Introduction

‘What is grounded theory . . . and how do you actually do it?’ is a question I am frequently asked when I discuss my research with colleagues and students. This chapter introduces readers new to grounded theory research to the complex process of understanding, selecting and using this research method and methodology. I do this by reflecting throughout the chapter on my own grounded theory journey in relation to my doctoral study. The chapter commences as I guide readers through various considerations as to whether or not grounded theory research is appropriate for their particular study. Then, in outlining the origins and purpose of grounded theory, I introduce readers to a number of issues that have resulted in confusion regarding grounded theory. Having addressed these matters, I unpack the Straussian grounded theory approach, given that this was the approach selected for my doctoral thesis. The reader is then offered some thoughts as to the importance of upholding ethical codes of research practice when conducting grounded theory research. Thereafter, some final suggestions are presented for consideration when contemplating the selection and use of any particular grounded theory approach. To conclude, I advocate for the increased consideration and utility of grounded theory research methods and methodologies in scientific research, regardless of discipline or academic field.

Being a pre-grounded theorist

I never planned on being a grounded theorist, as I entered my doctorate thinking I might conduct a thematic content analysis. However, in researching my selected topic, which focused on the complexity of the phenomenon of meaning-making of voluntary medical adult male circumcision (VMAMC) in South Africa for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention, I found that there was no unified theory that could account for my various research questions. Should you find yourself in a similar position with your selected research topic, namely that there is an absence of such theory in which to locate your study,
grounded theory may be a good research method to utilise since the outcome of such an investigation would be the production of a theory regarding the phenomenon. This is particularly useful for certain levels of postgraduate study where one is expected to contribute novel knowledge to the discipline.

It seemed to me that grounded theory research would be able to address the various limitations of other research methods. For example, quantitative hypothetico-deductive methods would fail to establish a body of knowledge that fully captures the density, complexity and dynamism of meaning-making in the face of a novel HIV-prevention intervention (Fife-Schaw, 2011; Malson, 2010). Likewise, traditional narrative methods serve to offer descriptive accounts as to people’s responses to particular events but are unable to provide an understanding of the processes that underpin people’s behaviour as they seek to resolve certain problems related to those events. Grounded theory houses a relatively wide assortment of research methods and epistemological foundations from which a researcher can select in order to match the distinctiveness of the milieu with the research problem. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that the grounded theory approach differs from other methods of qualitative analysis due to its focus on theory generation and development, which can be either substantive or formal.

A substantive theory is located in the research of a single content area, which involves studying a particular phenomenon positioned in one specific situational setting – for example, the factors involved in individual meaning-making of HIV prevention strategies such as VMAMC in Johannesburg, South Africa. On the other hand, a formal theory is related to a conceptual area and develops as a result of a single phenomenon being investigated under diverse conditions and situations – for example, racism in high and low middle-income countries. Having decided that grounded theory research might fulfil the needs of my investigation, I went on to research the origins of this research method.

Origins and purpose of grounded theory

Grounded theory was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1965) as an alternative to the prevailing research norms of the 1960s. They proposed grounded theory as a way to guide researchers on matters of data collection where they can use data of any type (e.g. video, images, text, observations, spoken word), but details are often vague regarding the actual procedures for data analysis (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005). Grounded theory is a research tool which enables researchers to seek out and conceptualise the latent social patterns and structures of their area of interest through the process of constant comparison (discussed later). Initially, researchers will use an inductive approach to generate substantive codes from their data. Later, the developing theory will suggest to the researcher where to go next to collect data and which more focused questions to ask; this is the deductive phase of the grounded theory process (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). This research process is unpacked more fully later in the chapter.
Confusion regarding grounded theory

One of the primary reasons why novice grounded theorists may be perplexed as to this research method relates to the term ‘grounded theory’ itself. This is because the term is used in two ways: it is the research method but it is also the resulting outcome of the research, a theory that is grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Furthermore, researchers tend to get confused when pursuing grounded theory research because of Glaser and Strauss themselves. While I discuss this at great length in a journal article (see Howard-Payne, 2016), I essentially found that after presenting this new research method, Glaser and Strauss realised that they had starkly different views on the philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory research as well as the actual procedural aspects of conducting such a study. These differences resulted in Glaser and Strauss parting ways. Glaser seemed to appropriate the original or ‘classical’ grounded theory approach, while Strauss paired up with Corbin to pursue the Straussian grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). In Howard-Payne (2016), I address the various reasons for not subscribing to the philosophical and procedural elements of Glaser’s approach. Based on this, I decided to pursue the Straussian approach to my study on the meanings of VMAMC for HIV prevention in South Africa. The next section outlines the data collection and analytic process for this approach.

Straussian grounded theory approach

Before proceeding with the procedural elements of a Straussian grounded theory approach, it is essential to clarify the terminology used to describe the discrete units of analysis for this approach. As the theoretical factors involved in a study begin to emerge from the data, the initial analysis units (codes) are generated. These are considered the identifying anchors that highlight the key aspects of the data being gathered and analysed. Figure 13.1 represents some of the initial codes that emerged from my first interview conducted with my first participant.

Figure 13.1 Example of the initial codes from preliminary interview with first participant

Source: Author
When codes are compared and then clustered together (based on the similarity of their content), they are elevated to concepts. As extensive groups of similar concepts are grouped together, categories are generated which are then used to construct a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). For my doctoral study, the theory consists of various explanations as to the meanings that are attached to VMAMC in an effort to reduce the risk of HIV infection. In order for codes to evolve into categories, which form the basis of this theoretical account of VMAMC meaning-making, the data underwent various recursive coding and analytic processes (Figure 13.2).

**Figure 13.2** Straussian grounded theory process to evolve codes into categories

1. Conduct initial interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule.
2. Transcribe these in full and start coding and analysis.
3. Data coding and analysis (unpacked in detail below).
4. Verification as participants confirm the accuracy of summaries made of interpretation of data analysis. Use this to generate a follow-up interview schedule.

Source: Author

**Data coding**

As proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), three forms of data coding were utilised (in both a simultaneous and interconnected fashion): open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

**Open coding**

Strauss and Corbin (1990) report open coding as being a data coding method whereby data are dissected, scrutinised, compared, conceptualised and finally categorised. As recommended by these grounded theorists, I performed a line-by-line *in vivo* coding of the data for the first interview transcript. *In vivo* coding involves allocating a label (a single word or short phrase) to a portion of data to encapsulate its meaning. The first interview was conducted with a young man who offered relatively detailed and emotive responses to the initial semi-structured interview schedule. I read this transcript carefully, underlined key words and wrote notes regarding my initial impressions in the margins of this transcript (see Figure 13.1 and Box 13.1).
Box 13.1 Researcher’s summary: Impressions from interview with first participant

As expected, strong sentiments regarding cultural norms regarding ‘manliness’ and pain endurance emerge in this interview. It will be interesting to see how participants reconcile the fact that the pain endured during a traditional adult male circumcision ‘makes him a man’ but that medical adult male circumcision would be performed while the man is under anaesthesia (and will not endure the pain of the incisions made but will experience the post-op pain and recovery). Masculinity seems to be a construct that is defined rather by the vague practice of general culturally valued rites rather than what the rite entails. Masculinity is also strongly attached to the autonomy of decision-making power, separate from government, women and even parents (if adult male circumcision is not traditionally performed for cultural reasons). Patriarchy and sexism might play critical roles in whether or not a man will undergo a medical adult male circumcision.

I relied on key phrases (offered by the participant in his own words) to generate a summary (Box 13.1) that reflected an overall sense of his understandings of religious, cultural and medical male circumcision; the HIV pandemic and existing HIV-prevention interventions in South Africa; as well as general sentiments regarding South African masculinity as related to the physical body, sexuality, patriarchy and continued cultural tradition, and the ability to withstand physical pain.

Two alternative key approaches could have been utilised during this categorising process, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990): firstly, a microscopic focus on a particular concept, comparing it to other concepts that arose during the labelling (coding) of the data and assessing its connection, if any, to a similar phenomenon; and secondly, a holistic approach that considers the complete data set to gain an understanding of the concepts. I initially utilised the holistic approach to categorise the data elements by constructing a summary of the first interview, and then shifted into a microscopic method when the next five interviews were analysed line by line, thus initiating the coding process.

Once all the in vivo codes were generated, I listed and matched them with condensed code phrases that reflected the core ideas of what was offered by the participants. I relied on manual coding to code and organise the data. Once the codes generated had been listed, I reduced the number of codes by grouping similar codes together into clusters. The data components were compared for parallels, dissimilarities and uniformity of sentiment, so as to generate coded categories that were relevant to the emerging theory.

After code phrases were grouped together to form clusters, these clusters were reduced into meta-clusters, which were labelled. This was achieved as I determined the properties of the identified clusters and delineated the scope of these properties until no novel information could be generated – that is, until theoretical saturation had been reached. This was accomplished by questioning the cause of a particular cluster, the timing of its occurrence, as well as the manner in which the cluster functions. It was in posing these self-directed questions that I gained further insight into the meaning-making of HIV-preventive VMAMC...
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in South Africa, and contributed to the transitioning process that generated the final theory. It is important to ensure that the labels assigned to clusters are descriptive as well as conceptual. For example, I noted that some initial labels applied to my data set were too descriptive and lacked conceptual consideration. In one instance, an initial label was noted as ‘fathers want their sons to look similar to them’ but this was relabelled as ‘familial patriarchy’. This was later revised in further cycles of data analysis as categories were reorganised to better reflect the VMAMC meaning-making patterns in the data.

As the data coding and analysis progresses, labels become concepts as a comparison of a particular incident is made with previous such incidents, followed by segregating it into as many conceivable codes as possible. As the frequency of this incident increases, comparing a new incident (with respective codes) would then result in the generation of concepts and, ultimately, the properties of the resulting categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

I embraced the process of constant comparison-making to promote codes to a conceptual plane by outlining the conditions under which this concept occurred, offering an account for the incident, as well as forecasting when it was likely to occur (Charmaz, 2014). This generated the foundation of the theory that materialised. Whether or not a code was elevated to a conceptual plane depended on its value in describing and accounting for a particular incident. I was able to evaluate such value by tracking the codes in further rounds of data collection, as well as by associating it to other conceptual categories.

Via the constant comparison method of analysis, concepts are grouped together to generate categories. Strauss and Corbin (1990) regard categories as classifications of concepts, which emerge as concepts are compared with each other during the comparative phase of data analysis. During this phase there is constant comparison between groups of people within the area being investigated. In my study, the groups of participants were men from the general public and student-doctors. This constant comparison technique enabled me to detect trends in the data as well as interactions between these trends. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), categories must be considered higher-order, more abstract forms of codes or concepts.

The next process in the open coding procedure requires the researcher to identify subcategories, which are defined as the properties of categories that can be located along a dimensional range (Charmaz, 2014). For example, I identified data extracts that were related to the emerging category of ‘men’s health’ and sought to identify the different issues related to this category as well as their properties and dimensions. Initially, properties such as ‘masculinity’, ‘the “normal” male body’, ‘familial patriarchy’, ‘critical sensations of the penis’, ‘decision-making power’ as well as ‘risk and blame’ were identified and the dimensions of these properties were made. However, these were revised in further cycles of coding to better reflect the VMAMC meaning-making patterns within the data.

Axial coding

Axial coding involves reassembling the data in a novel fashion whereby the different categories are linked in order to develop a grounded theory (Strauss &
Corbin, 1990). Axial coding occurs at a single category at a time and, in doing so, the researcher is able to have that particular category at the centre of the analysis, thus highlighting its relationship to other categories. This process also plays a crucial role in identifying the core category. Axial coding comprises four discrete but synchronised actions:

1. the speculative connection of subcategories to their related categories is identified;
2. the verification of these postulates alongside the data is addressed;
3. the supplementary expansion of the emerging categories’ properties is performed; and
4. the exploration of the variation in the phenomenon is undertaken (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Such efforts form a part of the axial coding process, and engaging with the data in this fashion enabled me to better appreciate the relationship between the different categories and their elements. Figure 13.3 outlines this axial coding process.

**Figure 13.3** Schematic representation of the processes involved in axial coding

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal conditions</th>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action–interaction schema</td>
<td>Intervening conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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*Source: Author*

I engaged with this coding process by asking questions about the relationships that emerged through the constant comparison method. In order to test the theoretical explanations for the relationships that I started to develop, I relied upon the literature within various areas of public health, traditional and medical circumcision, as well as a number of key psychological theories of masculinity, so as to outline and compare the relationships among these categories.

In addition, I sought to detail the emerging categories of the conditions that result in particular views of VMAMC in response to the perceived risk of HIV infection, and to identify the contexts that shape meaning-making. Thus, I had to engage with the action–interaction schemas by which VMAMC meaning-making is realised, and address the outcomes of these schemas so as to yield a grounded theory that is both detailed and specific.

For instance, the initial open code of ‘masculinity through traditional male circumcision’ (TMC) was considered as being essentially connected with other open codes, while also being linked with higher-order categories such as ‘men’s health’ and ‘tensions between tradition and medicine’. I did so by relating the concepts of ‘gender identity development’ and ‘politics of VMAMC’ to ‘shifting notions of masculinity’, and positioning this within the emerging category of ‘men’s health’. Later cycles of data analysis required me to recategorise these concepts, which resulted in the final presentation of my grounded theory.
I consistently reflected back upon the central phenomenon, the context in which it occurred, as well as the causal and intervening conditions that seemed to reflect the participants’ meaning-making. For example, participants who considered themselves to be at low risk for HIV infection had certain perceptions of existing HIV-prevention interventions as being successful, thus making HIV-preventive VMAMC a radical and unnecessary prevention strategy. Other participants who considered themselves or their communities to be at higher risk of infection felt that existing HIV-prevention strategies were not effective enough in addressing the HIV pandemic, and so felt that VMAMC was a viable and indispensable intervention strategy.

Participants who had recently become sexually active were more concerned with their personal risk of HIV infection and were more open to considering the value of VMAMC in reducing their risk of infection than those participants who claimed to never have been sexually active. The same could be said of participants in the adult male group who had young sons as compared to those participants who had no children. During open coding, such data extracts were labelled ‘favouring of TMC’, but this was reconsidered during axial coding as being related to the concept of ‘risk and blame’. It was noted that ‘the male body’ and ‘patriarchy’ were important with regard to ‘men’s health’ as intersected by ‘plurality and fusion’. This intervening condition proved centrally important to VMAMC meaning-making as it essentially spoke to the fact that participants experienced the legitimacy of diversity and inclusive understandings of the meanings of VMAMC (Tsirogianni & Gaskell, 2011), and these seemingly contradictory elements are connected to result in a complex unit of meaning-making (Martin & Sugarman, 2000). This ‘plurality and fusion’ resulted from men considering a number of their masculine roles (both traditionally hegemonic as well as contemporary perspectives regarding masculinity) and the way in which they should or could be performed in relation to VMAMC and TMC.

Selective coding
While Glaser (1999) maintains that a classic grounded theory could have a number of core categories, Strauss and Corbin (1994) hold that the core category is the pivotal theme of the data in which the other identified categories can be included. It has been argued that when data reflect a number of focal themes, a number of core categories can be identified (Glaser, 1999). Given that two relatively discrete groups were included in the sample for my study, as well as the fact that multiple cultural perspectives regarding TMC were represented by the various participants, it is conceivable that several core categories could be identified during the selective coding of the data. However, while several significant phenomena were exposed during the construction of the themes, the Straussian approach to grounded theory compels the researcher to select only one core phenomenon. I thus continued to code and analyse the data until such time as a single core category emerged, namely that of ‘tensions between tradition and medicine’.

As advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), I initiated the selective coding process by constructing a record of concepts (as produced through the axial
Selective coding converts the relevant records (in the form of lists and schematics) into a discursive summary that describes the themes of the theory. As noted, while several significant phenomena emerged during the construction of the themes, the factors involved in individual meaning-making of HIV-preventive VMAMC were established as the phenomenon during the conceptualisation of the study, while three emerging subcategories were identified. My objective was to emphasise grounded theories that embody a basic social process and a basic social problem, as well as to remain aligned with the aim of my study.

The basic social process and the basic social problem are issues shared by the individuals who participated in the study, but they may not have been overtly expressed by them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As grounded in the interview data, I found the basic social problem to be performances of masculinity, which resulted in the basic social process of participants having to negotiate tensions between tradition and medicine.

It was with this in mind that I repositioned the existing categories and their properties, a process guided by configuring trends monitored within the data. The consequence of exposing these patterns in the data is that the conditions of the theory’s occurrence are augmented. In my study, three patterns were recognised and labelled: ‘citizen rights and responsibilities in times of HIV’, ‘men’s health’ and ‘politics of implementation’.

Data collection from this point on was directed towards substantiating the overall theory and the patterns of factors in individual meaning-making. This was performed as I surveyed the data to locate corroborating data, but at the same time I considered data that were unusual or contradictory. Participants
were systematically offered the theory to invite their input (regarding its usefulness and applicability to their understanding of VMAMC) and given an appraisal of its development. The concluding cycle of interviews (for each group of participants) was directed towards gaining confirmatory insight into the interpretation of their accounts, and the theory was amended with this final data gathered.

Some concerns, one of which was related to the defining features of patriarchy, emerged from the final cycle of interviews, which were more oriented towards the hypothetical scenarios generated by the interview questions regarding the action of VMAMC for HIV prevention for men who have already undergone a TMC. Another concern was the pessimism and negativity attached to the perceptions of public health and the Department of Health in general, which may have corrupted the pattern of ‘the role of the state’ and ‘autonomy and action’ with regard to making health decisions.

Data analysis

Two forms of data analysis occur for a Straussian grounded theory approach: formal analysis through theoretical sampling; and informal analysis, which involves memo writing through the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

**Formal analysis: Theoretical sampling**

Theoretical sampling commenced as I gathered initial data, in this case based on a broad set of semi-structured interview questions regarding general views about TMC, VMAMC and the HIV pandemic in South Africa. This procedure allowed for testing the relevance of such interview questions (where they proved to be inappropriate, they were replaced and retested), which became more intensely focused as the theory started to develop and as the data were categorised and a comparison of these categories was performed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The initial research question – What are the individual meaning-making factors regarding VMAMC for the purposes of HIV prevention? – was presented in the form of an elaborated initial individual semi-structured interview schedule to adult and young males from Alexandra township, where the data collected were transcribed and coded. This gave rise to tentative theoretical categories, which further informed more focused data collection rounds.

As a result, there was a further refining of conceptual categories that were re-examined in relation to earlier data, where a particular theoretical category was adopted (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011). This process was conducted until such time as there was sufficient integration of data from various rounds of data collection, and a sound theoretical model could be presented where the key factors that influence the meaning-making of VMAMC for the purposes of HIV prevention were outlined in a relational manner. I had to contend with the absence
of pre-set theoretical samples to be used in generating codes, concepts and categories, thus it was only at the conclusion of the research that the number and type of categories that were sampled could be identified. In order to cultivate the expansion of a category (to the greatest extent possible), an extensive and varied scope of concepts was included, with the limitation of the research aims brought to the fore. If one is cognisant of the inclusion of concepts, one can directly manage the overview of the conceptual levels, and by having command over concept similarities and divergence, I was able to establish the identification of categories and their properties. The minimisation of concept divergence resulted in the identification of central category properties, while the converse assisted in the expansion of this instituted framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The two criteria used to guide theoretical sampling are basic in their conceptualisation but complex in their execution: theoretical purpose and relevance (Harry et al., 2005). Whether or not theoretical sampling should persist is resolved by the degree to which additional sampling would add value to the progression of the theory. This decision is informed by the emerging theoretical categories. I adopted the position held by Strauss and Corbin (1994) to conclude the sampling of certain concepts at the point when the category reached theoretical saturation, which occurred when the inclusion of supplementary data failed to further develop the properties of that category.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) also reference the tendency for fresh categories to surface, even at the final stages of the research process, and recommend that such categories not be saturated. For this reason, I focused further on the saturation (to the greatest extent possible) of the core theoretical category.

**Informal analysis: Memo writing and constant comparisons**

Informal analysis should be engaged with at the initiation of the data gathering process (both during the actual interviews by asking clarifying or elaborating questions, and post-interviews through the process of memo writing), in order to gain some understanding of the data obtained from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Memo writing**

As discussed previously, I organised memos during theoretical sorting, diagramming (which I found to be valuable for providing visual representation of summarised key points raised from each interview and how these related to other interviews) and integrating of memos. Memo writing occurring at this stage in the research process was highly conceptual as I sought to understand the magnitude and characteristics of the categories emerging from the data (Harry et al., 2005). The content of a number of these memoranda was included in the final structure of the grounded theory.

**Constant comparison method**

The grounded theory data coding and analysis process for my study involved elaborating and refining the theoretical categories that emerged from the data.
According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), categories can be considered higher-order, more abstract forms of codes or concepts, and are essentially the most credible conceptual explanation. Categories are established through the constant comparison method whereby all possible explanations for the data are considered, a hypothesis is formed for each potential account, and such hypotheses are empirically checked by re-examining the data (Charmaz, 2014).

The constant comparison method was conceptualised by Glaser and Strauss prior to the divergence of their schools of grounded theory and continued to be used by both Glaserian and Straussian grounded theorists after the institution of these separate schools. This was primarily due to its critical function (conjunction with theoretical sampling) in establishing ‘categories, properties, and hypotheses’ that create the foundation of the developing theory. Glaser and Strauss (1965) include four phases in this process: incidents that are considered pertinent to each category are compared; the categories and their properties are amalgamated; the theory is bordered; and the theory is finally reported. These four phases are addressed in detail below.

Comparison of incidents
Two rules direct the process of comparing incidents (Glaser & Strauss, 1965): 1) the researcher must compare the incident with previous incidents in the same and in other groups of the category, while coding the incident for a category; and 2) the researcher should stop coding at the point where a conflict in thinking develops and should make a note of these thoughts in a memo.

Grounded theory places great emphasis on the importance of memo writing as it allows the researcher to chronicle any ideas, queries and objectives, and to delineate what may be obvious or embedded in the data collected. Such chronicling allowed me to conceptually digest the data gathered hitherto and to formulate a way forward for future data collection (Charmaz, 2014).

It is also suggested that a gamut of categories be constructed so as to allow the researcher to classify their scope, stipulations, significance and associations. Glaser and Strauss (1965) account for two forms of concepts that surface from the comparison of incidents: 1) concepts that are extracted from the language or terminology used in the description of the process, behaviour or responses related to the research situation; and 2) those concepts that are established by the researcher in an attempt to account for and justify those processes, behaviours or responses. Although it was a challenging task, I tried to avoid prematurely privileging any particular set of categories before engaging fully with the data gathered.

Integration of categories
The second phase of theory generation involved integrating categories and their assigned properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This occurred organically as theoretical sampling and analysis were performed simultaneously (where the collection of data was directed by the questions raised by the gaps in the theory as it was being generated).
Theory delimitation
Once there is an integration of categories, the third phase of developing a theory includes delimiting the theory at two points: 1) those of the theory, where the theory is adapted to elicit clarity by removing unrelated occurrences of knowledge as well as expanding those of value to the area of study; and 2) those of the categories – where the theory begins to surface, the number of categories is condensed in line with the delimitations of the theory. This reduction, as lesser sets of complex concepts emerged to yield a more prudent theory that was able to meet a wide scope of applicability, moved me to the final stage of theory development (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011).

Writing the theory
The grounded theory culminated as I wrote the theory by satisfying three requirements: 1) the framework must produce a systematic and logically substantive theory; 2) it has an obligation to be reflective of truth and accuracy (in terms of precisely reflecting the interview data); and 3) its final presentation should be considered practical by its audience.

This stage of theory generation was considered an integral part of the investigative process due to the additional insights, ultimately included in the final theory via the writing and rewriting of the theory, which was refined as a result of the continued engagement with the data. This final process afforded me the opportunity to substantiate and explicate conjecture, address and resolve remaining problems, and ensure that all concepts were comprehensive and clear in their presentations.

What does a final Straussian grounded theory look like?
The final grounded theory must be comprised of one core category, which is underpinned by various subcategories. Each subcategory will be comprised of properties that are made up of various dimensions. As you keep track of your memos, you will see how your codes were linked (theoretically) and you can trace this pattern throughout your subcategories. The one issue that links your subcategories will be labelled as your interacting and intervening variable. You then have to identify the theoretical cause of that variable, which will be labelled as your causal condition. This will be comprised of implicit and explicit strategies, namely the theoretical concept that drives the cause (implicit) and how it manifests (explicit). To tie your theory together, you need to identify the basic social process (which is most typically the way in which your core category manifests itself) and the basic social problem (the theoretical cause of the core category). Figure 13.5 represents an overview of my final grounded theory.

I rewrote my theory countless times until I felt that everything was adequately accounted for in my data set. Until that point, confusion reigned, which is a comfortable state to be in for a grounded theorist! Having unpacked the
intricacies of a Straussian grounded theory approach, I now briefly consider some of the practical implications of this research method as it relates to ethical codes of research practice.

Some ethical considerations for grounded theorists

One of the core aspects of a Straussian grounded theory is the recursive collection and analysis of data whereby participants are invited to verify the researcher’s interpretation of their previous interview so that the interview schedule can be refined and follow-up interviews conducted with that same participant. What this means, practically speaking, is that researchers might have lengthy interviews with a single participant on several occasions. This requires commitment, not only from the researcher, but from the participants who generously offer their time and knowledge to the research on an ongoing basis. Without some form of compensation for this time and knowledge, researchers are unlikely to retain participants over a period of time (Cotter, Burke, Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 2005). As the number of interviews increased, my participants started to ask for money, free healthcare, free medical aid or health insurance, free medical circumcisions and/or free education as compensation for their continued participation in my study. Since ongoing involvement by participants is crucial for developing grounded theory research, it may be tempting for a researcher to offer participants what they feel is fair compensation. The matter of adequate compensation may introduce issues for ethical consideration for grounded theorists.

The ethical debate to be considered is, ‘At what point does compensation become coercion?’ Coercion can be defined as ‘an overt threat of harm [that] is intentionally presented by one person to another to obtain compliance’
A core ethical standard that all researchers must uphold relates to informed consent and voluntary participation (Appelbaum, Lidz & Klitzman, 2009). Of course, this is a point that can and should be debated, but one may argue that to offer money, free education or healthcare services to participants from low-income communities in South Africa as a form of compensation for their research participation is in fact coercion (Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Wertheimer & Miller, 2008). Researchers must resolve this ethical debate for themselves as they weigh the merits and consequences of ‘adequate compensation’ against the potential threat of coercion. I urge researchers to be aware of this dilemma in grounded theory and to resolve this issue by consulting with their respective ethics committees during the proposal-writing phase of the research process. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to spend more time than usual discussing with potential participants what would be expected of them (in terms of their ongoing participation) and what you are offering by way of compensation if they choose to participate in your grounded theory research.

In my study, I chose to seek out new participants rather than attempt to offer the compensation requested by participants who became dissatisfied with only being offered refreshments during the interviews. Not only was it not financially feasible for me to provide money, free healthcare or free education to the participants, but I felt it breached the ethical standard of non-coercion. Of course, the challenge of ongoing recruitment and retention of participants in grounded theory research can be disheartening if researchers are unable (practically and/or ethically) to provide the type of compensation that some participants request, yet the resolution to uphold ethical standards of conduct is paramount in research practice. Having presented the challenges that a novice researcher may encounter when embarking upon grounded theory research, including upholding the ethical codes of research practice, I now offer a final suggestion for starting a grounded theory study.

Final suggestion

While many tips could be offered for individual grounded theories, I offer what I consider to be a critical suggestion as researchers start their methodological journey. I believe that it is essential for researchers to clarify what type of grounded theorist they may be from the outset of the study. This can be established by reading seminal work from Strauss and Corbin, or Glaser; however, the work of Charmaz, which was not discussed in this chapter, is also compelling and worthy of engagement. In considering their philosophical assumptions regarding grounded theory research, readers can identify relatively early on whether or not they agree with the authors’ position on the research paradigm, epistemology and ontology. For example, a researcher who is attracted to the idea of objectivity, and casting aside all personal and professional expectations for a study, may be well suited to a Glaserian grounded theory approach. If researchers are unconvinced by this philosophy but rather feel compelled by the notion that axial coding can be used to understand the complex conditions of an investigative
phenomenon, then they may find the Straussian approach well suited to their study.

Researchers may find reading certain seminal works easier than reading others because that particular grounded theory approach resonates more profoundly with their view of the world and how their research is located within that world. As with most types of research, the grounded theory approach selected often reflects a researcher’s true identity, which is vital to the successful completion of any study.

Embrace being a grounded theorist

Despite the apparent confusion regarding grounded theory research, once researchers have taken the time to grapple with the various issues addressed in this chapter, they will find that it is a unique research method and methodology for a number of reasons.

It is a flexible method that is structured in a way that allows researchers theoretical and practical room to address research problems as they arise. This requires researchers to be creative in their approach to the research process. As a result, grounded theory is intellectually exciting because it requires researchers to read widely, often beyond their typical disciplinary borders.

Embracing the notion of emergence will facilitate the simultaneous inductive–deductive thinking that is the foundation of grounded theory research. While this requires researchers to be highly organised people with (relatively) good memories, it also allows them to be independent thinkers.

A good grounded theorist likes to solve puzzles and understand how different features of the resulting grounded theory are related to each other. This is thought-provoking and generally exciting as it often requires researchers to consider the more obscure aspects of their research in order to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses the phenomenon under investigation.

Finally, being a grounded theorist challenges early career academics to tackle insecurities regarding thoughts that theory development is reserved only for more experienced professors or the ‘legends’, such as Freud and Darwin. Grounded theory research encourages researchers, regardless of the stage of their careers, to contribute to knowledge production, particularly if the resulting theory addresses unique contextual phenomena.

Conclusion

This chapter relied on my experience of using a Straussian grounded theory approach for my doctoral study on meaning-making of HIV-prophylactic VMAMC in South Africa. In relaying this experience, I presented the origins and purpose of grounded theory research but also provided readers with an outline of the challenges that come with trying to make sense of this unique research method and methodology. Ultimately, this chapter advocates that researchers
make more use of grounded theory research to conduct empirically sound studies that present novel theory which is grounded in the data. This will ensure that scholars have continued access to improved, contextually relevant theory in which to locate their own research.

References


