completion dates for key components of your project. External factors that may influence your study must be taken into account. Identify submission dates for IRB applications. Ensure that holiday periods or other scheduled events do not prevent access to potential participants or other data sources. Most of all it is important to build in flexibility and contingency. IRBs may require additional information and time for consideration of your ethics application; gatekeepers may delay access to data sources; participants may not be available; an unanticipated need to return to the field may be indicated even in the later stages of your study. It is unlikely that you will be prepared for every change in direction or hurdle that will arise. Planning for what is known or likely is your best defence against loss of your valuable time when the unexpected does occur.

ACTIVITY 2.3 RESEARCH DESIGN IN GROUNDED THEORY

Refer to the articles that you collected in Activity 2.1 earlier in this chapter. How do the authors discuss their use of grounded theory methods? Is there a detailed description of their research design or do they simply state that grounded theory has been employed? Have the authors described how they addressed any potential ethical or legal issues? Do any of the papers present a discussion of the author's experience of conducting the research using grounded theory methods?

Writing a formal proposal

Almost every research study requires submission of a written proposal of some description. The most common examples can be found in applications for enrolment into higher degree courses or to secure ethics approval from the relevant institutional committee. In addition, applications for research grants and scholarships also require submission of a detailed proposal to the funding body.

Attention to detail in the preparation of your written proposal to conduct research will minimize the possibility that resubmission will be required or that the application will be rejected or declined outright. Most forms of written research proposals will contain a discussion of many of the items contained in Box 2.1. The specific purpose of your proposal will determine the extent to which each of these components will take precedence. All proposals will require that you demonstrate the relevance and significance of your proposed study in addition to an ability to conduct research at this level. Applications for ethics clearance will require greater emphasis on measures to protect participants while submissions for funding will focus more heavily on resource requirements and your ability to complete the research within the identified timeframe.

Reviewing bodies are becoming more familiar with research that includes a qualitative component, yet there remains a dominance of quantitative methodologies in the scholarly arena that influences how non-positivist approaches such as grounded theory are perceived in the academic environment and beyond (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Grounded theory is particularly prone to scrutiny by those most familiar with more structured research methodologies. Reviewing bodies are often more comfortable with research designs that state categorically the number of persons, records, locations, etc., that will be accessed and for what purpose. In your written proposal be sure to describe grounded theory as a research design that evolves and demonstrate the rationale for this approach. Acknowledge the implications of employing such a fluid research design and describe measures that you will put in place to prevent and manage any potential, unforeseen adverse outcomes. Be conscious of the fact that you may need to return to the approving body at a later stage with any necessary amendments and build such flexibility into your proposal.

Grounded theory methods in diverse research designs

It is common for studies conducted within another methodological framework to employ grounded theory methods because of their value in the analytical process. Grounded theory methods are in and of themselves effective tools that can be employed in a variety of ways. The hybrid utilization of the essential grounded theory methods is legitimate and encouraged; however, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, there are problems associated with studies that claim to be grounded theory but cannot legitimately be described as such. It is important, therefore, to ensure that your use of grounded theory methods is adequately and accurately described to preserve the credibility of your work.

There are many examples of published research that have employed grounded theory methods within other research designs. Often the researcher is using a grounded theory approach but does not aim to generate theory. A varied application of grounded theory methods and principles is used in these studies where the ultimate outcome is description and exploration of phenomena. Vågan (2009) used grounded theory methods in his study of how medical students in Norway perceived their identity when learning communication skills. Bahora, Sterk and Elifson (2009) also employed grounded theory techniques in their investigation of recreational ecstasy use in the United States. In both of these studies, the authors described their research method as 'modified grounded theory', with findings presented as themes that provided insight into the phenomena being explored.

Grounded theory methods are of particular value in mixed methods studies that employ broad and diverse research strategies drawn from both qualitative and quantitative domains. In mixed methods studies, grounded theory methods are often used to ensure rigorous management of the qualitative component of the research. Cagle and Wells (2008) demonstrated the use of grounded theory methods for this purpose in their design of a mixed methods study exploring the cancer care-giving experience of Mexican–American women.

Researchers undertaking studies using a single overarching methodological framework, such as phenomenology, case study, historical research, ethnography and action research, may choose to employ grounded theory methods to varying degrees in their research design. Annells (2006) promotes the application of grounded theory methods with other established methodologies, providing the study is structured to accommodate the different strengths, weaknesses and purposes of each. The extent to which specific grounded theory methods can be relied upon will be determined by how well they fit with the researcher's methodological goals and philosophical position.

When using grounded theory strategies and techniques in diverse research designs, the rules are quite simple:

- Identify the overarching methodological framework(s) of your study.
- Be guided in your choice and application of grounded theory methods by the aims of your study; avoid selecting their use on the basis of personal preference alone.
- Ensure that you possess adequate knowledge of the principles that underlie each of the methods you intend to use.
- Plan your use of each of the selected methods in the context of your study as a whole.
- Clearly describe the modification and use of grounded theory methods in any reports or publication of your research.

Failure to adhere to these rules can have a negative impact on the quality and credibility of the work (Cutcliffe and Harder, 2012: 2) and the potential value that grounded theory methods bring to diverse research designs can be lost.

Conclusion

The application of grounded theory principles and methods is a flexible, fluid, evolving process. The dynamic nature of the grounded theory research process presents the

researcher with enormous advantages over more rigid approaches to investigating phenomena. There remains, however, the potential for a researcher to lose their way if there is inadequate attention to planning during the early stages of a study. Whether your intention is to generate theory, or exploit the value of grounded theory methods in more diverse research designs, producing a detailed plan will ensure that you remain focused and identify areas of weakness before they become problematic. In the following chapter, we will discuss issues relating to quality in grounded theory research and provide you with practical guidelines for ensuring that the attention to detail initiated during the planning stage continues as your study is implemented.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

- 1 Consider your own profession. Are there general or specific areas of knowledge that would benefit from the generation of theory through research?
 - 2 The concept of process can potentially be defined quite broadly. Think about your everyday activities. Identify obvious and more obscure examples of process in your daily routine. How does examining events in this way change your perspective of them?
 - 3 Locate examples of application proformas for the conduct of research (for example, ethics applications, funding requests, course enrolment documentation). You will find examples of these on the internet or can possibly obtain them from your affiliate organization. Review the components of each and consider how effectively they may accommodate an application for grounded theory research.
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WORKING GROUNDED THEORY

Review the 'Working grounded theory' example presented in Appendix A. Note:

- The characteristics of this study that made it appropriate to investigation by grounded theory.
 - The stages of planning a grounded theory study discussed in this chapter that are evident in this example.
 - Strategies used by the researcher to address issues related to the development of a written proposal to conduct the study.
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