

Theory Criteria and Evaluation Resource

Theory Committee
Academy of Human Resource Development
www.theorypractice.net

1. Selected source citation:

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3-20.

2. Stated purpose of selected source:

“We hope to offer evaluative guidance to readers of grounded theory publications and suggest more systematic guidelines to authors themselves. Our description may also stimulate researchers in other qualitative traditions to specify and publish criteria for judging their own research processes and grounding their empirical findings” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 16).

3. Direct quotation of the theory criteria or evaluation:

The Research Process

Criterion #1: How was the original sample selected? On what grounds (selective sampling)?

Criterion #2: What major categories emerged?

Criterion #3: What were some of the events, incidents, actions, and so on that indicated some of these major categories?

Criterion #4: On the basis of what categories did theoretical sampling proceed? That is, how did theoretical formulations guide some of the data collection? After the theoretical sample was carried out, how representative did these categories prove to be?

Criterion #5: What were some of the hypotheses pertaining to relations among categories? On what grounds were they formulated and tested?

Criterion #6: Were there instances when hypotheses did not hold up against what was actually seen? How were the discrepancies accounted for? How did they affect the hypotheses?

Criterion #7: How and why was the core category selected? Was the selection sudden or gradual, difficult or easy? On what grounds were the final analytic decisions made? How did extensive “explanatory power” in relation to the phenomena under study and “relevance” as discussed earlier figure in the decisions?

Some of these criteria are unconventional (for instance, emphasizing theoretical rather than statistical sampling and the injunction to account for discrepancies explicitly) for most

quantitative and many qualitative researchers. Yet, these standards are essential to evaluating grounded theory studies. If a grounded theory researcher provides the pertinent information, they enable readers to assess the adequacy of a complex coding procedure. Detail reported in this way and supplemented with appropriate cues can, at least in longer publications, highlight thorough tracking of indicators, conscientious and imaginative theoretical sampling and so on.

Empirical Grounding of Findings

Criterion #1: Are concepts generated?

Since the basic building blocks of any scientific theory is a set of concepts grounded in the data, the first questions to be asked of any grounded theory publication are: Does it generate (via coding-categorizing activity) or at least use concepts? And what are their sources? If concepts are drawn from common usage (such as, “uncertainty”) but are not put to technical use, they are not parts of a grounded theory, for they are not actually grounded in the data themselves. Any monograph that purports to present theoretical interpretations of data based on grounded theory analysis should permit a quick, if crude, assessment of concepts merely by a check of the index to determine whether the listed concepts seem to be technical or common sense ones, and whether there are many of them. For a more complete assessment of such points, one must at least scan the book.

Criterion #2: Are the concepts systematically related?

The key to scientific research is systematic conceptualization through explicit conceptual linkages. So a grounded theory publication must be asked: Have such linkages been made? Do they seem to be grounded in the data? Are the linkages systematically developed? As in other qualitative writing, the linkages are unlikely to be presented as a list of hypotheses, set of propositions, or other formal terms, but be woven throughout the text of the publication.

Criterion #3: Are there many conceptual linkages and are the categories well developed? Do the categories have conceptual density?

If only a few conceptual relationships are specified, even if they are grounded and identified systematically, there is something to be desired in terms of the overall grounding of the theory. In final integration, a grounded theory should tightly relate categories to one another and subcategories in terms of the basic paradigm features -- conditions, context, actions/interactions (including strategies) and consequences. Categories should also be theoretically dense, having many properties richly dimensionalized. It is tight linkages, in terms of paradigm features and density of categories, that give a theory explanatory power. With them a theory is less than satisfactory.

Criterion #4: Is there much variation built into the theory?

Some qualitative studies report on a single phenomenon, establish only a few conditions under which it appears, specify only a few actions/interactions that characterize it, and address a limited number or range of consequences. By contrast, a grounded theory monograph should be judged in terms of the range of variations *and* the specificity with which they are analyzed in relation to the phenomena that are their sources. In a published paper, the range of variations discussed may be more limited, but the author should at least suggest that a larger study includes their specification.

Criterion #5: Are the broader conditions that affect the phenomenon under study built into its explanation?

The grounded theory mode of research requires that the conditions noted in explanatory analysis should not be restricted to ones that bear immediately on the phenomenon under study. The analysis should not be so “microscopic” as to disregard conditions that derive from more “macroscopic” sources, such as economic conditions, social movements, cultural values, and so forth.

Macrosocial conditions must not simply be listed as background material but be linked directly to the phenomena under study through their effect on action/interaction and, through these, to consequences. Any grounded theory publication that omits the broader conditions or fails to explicate their specific connections to the phenomena under investigation falls short in empirical grounding.

Criterion #6: Has “process” been taken into account?

Identifying and specifying change or movement in the form of process is important to grounded theory research. Any change must be linked to the conditions that gave rise to it. Process may be described in terms of stages or phases and as fluidity or movement of action/interaction over time in response to prevailing conditions.

Criterion #7: Do the theoretical findings seem significant and to what extent?

It is entirely possible to complete a grounded theory study, or any study, yet not produce findings that are significant. The question of significance is generally viewed in terms of a theory’s relative importance for stimulating further studies and explaining a range of phenomena. We have in mind, however, assessing a study’s empirical grounding in relation to its actual analysis insofar as this combination of activities produces useful theoretical findings. If the researcher simply follows the grounded theory procedures/canons without imagination or insight into what the data are reflecting -- because he or she fails to see *what* they really indicate except in terms of trivial or well known phenomena -- then the published findings fail on this criterion. Because there is an interplay between researcher and data, no method, certainly not grounded theory, can ensure that the interplay will be creative. Creativity depends on the researcher’s analytic ability, theoretical sensitivity, and sensitivity to the subtleties of the action/interaction (plus the ability to convey the findings in writing). A creative interplay also depends on the other pole of the researcher-data equation, the quality of data collected or utilized. An unimaginative analysis may in a technical sense be adequately grounded in the data, yet be insufficiently grounded for the researcher’s theoretical purpose. This occurs if the researcher does not draw on the complete resources of data or fails to push data collection far enough.

This double set of criteria -- for the research process and for the empirical grounding of theoretical findings -- bears directly on the issues of how fully verified any given grounded theory study is and how this is to be ascertained. When a study is published, if key components of the research process are clearly laid out and if sufficient cues are provided, then the theory or theoretical formulations can be assessed in terms of degrees of plausibility. We can judge under what conditions the theory might fit with “reality,” convey understanding, and prove useful in practical and theoretical terms

4. Contributor: (name & year)

Thomas J. Chermack, 2007

5. Contributors comment of reflection:

The authors could be interpreted to be drawing a parallel between the research process and the theory development process. These terms appear to be used interchangeably in this publication. For clarity, Corbin and Strauss have provided two checklists -- one for use in describing and assessing the research process (or grounded theory development process) and one for describing and assessing the quality of the findings. The authors repeatedly refer to explanatory power considering the research process, and while grounded theory can be thought of as a hybrid or mixed methodological approach, the term “explanatory power” clearly comes from a particular assumption of how to make sense of the world. In any case, Corbin and Strauss have provided a useful set of markers to consider in ANY theory development effort, and they remind us that the process itself can account for considerable variation in the results.

6. Classification of this source (Check all that apply)

- Theory end-product
- Theory development process
- Theory evaluation
- Other: _____