

Article

## Transformational Grounded Theory: Theory, Voice, and Action

Michelle Redman-MacLaren  
College of Medicine and Dentistry  
James Cook University  
Cairns, Australia

Jane Mills  
College of Healthcare Sciences  
James Cook University  
Cairns, Australia

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### Abstract

Grounded theory has been evolving methodologically since Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss first described it in the late 1960s. Initially underpinned by modernist philosophy, grounded theory has had recent turns including the adoption of both constructivism and postmodernism. This article explores ontological offerings of critical realism as a basis for transformational grounded theory informed by participatory action research and decolonizing research methodologies. The potential for both theory and action to result from this critical grounded theory methodology, which promotes greater participation and equity of power for positive change, is the *transformational* in transformational grounded theory.

**Keywords:** transformational grounded theory; participatory action research; decolonizing methodologies; cross-cultural; critical methods; theory development

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Glaser and Strauss challenge grounded theorists to develop their own methods for generating theory (1967). More recently, grounded theorists have called for an explicit description of the philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2008; Morse et al., 2009). Transformational grounded theory is an expanded grounded theory methodology we developed in response to this challenge. Transformational grounded theory, underpinned by critical realism, incorporates participatory action research and decolonizing methodologies. Participatory action research enables both action and new understandings (Stringer, 2013), while decolonizing research ensures the research agenda is determined by, or at very least agreed to by, indigenous research participants (Smith, 2012). The development of transformational grounded theory adds possibilities for more rigorous inquiry, with a focus on participation by coresearchers and a critical analysis of the context in which research is occurring. Actively identifying power in the research process further enhances the intellectual synthesis. In this article, we provide a rationale for expanding grounded theory methodology, explain transformational grounded theory as a critical grounded theory methodology, and provide examples of how this methodology has informed research. The privileging of participation, redistribution of power, and action for positive change is the *transformational* in transformational grounded theory.

### **Transformational Grounded Theory: A Rationale**

As a White Australian woman, I (the first author will be referred to in the first person throughout the manuscript to indicate that this manuscript is based on her doctoral study) have lived or worked in Pacific Island countries for many years. More recently, I have explored issues of power and decolonizing approaches to research and capacity strengthening (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2012). This work also informed my doctoral research, where I adapted a grounded theory methodology to explore HIV risk for women in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Papua New Guinea is a lower middle-income country of 7 million people in the South Pacific. Specifically, I explored the implications of male circumcision for women in PNG, including for HIV prevention. This research study had two phases. In the first phase, I conducted a secondary analysis of theoretically-sampled data from an existing data set. This data set had been generated during a large multi-site study that I had managed (2010–2012) (MacLaren et al., 2013). In the second phase, a PNG colleague and I returned to two sites in PNG and cogenerated primary data with 67 women and one man during interpretive focus groups and individual interviews (Redman-MacLaren, Mills, & Tommbe, 2014). Human Research Ethics Committees of Pacific Adventist University (Papua New Guinea), James Cook University (Australia), and Papua New Guinea National AIDS Council Secretariat provided ethics clearance for this doctoral research. As I designed and enacted the research to incorporate my values, philosophy, methodology, and methods with my supervisor (JM), it became evident to me and my supervisor that we could extend existing grounded theory methodology. This article introduces transformational grounded theory. Underpinned by a critical realist philosophy, transformational grounded theory is inductive and participatory, and used to identify and redistribute power between researcher and coresearchers for positive change.

Research methodology is a set of principles that inform the design of a research study. Grounded theory methodology systematically and inductively answers research questions about how people relate to each other—including social and psychosocial processes (Birks & Mills, 2011). This inductive approach to theory generation was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss and published in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) as a rejoinder to both quantitative and qualitative researchers who sought to verify a hypothesis (Kelle, 2007, p. 194). Grounded theory privileges emic (insider) views and challenges the “context stripping” approach of variable-focused research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). Largely connected by common research methods, grounded theory can be underpinned by a range of philosophical positions (Urquhart, 2013). Recently, grounded theorists have more explicitly identified their ontological and epistemological positions. This has resulted in more diversified interpretations and applications of core grounded

theory methods (Amsteus, 2014; Gibson, 2007; Kushner & Morrow 2003). These core methods include the following: (a) coding and categorization of data; (b) concurrent data generation and analysis; (c) theoretical sampling; (d) selecting a core category; and (e) constant comparative analysis along with theoretical sensitivity, saturation, and integration (Birks & Mills, 2011).

**Making Explicit the Base: Axiology, Ontology, and Epistemology Defined**

The worldview of the researcher determines the way research is conceived and conducted. This is important because, “what can be known and how we can know are inseparable” (Clarke, 2009, p. 197). A researcher’s worldview arises from ideas about the nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher, what can be known and the best way to discover reality (Annells, 1996). By being explicit about one’s conceptual framework, the researcher explicates beliefs about knowledge production and how those beliefs will affect the research process (Kovach, 2009). Thus, it is important to establish the metatheory—the axiology, ontology, and epistemology that forms the basis for transformational grounded theory.

Axiology describes values central to the research process, the way of being in and doing research. Mertens (2009) defines axiology as a researcher’s assumptions about the ethics of research, while ontology describes how the researcher conceives the nature of reality and the theory of the existence of things. Buchanan (2010) states ontology, at its most fundamental, “seeks to answer the question why there is something rather than nothing” (p. 352). Epistemology describes how we gain knowledge about the nature of reality (for example, through research or evaluation) (Wadsworth, 2010). To clearly understand and communicate my axiological, ontological, and epistemological position, I have considered a variety of philosophical positions. These include: (a) positivism (reality can be apprehended); (b) postpositivism (reality is only imperfectly apprehended); (c) structuralism (social and cultural reality is understood in the context of an overarching structure, evidenced in language); (d) poststructuralism (reality can never be completely known); (e) constructivism (reality is dependent on perceptions based upon previous experiences, and thus constructed); and (f) postmodernism (reality is a social construct) (Buchanan, 2010; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Potter & Lopez, 2001). Recent exploration of grounded theory situated in a critical realist paradigm by Oliver (2012) makes the case for a grounded theory approach “which attends to social structure as well as individual action” (p. 382). Critical realism posits reality exists, but is not limited to human interpretation or construction. This philosophy provides a framework consistent with my experience of varied worldviews in Pacific Island countries informed by cultural, social, and spiritual beliefs and practices. Beliefs about transformational grounded theory are summarized in Table 1 and described in more detail below.

Table 1

*Summary of Beliefs About Transformational Grounded Theory*

| Element of metatheory  | Characteristics   |
|--|---|
| Axiology (values)  | Love, social justice, equality  |
| Ontology (nature of reality)   | Critical realism  |
| Epistemology (how knowledge is gained about the nature of reality)       | Knowledge is culturally and historically situated   |
| Methodology (principles which inform steps taken to gain this knowledge) | Grounded theory combined with participatory action research, and decolonizing methodologies |

## **Critical Realism**

Critical realists posit there is a truth but it can never be known in its entirety. Altheide and Johnson (2011) explain, “while our theories, concepts, and perspectives might approach some kind of understanding they cannot and do not exhaust the phenomena of our interest” (p. 581). Roy Bhaskar (1975, 1986, 1998) is the philosopher attributed with developing critical realism. Bhaskar (1998) argues there are three aspects of reality: (a) empirical (experience and expression); (b) actual (actual events); and (c) real (for example, structures, powers, and mechanisms). Two dimensions capture these concepts: (a) the intransitive dimension (it simply is, things are independent of our beliefs, perceptions, or “knowledge”); and (b) the transitive dimension (our knowledge and beliefs are fallible) (Iosifides, 2011; Potter & Lopez, 2001). It is within this realm of physical reality (intransitive) and social experience and interpretation (transitive) that researchers operate in order to understand and contribute to knowledge creation for positive change.

Findings can be represented as the truth for participants and the researcher (being mindful that the researcher usually has more power to represent that “truth”), however, the picture will never be fully complete. Hockey (2010) explains, “Knowledge is thus not only socially constructed, but it is knowledge about something, about a layered, differentiated reality” (p. 366). How do we create knowledge if we subscribe to critical realism? “Critical realism puts forward epistemological caution with respect to scientific knowledge” (Potter & Lopez, 2001, p. 9) Critical realism holds that culture and history situate knowledge. A grounded theory study about women’s experience of HIV in a lower middle-income nation, for example, requires an exploration of the social, cultural, and economic history and position of the women to inform knowledge generated.

Grounded theory, as originally described by Glaser and Strauss, reflected a modernist ontology (Charmaz, 2006). Other philosophical positions such as constructivism and postmodernism have provided alternative approaches to the methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Recently, Urquart (2013) stated that the successful use of grounded theory as a methodology is not contingent on a particular ontological platform on which the researcher stands. Although we agree with this position, we also believe it is important that an ontological position be established to “illuminate the epistemological and methodological possibilities” (Mills et al., 2006 p. 2) the researcher has available to them in a grounded theory study. Utilizing a critical research approach, transformational grounded theory generates theory that can be used to challenge excluding and oppressive structures and systems for positive change. Consistent with other critical approaches (Buchanan, 2010), researchers using transformational grounded theory explore connections and interfaces between the individual and society. As Gibson (2007) argues, a grounded theory “that seeks to accommodate critical theory without reflecting on society would cease to be critical” (p. 440). Critical theories, initially associated with the Frankfurt School of Sociology in the 1930s, have developed and diversified enormously, reflecting the reflexive nature of those adhering to the approach (Buchanan, 2010).

Critical theorists often theorize in isolation to preserve a distance between themselves and their research subjects (Buchanan, 2010; Gibson, 2007). Many critical theorists claim experience is an invalid basis for claims about knowledge because the experience alone does not take into account the historical context (Gibson, 2007). From a critical realist position, we counter this argument in the belief that we can only partially know the phenomena and that this knowing is socially, culturally, and historically bound. Transformational grounded theory allows for the researcher’s experience (of being a woman, a worker, from a particular cultural group, and so forth) to enable engagement with people experiencing the phenomena being researched while maintaining a commitment to a structural critique for positive social change. Including a critical examination of social, cultural, and economic structures provides an opportunity for a more complete and transformational grounded theory.

### **Participation, Action, and Transformational Grounded Theory**

Researchers can expand their understanding of a phenomenon by including participants throughout the research project. Bob Dick (2008) makes a seminal contribution to this argument by outlining what grounded theory and action research can learn from each other. Grounded theory methods of explicit, systematic data generation and analysis enhance action research. Grounded theorists can also learn from action research, which typically includes research with individuals and/or groups. Participation, a key tenant in action research, will increase both the researcher's knowledge and the participants' knowledge of the phenomenon through the sharing of both insider knowledge, held by people participating in the research, and the technical knowledge of the researcher. If validity in a realist grounded theory is regulated by socially constructed reality "as it really is" (Lomborg & Kirkevold, 2003, p. 189), then greater participation of those who have experience of the phenomenon has the potential to increase the rigor of research results (Mertens, 2009).

Action research employs the term coresearcher (or coinquirer) to describe research participants who jointly assist in the inquiry process (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The use of these terms centralizes participation (and power sharing) in the research process and enables the "researched" to become researchers into their own concerns (Stringer, 2013). Purposeful participation means coresearchers are involved in the cycles of research: (a) research design, (b) data generation, (c) data analysis, and (d) reporting of research results. Action research is known by various names, however, we have chosen to use participatory action research in the context of transformational grounded theory, emphasizing "our equal interest in participation and action without making a choice between the A and the P" (Teram, Schachter, & Stalker, 2005, p. 1132).

During phase one of the research, I undertook an initial inductive analysis of the existing data set using grounded theory methods of theoretical sampling, coding, and categorizing using constant comparison, complemented by writing memos. I identified portions of data that represented the emerging categories and discussed these with my senior coresearcher from PNG, Rachael Tommbe. In phase two of the doctoral research, participatory approaches were centralized during interpretive focus groups. Groups of women analyzed portions of the existing data set in small story circles and cogenerated new understandings of those data using storyboarding methods (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2014). Data cogenerated from this phase of the research study was analyzed using grounded theory methods, supervised by JM. Reflecting the cyclical nature of action research, coresearchers were again involved in knowledge cogenerated when we returned to the field sites the following year to discuss the developing transformational grounded theory. Some women explained how the theory reflected their lived reality. Some women also shared actions they had taken since we had met the previous year, including plans to have their sons circumcised. By discussing and adapting the developing grounded theory with coresearchers, who had experienced the phenomenon being studied, the final grounded theory had greater fit, grab, relevance, and modifiability than if the theory had been generated by the researcher alone (Dick, 2008; Lomborg & Kirkevold, 2003). This meant the research process was more rigorous than if the findings had been developed and reported in isolation of coresearchers.

By centralizing participation in the research process, transformational grounded theory diverges from a Glaserian approach of research subjects being transformed into theoretical objects (Gibson, 2007). Many grounded theorists now agree that the researcher has "considerable power to (mis)represent the researched by turning them into an object" and are beginning to challenge this approach to "realise emancipation in the process of social enquiry" (Gibson, 2007, p. 442). The possibility of partnership is exemplified when taking a transformational grounded theory approach to the key grounded theory method of theoretical sampling. When the researcher makes a strategic decision about "what or who will provide the most information rich source of data to meet their analytical needs" (Birks & Mills, 2011 p.11), they are theoretically sampling. In transformational grounded theory the researcher and coresearchers decide together who will have additional

information about the phenomena under study. In focus groups and interviews conducted about HIV in PNG, the researcher and coresearchers discussed whom else to invite to share information about HIV prevention and its impact on women. Consequently, a number of individual interviews were conducted, which generated more rich data.

Data generated and analyzed in partnership with coresearchers is less likely to be “forced” into a particular theoretical position by a researcher, a key concern of data analysis in grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Including coresearchers throughout the research process increases the theoretical sensitivity of both the researcher and coresearchers. Theoretical sensitivity incorporates personal insight and intellectual history (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 11), enabling the researcher/s to see possibilities, establish connections, and ask relevant questions (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers who are theoretically sensitive will be less likely to preconceive the relevance of data during concurrent data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Collaborative analysis at critical junctures in a transformational grounded theory study enhances theoretical sampling and strengthens decision making about concurrent data generation and analysis. Examples of grounded theorists who have generated and analyzed data in partnership with research participants include feminist grounded theorists Favero and Health (2012) and Merritt-Grey and Wuest (1995). Participatory research processes challenge traditional power imbalances and can enable an increase in power for coresearchers (Mertens, 2009). Researchers who enact decolonizing methodologies also prioritize power redistribution.

### **Decolonizing Research Methodologies and Transformational Grounded Theory**

Researchers typically have more power than participants in research. Purposeful participation of coresearchers can reduce the power imbalance (Stringer, 2013), but is participation enough? Charmaz (2006) highlights the importance of creating knowledge together with research participants for a socially just outcome. However, it is also essential for the researcher to critically examine (individually and in partnership with coresearchers) the nature of the relationship in which the knowledge is being co-created. What historical, social, and cultural relationships do the researcher and coresearchers share? Is there a colonial history between the researcher and coresearchers? Are there gender or economic differences? How will these differences affect data generated and the emergent grounded theory? Structural positioning of the researcher and the coresearchers (including White privilege and/or other power differentials) is critical to constructing knowledge together in transformational grounded theory. Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon challenged structural inequality and the unequal power in relationships between colonized and colonizer, which historically led to other dichotomies such as educated and uneducated, wealthy and poor (Fanon, 1963; Fanon, 1967; Freire, 1994). Although constructivist and postmodernist understandings of society have led to the challenge of a binary view of social structures (Bidois, 2011), nonetheless, the concepts continue to be instructive for identifying power inequity.

Building on this intellectual history, decolonizing research methodologies offer a framework for critically analyzing oppressive assumptions about the research process. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), states, decolonizing research acknowledges the reality of colonization, rejects Western ideologies as superior, and privileges indigenous ways of knowing and understanding history. We use the term “decolonizing” in this article to reflect both the process of challenging the colonial past and the ongoing colonizing processes. “Even when (the colonizers) have left formally, the institutions and legacy of colonialism remains” (Smith, 2012, p. 101). Smith asserts postcolonialism, as a term, has been employed by academics in the global north as a way of reclaiming authority in the research relationship (Smith, 2012). A continued commitment to decolonizing is important because “the essentialism of Western thought pervading research has not been fully challenged in the academy” (Kovach, 2009, p. 28). Supported by fellow decolonizing researchers (Chilisa, 2012; Liamputtong, 2010), Smith (2012) challenges researchers to ensure the research agenda is determined by, or at very least agreed to by, indigenous research participants.

The doctoral research I undertook was a priority issue for coresearchers who participated in the study and a response to policymakers who wanted more information about women's risk of HIV in PNG.

Enacting decolonizing methodologies in knowledge creation can reduce power differences between the researcher and coresearcher and result in a more authentic process of research inquiry. So how can we understand power in this context? Power is a productive force which "produces things ... it forms knowledge and produces discourse" (Foucault, 2000, p. 120). The production of knowledge and discourse occurs in partnership with research participants when we are explicit about the historical conditions for the power distribution, and who has power. Enacting principles of decolonizing research in the field, I took small but deliberate steps to reduce my power as an international researcher and to increase the power of the coresearchers. Women were invited to participate in the research by other women leaders in their community to increase the possibility that they would choose to participate in the HIV research, rather than feeling obliged to participate because the *White meri* (woman) was asking. I explicitly stated that the women, as coresearchers, were the experts who were able to advise me as a researcher. It would be their ideas that would be communicated and considered for future health policy and health-service decisions. Interpretive focus groups were cofacilitated with a colleague from PNG, Rachael Tommbe, to enhance cultural safety. We shared stories about ourselves, our families, and where we came from, which enabled the coresearchers to "place" us before we started discussing the sensitive research topic. Stories about family, place, and shared connections are markers for developing relationship and trust in PNG, as in many indigenous communities (Kovach, 2009). When conducting focus groups and interviews, we often spoke in PNG *Tok Pisin* (a lingua franca of PNG) rather than English (the language of the ex-colonizer), and I purposefully sat on a mat alongside of women (rather than in a chair). In addition to the planned research activities, we also discussed what women wanted to discuss about HIV, using local metaphors and stories. Further, trust between researcher and coresearchers was enhanced when I returned to discuss in more detail the women's original ideas and to plan action to address identified HIV risks. Along with Chilisa (2012), we are committed to developing and supporting transformative research methodologies and methods, in the small spaces in which we operate, so that they are "inclusive of the [i]ndigenous knowledge systems and life experiences of the historically colonized, disenfranchised, and dispossessed communities" (p. 6).

### **How Transformational Grounded Theory Expands Grounded Theory**

How does including the elements of participation and redistribution of power contribute to grounded theory? Has the inclusion of these critical approaches already been addressed in grounded theory literature? A number of authors have made important contributions about social justice in grounded theory. In particular, Charmaz (2006, 2011, 2012) has written extensively about social justice and grounded theory. Oliver (2012) has shown how critical realism can enhance the applicability of grounded theory as a research methodology in the human services such as social work. Building upon this important base, transformational grounded theory is a methodology that can be used to explore differences in power between the researcher and coresearchers, and how this power difference affects the data generated to be used for a socially just outcome. Transformational grounded theory adds to decolonizing methodologies as a way of setting a shared agenda and increasing coresearcher participation. Often, researchers benefit greatly from coresearchers' knowledge, experiences, and generously shared stories. It is transformative when mutual benefits for understanding the phenomena are explicitly stated (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2012).

Transformational grounded theory can be used in any context and, to borrow a phrase from Potts and Brown (2005), is "not contingent upon physical or political location" (p. 258). During the second phase of my research, I returned to PNG to discuss the developing grounded theory with coresearchers, consistent with the process of concurrent data generation and analysis. During this field trip, my coresearchers from an oil palm plantation expressed their concern that men had

limited knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and this was contributing to their risk of acquiring HIV. Women recommended training about sexual and reproductive health. This was organized with the host organization and in July 2014, sexual health training was provided for 22 managers and 327 predominantly male fieldworkers. In addition a two-day clinician's course was facilitated with 11 male and 11 female clinic staff. By enacting a participatory, action-oriented, power-sharing approach in the form of transformational grounded theory, we sought to inductively generate a grounded theory that is socially, culturally and historically relevant.

Although the use of transformational grounded theory is relevant for research being conducted with indigenous people, it is a methodology that can inform research being conducted in other cross-cultural or non-indigenous contexts. A decolonizing approach underpinned by critical theory is especially "effective in analyzing power differences between groups; that it provides hope for transformation; that there is a role for structural change and personal agency in resistance" (Kovach, 2009, p. 80). If a researcher is working with non-indigenous people, transformational grounded theory can accommodate other critical theories such as feminist theory, queer theory, or critical disability theory. Transformational grounded theory has at its core respect for coresearchers as knowledge holders. Partnership is centralized throughout the research process, in determining research findings and conducting resultant action. Therefore this methodology could be relevant to researchers in a variety of settings with a range of theoretical underpinnings.

### **Limitations of Transformational Grounded Theory**

A key limitation to transformational grounded theory methodology is the challenge of sustaining coresearcher participation. Participation of coresearchers throughout the multiple iterations of the research cycle is not always possible, as experienced in this study and reported in participatory action research literature more widely (Stringer, 2013). Ongoing participation is especially challenging when researching with transient populations, such as university students and plantation workers. In this study, we found the same coresearchers were not always present for all iterations of the research cycle (for example, discussion about the developing theory after the data had been cogenerated). Nevertheless, coresearchers who did participate throughout often took leadership roles in the research process.

Trusting relationships, cogenesis of knowledge, and plans for action are conceived of and enacted more effectively when researcher and coresearchers share *graun* (literally, ground) or place. The researcher living in a different location to coresearchers is a limitation. However, this limitation can be somewhat ameliorated by deliberate use of the participatory and decolonizing methods described above.

### **Conclusion**

Grounded theory has evolved over time and now accommodates diverse philosophical positions. Transformational grounded theory, underpinned by critical realism, builds upon core grounded theory methods while centralizing participatory action research and decolonizing methodologies for enabling action and generation of new knowledge in the context of more equal power between the researcher and coresearchers. This research methodology will be of use when working toward making changes with people across social, cultural, and gendered divides. In the tradition of critical realism, we offer this framework in the time-bound cultural, social and academic context in which we are now. This might change as we have more experience of grounded theory research and as our colleagues from other cultures and research traditions offer their experiences and opinions. However, in the spirit of collective reflexivity it is important to take the initial step toward rethinking grounded theory methodology.

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