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## Grounded theory

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Grounded theory is a method, often used in qualitative research, that involves the development of theory in social science research through the collection and analysis of data. Unlike traditional social science research, grounded theory begins with the collection of data rather than the formulation of a hypothesis. Developed by two sociologists conducting research related to the sociology of illness at the University of California, San Francisco, grounded theory has since been used in a variety of other social science fields, including education, economics, [anthropology](#), and political science. Since its introduction during the 1960s, grounded theory has diverged into related but dissimilar approaches.



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### Overview

In 1967 Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *Awareness of Dying*, a book that explored the experiences of dying hospital patients. As part of this process, Glaser and Strauss developed a research methodology that they initially termed the constant comparative method, and was later named grounded theory. Most social science research up until that point had followed a highly structured approach, which entailed forming a hypothesis, performing a literature review, collecting and analyzing data, and only then realizing the findings. Grounded theory, which Glaser and Strauss first wrote about in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, in many ways reversed this traditional approach.

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Researchers utilizing the grounded theory begin the process by collecting data as a way to use both inductive and deductive thinking as a way to engage in a systematic generation from

theory. In doing so, researchers pursue several related but mutually exclusive goals. One goal is the formulation of hypotheses based upon conceptual ideas. Another goal of researchers using grounded theory approach is to discover what concerns the participants in the study may have and how they may try to resolve them. Other researchers may seek verification of hypotheses that are generated through the process of comparing conceptualized data at different levels of abstraction. Rather than seeking “truth,” researchers using a grounded theory approach try to answer the questions “what’s going on here?” and “how are the participants trying to solve their main problem?” This focus on explanation rather than description is one way in which grounded theory varies from other forms of inquiry.

Those using grounded theory engage in four stages of analysis, each of which involves the collection of data and concurrent analysis. Data collection is ongoing throughout four stages: codes, concepts, categories, and theory. During the codes stage researchers identify those anchors that permit the key points of the data to be gathered. While involved in the concepts stage researchers collect codes of similar content so that data may be grouped. The categories stage uses broad groups of similar concepts in order to generate a theory. Finally, during the theory stage explanations are collected that elucidate the subject of the research. No one stage is more important than the others, and each helps the researcher to clarify what is going on in a given situation and to determine how participants are trying to solve the main problem.

While traditional social studies research focuses on the validity of findings, grounded theory is judged by its fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability. Fit involves how well concepts fit with the incidents they represent, and incidents are constantly compared to concepts to ensure this. Relevance examines the real concerns of participants, and when it is well done it grabs the attention of readers. Workability exists when a theory explains how the problem is being solved in a variety of settings. Modifiability permits a theory to be altered if and when relevant new data is compared to existing data. A grounded theory is neither valid nor invalid, but rather it has more or less fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability.

After their initial work in 1967, Glaser and Strauss disagreed on how best to apply the grounded theory method, resulting in Glaserian and Straussian paradigms. The disagreement between Glaser and Strauss centered on several issues. The first area of disagreement focused upon whether the researcher uses a well defined coding paradigm, or instead draws upon a huge fund of coding families to generate codes as they emerge. Another area of dispute involves whether the researcher looks systematically for causal conditions, phenomena, context, intervening conditions, action strategies, and consequences in the data. These disputes have caused a great deal of discussion, although some suggest that in the end the results may not vary greatly depending upon which approach is used.

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