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CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: PURPOSE, PROCESS, PROMISE

ABSTRACT

Grounded theory is the most cited qualitative methodology, and its popularity is continually increasing through researchers' engagement with its constructivist school. In this short paper, I explore its core purpose, history, and development over time, including its 'contested' nature, and the constructivist school's increasing emphasis on social justice-oriented research through its pragmatist roots. Next, I examine constructivist grounded theory's process, examining its core features and how these translate into specific strategies, as well as constructivist 'adaptations'. Here, I also consider examples from education and nursing social justice-oriented research that have employed constructivist grounded theory. Finally, I end by considering the promise of the methodology, first by outlining some key challenges in its use, and finally by emphasising the significant potential of the methodology for social justice research into the future.

Keywords

Grounded theory; Constructivist grounded theory; Social justice research; Qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Grounded theory is the most cited qualitative methodology (Morse et al., 2021a; Bryant, 2017) and its popularity is continually increasing through researchers' engagement with its constructivist school. In this short paper¹, I consider its core purpose, history, and development over time, including its 'contested' nature, and the constructivist school's increasing emphasis on social justice-oriented research through its pragmatist roots. Next, I examine constructivist grounded theory's process, examining its core features and how these translate into specific strategies, as well as constructivist 'adaptations'. Here, I also consider examples from education and nursing social justice-oriented research that have employed constructivist grounded theory. Finally, I end by considering the promise of the methodology, first by outlining some key challenges apparent in its use, and finally by emphasising the significant potential of the methodology for social justice research into the future.

2. Purpose

Grounded theory methodology was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the US in the 1960s (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) during their study about death and dying in hospitals (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1968). Concerned at the time about the dominance of 'grand theories', and the lack of connection between empirical data and theory development, they sought to develop an exploratory but systematic qualitative methodology to develop theory *from* data. This was in contrast to the hypothetico-deductive (quantitative) research models in vogue in sociology at the time, which emphasised testing theory with data. Grounded theory's core perspective is "how to focus on action and change" (Morse et al., 2021b, p. 313) and its core purpose is as "a mode of conceptualizing, abstracting, and theorizing" (p. 293). Grounded theory subsequently developed into different 'schools', with Strauss (1987, 1993) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998) putting forward new technical procedures and Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998) remaining closer to the original statement of method. The methodology became quite contested, with disagreement about its philosophical underpinnings. Specifically, aspects of both 'original' and, especially, Glaserian, grounded theory were critiqued as being based on objectivist conceptions of reality and knowledge (Charmaz, 2000, 2014; Bryant, 2017), and both researcher and participants presented without reflexivity. Such positivist-leaning underpinnings have been regarded as problematic for several decades (Kuhn, 1962; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and they are especially so in justice-oriented research, which by its nature requires a high level of reflexivity (Charmaz, 2005; Keane, 2015; Charmaz et al. 2018; Keane & Thornberg, 2025b).

¹ Note that due to word count constraints, only brief summaries of certain key ideas are included in this paper. See cited sources for further information. This paper is based upon my invited keynote address at the 9th World Conference on Qualitative Research (WCQR) at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, 4-6 February 2025.

Charmaz's (2000, 2005, 2006, 2014, 2017; Charmaz et al., 2018) *constructivist* grounded theory, while retaining the guidelines of the original method, has repositioned the method on a new epistemological footing. Charmaz (2000) argues that for multiple social realities and how our knowledge of 'reality' is inevitably socially constructed. Researcher and participant positions and subjectivities are recognised and data are understood to be partial and non-neutral (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, rather than 'discovering' a grounded theory in data, for Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2014), we *construct* our grounded theories in negotiation with our participants. In the first edition of *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2006, p.10), she explained:

I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it ... Research participants' implicit meanings, experiential views - and researchers' finished grounded theories - are constructions of reality. From a constructivist perspective, our analyses reflect researcher positionality and the wider research context (Charmaz, 2006, 2009, 2014; Charmaz et al., 2018; Keane, 2015, 2022; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012, 2014; Thornberg & Keane, 2022; Keane & Thornberg, 2025b). In this context, constructivist grounded theory emphasizes "deep reflexivity" and "methodological self-consciousness" (Charmaz, 2017) which has implications for research design and implementation. Constructivist grounded theory is being employed in a wide range of disciplines and in topics with a diversity of foci (cf. Charmaz, 2021), but it is especially well suited to social justice-oriented research. Indeed, Charmaz increasingly focused on the alignment between her version of the methodology and this research focus over time (cf. Charmaz, 2011, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021; Charmaz et al., 2018). Indeed, in the second edition of her famous *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Charmaz (2014, pp. 339-340) boldly asked (and answered):

Should knowledge transform practice and social processes? Yes. Can grounded theory studies contribute to a better world? Yes. Should such questions influence what we study and how we study it. Yes.

In this way, our orientation in constructivist grounded theory reflects Norman Denzin's proclamation that "Our project is to change society, not just interpret or write about it" (cf. Giardina, 2024). Like Denzin, constructivist grounded theorists believe in the transformational power of qualitative inquiry – including through constructivist grounded theory - in the creation of socially just societies (Staller, 2023). Charmaz's (2004, p. 991) exhortation to "bring passion, curiosity, and *care* to your work" and to "do something that *makes a difference* to the world" [my emphasis] reminds us of the importance of "increasing awareness of the conditions of our research, including what we bring to it and do with it" (Charmaz, 2021, p. 156).

Thus, the constructivist school is positioned as challenging “positivist elements that ignore reflexivity, overlook ethical issues, disregard issues of representation” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 323) as well as enabling researchers to demonstrate how social, cultural, and psychological processes of inequality (and privilege) are enacted in people’s meanings and actions (Charmaz et al., 2018). For Keane (2022b), Charmaz’s work developed grounded theory’s axiological, as well as epistemological, foundation.

It should be noted that part of constructivist grounded theory’s alignment with justice-oriented research is due to its pragmatist philosophical roots. Indeed, Charmaz (2021, p. 158) felt that the fit between them was “striking”. Both emphasise fluid realities, multiple perspectives, facts and values being inherently related, and the importance of studying participants’ actions to address problems of importance in the world, particularly in relation to structural inequalities in society, and advancing democratic principles (Charmaz, 2021; Charmaz et al., 2018). Charmaz (2017, 2021) also highlighted constructivist grounded theory as having significant potential for *critical* qualitative inquiry, noting that the methodology has the tools to answer core questions relating to who benefits from (and suffers as a result of) particular actions, and to the conditions underlying these processes.

3. Process

Across the schools of grounded theory, there are several core features (Thornberg & Keane, 2022) enacted through a range of central strategies, and, in the case of constructivist grounded theory, there are also some important ‘adaptations’ which align the implementation of the methodology with constructivist principles. Figure 1 captures these in summary format².

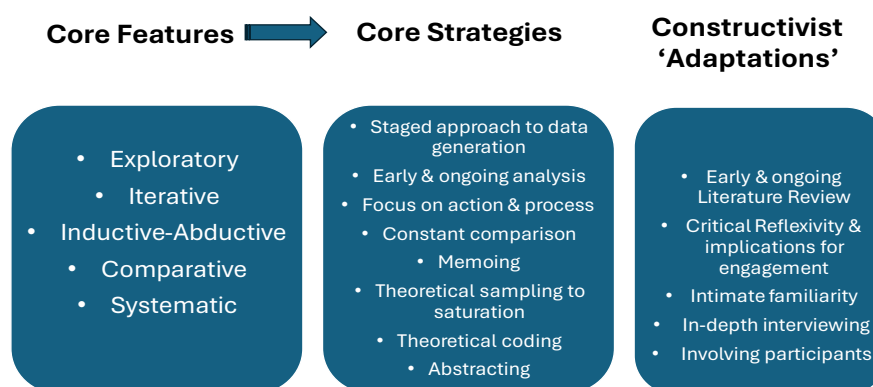


Figure 1. Overview of Constructivist Grounded Theory Features, Strategies & Adaptations

² Please see Charmaz (2014), Charmaz et al. (2018), Thornberg & Keane (2022), and Keane & Thornberg (2025b), for a more detailed explication of features, strategies and adaptations.

Grounded theory is fundamentally open-ended and **exploratory** through its aim of conceptualising and theorising *from* data, in a ‘ground up’ approach. It has primarily been conducted with qualitative data, both interview and observational. Grounded theory is **iterative** in that we move back and forth between data generation and analysis in a staged fashion and engage in early analysis. Analysis involves initial and focused coding using ‘gerunds’, focusing on action and process, and developing highly provisional categories and properties, all using Glaser’s (1965) constant **comparative** method through which we constantly compare data with data, data with codes, and codes with codes. We engage in theoretical sampling through next data generation (and analysis) to fill ‘gaps’ in the emerging analytic framework. Constructivist grounded theory’s logic is both **inductive and abductive** as we first analyse our data to interpret larger patterns but later also consider, and investigate the evidence in our data for, possible relationships between aspects (cf. Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012, 2014; Thornberg, 2022). While flexible, grounded theory is also fundamentally **systematic**, with guidelines offered to assist the researcher in planning, implementing, and interpreting their study (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Flick, 2018; Keane & Thornberg, 2025b). A central support for analysis and conceptualisation throughout is memoing - writing analytic notes about our data (cf. Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2014). This is conducted throughout the study, to record ideas and questions and to assist us in *generating* ideas and conceptualisations (Glaser, 1978, 1998; 2014; Lempert, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Keane, 2022a). We continue data generation until saturation, understood as achieving in-depth understanding of the topic and being able to predict participant responses (Morse et al., 2021b). Throughout, we remember grounded theory’s core focus as a method of conceptualising (and theorising) and engage in abstracting as we articulate actions and processes in our data.

Constructivist grounded theory’s revised epistemological (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2014) and axiological (Keane, 2022b) foundation has implications for the way in which a study is conducted. We have considered these ‘adaptations’ in detail elsewhere (cf. Keane & Thornberg, 2025a); here, I give a summary of central concerns. The first relates to *the role of the literature review*; whereas in Glaserian grounded theory, it is advised that the researcher avoid the literature until analysis is complete to avoid undue influence on the developing theory. In constructivist grounded theory, we encourage an early and ongoing ‘informed’ approach to the literature (Thornberg, 2012) on the basis that it is vital to familiarise oneself with the research terrain and that not doing so is impractical and underestimates the researcher’s capacity to be reflexive (Dunne, 2011; Thornberg & Dunne, 2019). In social justice-oriented research, we are also alert to ‘sensitising concepts’ (Blumer, 1969) such as power and oppression, for example, but are ready to discard them based on our data if not relevant (Charmaz et al. 2018). Secondly, constructivist grounded theory emphasises the importance of the researcher being *critically reflexive*, including in relation to researcher positionality. This means that the researcher engages in ongoing reflective journaling throughout a study *and* takes certain actions during study implementation, analysis, and write-up based on the implications of their positionality (cf. Charmaz, 2017, 2021; Keane, 2015, 2022b, Charmaz et al., 2018; Keane & Thornberg, 2025b).

Researchers must critically reflect on their personal and professional biographies and experiences and make explicit the standpoints they bring to the research (Charmaz, 2014). It is important to note that by recognising the inevitable impact of the researcher, we are not inappropriately ‘inserting’ researcher perspectives into a grounded theory. While acknowledging that data are inevitably co-constructed, constructivist grounded theorists do *not* deliberately impose meanings on an emerging analysis. From a constructivist perspective, we need to remember that *we all* bring beliefs and biases to our research. The key thing is to unearth, acknowledge, and be aware of these throughout a study. By doing so, researchers become “aware of how and to what extent they draw on such assumptions and perspectives” and then must “*be willing to revise or relinquish them*, should their interpretations of the data so indicate” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30, my emphasis). A third important constructivist adaptation relates to the *meaningful involvement of participants* in the co-constructive research process through the understanding that we research *with* and not *on* participants (Keane, 2015, 2022b; Charmaz et al., 2018). This participatory orientation aligns not only with constructivist principles but also with the fundamentally democratic ethos underlying pragmatism (Charmaz et al., 2018; Thornberg, 2022) which works very well in social justice-oriented research, particularly in relation to addressing researcher-participant power differentials. Meaningful participant involvement can be achieved in several ways, including during data generation and analysis, and theory construction (for examples, see Arczynski & Morrow, 2017; Bianchi et al., 2025; Bradford, 2025; Harris & Keane, 2025; Keane, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2022b, 2023, 2024; Kaufman & Keane, 2025; Loya, 2025; Selvik, 2025). Other important constructivist ‘adaptations’ include the flexible, intensive approach to interviewing (where interviewing is a data generation method used). We aim to establish rapport with participants and thus view interviews “as emergent interactions in which social bonds may develop” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 91).

The focus in our journey to co-construct a theoretical analysis based on the data is an in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences and interpretations, attendance to context, the researcher-participant relationship, taking the role of the “interested learner” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 73), and allowing participants to occupy the space as experts on their lives (ibid.).

Constructivist grounded theory is employed in social justice-oriented research across many disciplines, *inter alia* in Education, Nursing, Psychology, and Social Work (cf. Charmaz, 2021). My constructivist grounded theory research in education about social class, widening participation to higher education and the professions over the last 20 years has had a strong social justice orientation. As well as employing core grounded theory procedures previously outlined, it has been vital to recognise the power differentials at play between myself as researcher and my participants. In one study about the university experiences of students from different social class backgrounds (Keane, 2011a,b, 2012, 2015), I prioritised rapport, trust, and reciprocity building, to support the “intimate familiarity” that Charmaz (2005) identifies as a hallmark of constructivist grounded theory. These processes underpin *quality* data generation but also are vital as part of an *ethical* grounded theory practice.

I prioritised critical reflexivity about my personal and professional positionality, journaling throughout, and using these writings to inform the development of a critical autobiographical statement for inclusion in publications. I also used theoretical sampling ‘stages’ to meaningfully involve participants in recognition of the fundamentally co-constructive nature of the methodology and to create a more democratised research process. To achieve this, I shared a summary of provisional categories and my interpretations with participants in advance of final interviews, and sought their feedback, as well as gathering more data to fill emergent analytic gaps (see Keane, 2015). I used these same procedures in a more recent study with student teachers from working class backgrounds in the context of diversifying the teaching profession (Keane, 2022b, 2023, 2024a,b), but also developed the strategy of ‘positionality sharing’, or researcher self-disclosure. Here, I was researcher but also the participants’ lecturer, which had additional implications due to our relative positionalities, particularly participants’ vulnerabilities. Therefore, at the outset of data generation, I explained my interest in the topic and offered information about my background, which resulted in participants reporting that they felt more comfortable sharing sensitive information particularly given the hierarchical relationships in the research exercise (see Pezalla et al., 2012 and Abell et al., 2006 on benefits and risks). These constructivist grounded theory studies produced conceptualisations of students’ experiences of what I termed ‘distancing to self-protect’ in university (Keane, 2011), or ‘chameleoning to fit in’ (Keane, 2023) in their placement schools, which revealed the strong mediating effect of social class on participants’ socio-relational experiences, and the underpinning motivation for their actions and reactions. Both studies also allowed multiple opportunities to enact constructivist principles in the context of social justice-oriented research³.

In an example from Nursing, Schreiber and Tomm-Bonde (2015) in Canada observe that in their constructivist grounded theory studies – on topics such as how women managed their lives in the context of HIV/AIDS, and how women created a non-cash food economy - they moved *beyond* constructivism to incorporate a culturally appropriate methodology underpinned by a transformative philosophy. In this context, writing about their work as Western nursing researchers conducting investigations in Mozambique, they discuss the challenges for researchers exploring local perspectives. Schreiber and Tomm-Bonde (2015) discuss their decision to use the South African philosophy of *Ubuntu* as an appropriate ontology to guide their constructivist grounded theory study implementation. They argue that the methodology is congruent with *Ubuntu*, highlighting several areas of correspondence, such as the relativist ontology, humility, solidarity, harmony, and in particular, emphases on reciprocity, reflexivity, and social justice. While their constructivist grounded theory studies employed the core features of grounded theory methodology previously outlined, their 2015 paper considers their engagement in the field relative to these core areas of correspondence.

³ See Keane and Thornberg’s (2025) *Routledge International Handbook of Constructivist Grounded Theory in Educational Research* for more examples of the methodology in use in education.

A central feature involved addressing the researcher-participant power imbalance through a number of strategies, including: 1) active engagement in reflexive practice through journaling and discussion about how they (as researchers) were situated and located in the study (personally and professionally) and sharing this with participants; 2) sharing resources with and providing small gifts to participants; 3) providing feedback on a funding proposal; and 4) emphasising egalitarian relationships and reciprocity in multiple ways, including participating in a song and dance ritual! Schreiber and Tonn-Bonde (2015) end by underlining the alignment between the *Ubuntu* philosophy and constructivist grounded theory, pointing to its potential – or promise – as a starting point for anti-oppressive research that privileges the voice of the global South.

4. Promise

While some challenges can be observed in the use of grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory methodology, this powerful and popular methodology has a very promising (and hopefully more united) future.

Morse et al. (2021b, p. 313) emphasise the need for a return to grounded theory's core perspective "as a mode of conceptualizing ... human behaviour" and "how to focus on action and change". They express concern about the decline in quality of studies purporting to have employed the methodology, arguing that many "... do not meet minimum standards" (p. 290). Similarly, Charmaz (2021, pp. 156-157) bemoans the "thin analyses" (p. 157) produced by many claiming to have employed grounded theory, and further notes that many researchers "frequently adopt coding and memo-writing for summarizing and synthesising data rather than for constructing theories of categories and processes through constant comparative analysis".

In our review of many works that reported having employed some form of grounded theory in educational research in preparation of our Handbook (Keane & Thornberg, 2025a), many misunderstandings and poor practices were observed, particularly in relation to inadequate data generation, lack of early analysis of data, absence or misuse of theoretical sampling, lack of or inadequate engagement in memoing, and lack of or inadequate conceptual or theoretical development. In the final chapter of our Handbook (Keane & Thornberg, 2025c, pp. 372-375), we set out recommendations that a constructivist grounded theory researcher may find useful. In our review, we also found that, from a constructivist perspective, core processes relating to critical reflexivity and co-construction were frequently underdeveloped. Often, it was unclear what had been done in practice to align a grounded theory study with constructivist principles. A challenge I see in some constructivist grounded theory studies on social justice topics is a tendency to prioritise constructivist adaptations over core grounded theory processes. We need both. We discuss these challenges and, importantly, how to address them in our Handbook (cf. Keane & Thornberg, 2025c).

An exciting development in recent years has been the excellent collaborative work taking place between grounded theorists from different ‘schools’ under the auspices of the *International Association of Grounded Theorists*. This work has included two highly successful international conferences in 2021 and 2024, featuring the work of established and early career researchers employing a variety of grounded theory approaches. The Steering Committee is currently collaborating on a potential joint publication. While we all greatly mourn the loss of Kathy Charmaz, Barney Glaser, and Anselm Strauss (and many others), as grounded theory scholars of the present, we are excited to come together to chart a more united methodological future.

In terms of social justice-oriented research, there is very significant potential for further aligning constructivist grounded theory with principles underpinning transformative research for social justice, as we seek, in Norman Denzin’s words, to “change society, not just interpret or write about it”. In this regard, there are opportunities to consider how we may further integrate critical reflexivity and participatory principles, including through decolonising methodologies, into grounded theory, while simultaneously producing high quality, impactful conceptual analyses that hold meaning for our participants and communities, and help us to fulfil Charmaz’s (2004, p. 991) vision of constructivist grounded theory as a methodology for social justice research that will, in her words, “make a difference to the world”.

5. Conclusion

This short paper has explored the purpose, process, and promise of constructivist grounded theory in social justice-oriented research. The popular methodology’s use has mushroomed in the last decade across many fields and substantive areas and holds significant potential in this domain into the future.

Key for researchers considering employing this methodology is understanding both its core processes (across schools) and its constructivist adaptations in order to produce useful, compelling, and impactful conceptual analyses that serve social justice goals in society.

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