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Bin Ibrahim, Muhamad Alif (2024) *Book Review of "Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide" by Melanie Birks and Jane Mills. London, UK, Sage, 2023. ISBN 9781529759280. QM i P Bulletin, 37 pp. 59-63.*

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Please refer to the original source for the final version of this work:

<https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsqmip.2024.1.37.59>

Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide

A Book Review

Muhamad Alif Bin Ibrahim

School of Social and Health Sciences, James Cook University, Singapore

This is a pre-publication version of the following article: Bin Ibrahim, M. A. (2024). [Review of the book *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* by J. Mills & M. Birks], *QMIP Bulletin*, 37 (Spring), pp 59-63, published on 13 June 2024.

<https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsqmip.2024.1.37.59>

Author Note

Muhamad Alif Bin Ibrahim <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9849-5413>

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Muhamad Alif Bin Ibrahim, School of Social and Health Sciences, James Cook University, Singapore, 149 Sims Drive, Singapore 387380. Email: muhamadalif.binibrahim@my.jcu.edu.au

Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide

Melanie Birks & Jane Mills

Sage, 2023

Reviewed by Muhamad Alif Bin Ibrahim

Introduction

Qualitative research textbooks and methodological papers are important pieces of work as they allow novice and experienced qualitative researchers access to the evolving, ever-growing discipline of qualitative research. I enjoy reading qualitative methodological texts as they enable me to better understand the theoretical intricacies and processes of various methodologies in the qualitative research discipline. Hence, I was extremely excited and grateful to have been given this opportunity to review a recently published book 'Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide', written by Professors Melanie Birks and Jane Mills.

Since grounded theory was first developed in the 1960s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, it remains a popular methodology utilised by researchers to date. Qualitative researchers use this methodology to systematically develop an explanatory theory of social and psychological processes grounded within the data. While grounded theory was first developed in sociology, the methodology has today been used and popularised by researchers in numerous other disciplines such as nursing, public health, psychology, occupational therapy, education and even business & tourism (Almotiri, 2017; Dudley et al., 2022; Grafton & Gordon, 2019).

The book

The book consists of three main parts, subdivided into ten chapters. Part One covers what researchers need to think about and prepare when undertaking a grounded theory research study. This section includes a comprehensive introduction to grounded theory, philosophical

assumptions, as well as quality, rigour, and trustworthiness processes. Part Two provides tips and strategies for planning a successful grounded theory study. These include writing up a grounded theory research proposal and the ways researchers can manage their health and well-being throughout the project. Finally, Part Three covers the nuts and bolts of producing a grounded theory. The chapters in this section of the book bring readers through the processes of data collection and generation, as well as coding and theory generation as part of data analysis. As illustrated later on through my review of the individual chapters, the book was carefully written and thought through to ensure that readers can readily grasp the essentials and critical parts of undertaking a grounded theory research project.

In Chapter 1, the authors situate the development and evolution of Grounded Theory within the broader qualitative research landscape. Utilising Denzin and Lincoln's (2017) *Moments of Qualitative Inquiry* as a historical timeline, Birks and Mills point to the development of grounded theory by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss within the Golden Age or Modernist era of qualitative research inquiry in the 1960s. They subsequently explain the ways in which the methodology has evolved and split throughout the 20th and 21st century. This included how common grounded theory methods and procedures began to be used by other researchers with different philosophical stances and theoretical lenses, such as Corbin and Strauss's approach to Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2017), Redman-Maclaren's Transformational Grounded Theory (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015), and Clarke's Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2003).

Following this chapter, Birks and Mills further discuss research paradigms, ontology and epistemology within qualitative research in Chapter 2. The authors explain these essential aspects of qualitative research concisely. Hence, readers of varying familiarities with such topics would have a good understanding of what these concepts mean, as well as how they explicitly and implicitly impact the research process after reading the chapter. Chapter 2 ends with a section on reflexivity in Grounded Theory research. This is "an active, systematic process and analytical strategy that would enable researchers to become aware how their various identities, experiences and knowledge may impact the research process" (p. 35).

Interestingly, this chapter explains that the different grounded theory proponents have differing views regarding the importance and usefulness of reflexivity. For example, the authors illustrate how Glaser rejected reflexivity as it could lead to reflexivity paralysis, which could impede the researcher's focus on developing the theoretical constructs of their respective theories.

Chapter 3 and its location within the book were quite interesting to me: the chapter extensively covered the quality, rigour, and trustworthiness processes within grounded theory research. Through my reading of other qualitative research texts, such content would typically be left towards the end after methodological processes and procedures have been explained in great detail. In moving such discussions earlier in the text, Birks and Mills underscore the importance of thinking through rigour, trustworthiness and quality processes at the start of the project. These can then be carried out throughout the project rather than merely something researchers would only reflect upon and do post-hoc after completing their data collection and analyses.

Chapter 4 was one of my favourite chapters to read in this book. In this chapter, the authors first explain the critical differences between grounded theory and other qualitative research methodologies. The authors reiterate the ways in which grounded theory research needed to go beyond mere exploration and description of social phenomena. While many qualitative research studies aim to explore and describe, grounded theory aims to develop and formulate an explanatory theory or framework regarding social and psychological processes. Therefore, researchers need to think like a grounded theorist to achieve this goal. Birks and Mills explain that thinking as a grounded theorist consists of three aspects which need to be undertaken throughout the research process: a) theoretical sensitivity, b) managing preconceptions, and c) memoing. These critical aspects of thinking like a grounded theorist, ensure that researchers explicitly articulate their prior assumptions and knowledge as well as interrogate their interpretations about the data. These, in turn, enable the researcher to focus on recognising and pinpointing elements relevant within the data that can add to the explanatory power of the developing theory.

In Chapter 5, the authors invite readers of the text to consider the various parts of writing up a grounded theory research proposal. While writing up research proposals is not exclusively a grounded theory research process, there are specific considerations that one needs to consider when writing up the research proposal for a grounded theory study. One such example was the issue of sampling (and sample size) in grounded theory, which would need to be explicitly stated as part of the proposal to be submitted to the research ethics and/or grants committees. Although the iterative data collection and analysis process is integral to the grounded theory research process, proposal reviewers may insist on researchers providing a pre-defined sample size or the exact constitution of their research participants. Birks and Mills also offer a lot of guidance and tips that researchers should consider including in each section of their research proposal. The chapter also includes various checklists that would be useful in aiding novice grounded theory researchers to think through each of their proposal sections carefully before submission.

The qualitative research process can be daunting and tiring as data collection and analysis require enormous cognitive and emotional load. Yet, self-care is sometimes not talked about at great length in many qualitative research texts and methodological papers. Hence, Chapter 6 is another of my favourite chapter in the book. To devote an entire chapter to explain ways to manage oneself and others during the research process underscores the importance of self-care as well as managing relationships with supervisors and others when working in research teams. This chapter further expands on four domains of self-care (psychosocial, physical, professional, and intellectual) that researchers need to pay attention to while undertaking grounded theory research. These include reminders and tips to ensure researchers stay well while balancing their professional work, research and personal lives.

As mentioned earlier, the book's final section (Part Three) focuses on producing the grounded theory. Chapter 7 talks solely about generating and collecting data in grounded theory research. While interviews are perceived as a method more commonly used in grounded theory, the authors explain that grounded theory research could be undertaken with various data sources. This can include field notes and memos, scholarly literature, novels,

music and even photographs and videos. Birks and Mills also call attention to the differences between 'data collection' and 'data generation'. The former refers to the ways in which researchers have limited influence on the process of gathering and establishing the data sources used for their study (e.g. scholarly literature, government reports, and news media publications). The latter captures the active role of the researcher in directly engaging with data sources to produce materials for the grounded theory study (e.g. interviews, focus groups, and field notes). Theoretical sampling is also further discussed in greater detail in this chapter. The authors reiterate the importance of this sampling strategy in grounded theory as it informs the direction of what and where to collect data as the researcher proceeds with developing their emergent theory.

The different philosophical stances within grounded theory have differing conceptual terminologies in data analysis. However, all of these centre around the close analysis of the dataset with increasing levels of abstractions, which then culminates in the production of a high-level conceptual framework with explanatory power. Birks and Mills explain in their book that their approach to data analysis consists of three distinct but overlapping phases of coding (Chapter 8). Initial coding refers to a line-by-line coding process where the data is deconstructed, interrogated and reflected upon to generate codes (or labels) that reflect the issues evident in the dataset. Using constant comparison, these initial codes are grouped accordingly to similar conceptual categories. Thereafter, intermediate coding begins. This is where the categories generated from the previous phase are integrated and linked to form medium-level concepts. This is done by identifying connections and relationships between these categories and explicating relational statements to explain particular actions or processes occurring in the grounded theory. Theoretical saturation is said to be achieved when the categories have been sufficiently developed and no new concepts are introduced from the concurrent data collection and analysis processes.

The final phase, or advanced coding, is described in further detail in Chapter 9. The final analytical phase in grounded theory uses techniques and procedures that enable researchers to move from analysis to theory. Birks and Mills describe two strategies described

in this chapter as advanced techniques that could assist in moving the analysis to theory or higher levels of abstraction: a) using storyline, and b) theoretical coding. Using a storyline refers to generating and conceptualising a story that constructs and integrates the relationships between the generated categories into a coherent, grounded theory. On the other hand, theoretical coding is described as utilising advanced abstractions that further strengthen the explanatory power of the grounded theory. These theoretical codes are theories and constructs derived from various disciplines that can help researchers think about how their generated theory connects with other extant theories.

Finally, Chapter 10 invites readers to think through how to maximise the impact of their grounded theory research. Birks and Mills explain the importance of research in making a difference in people's lives and broader society. Maximising one's research impact includes thinking through the processes of dissemination, presentation and application of the grounded theory that has been developed. One interesting point brought up by the authors concerns the differences between a substantive and formal grounded theory. Substantive grounded theories are typically developed to explain a particular phenomenon in a specific setting. Formal grounded theories are developed to a higher conceptual level and generalisation, which in turn, can be applicable across a broader range of contexts and social settings. However, developing formally grounded theories require more time, effort and costs. Hence, this can be a barrier to researchers who may want to move beyond generating substantive grounded theories. Nevertheless, both forms of grounded theory contribute greatly to understanding and explaining social and psychological processes that occur in the social world.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book! As an experienced qualitative researcher who is still new to grounded theory, I felt the book provided a great introduction to grounded theory. While the book is written for postgraduate or higher degree research students in mind, I would highly recommend other novice and experienced researchers who are interested in conducting their grounded theory research to access this fantastic book. The definitions and

procedures in 'Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide' were written clearly and concisely. Abstract concepts such as research paradigms, ontology, and epistemology are also broken down into simple, easy-to-understand language in the book. This makes it easier for novice researchers to grasp these complex (and often confusing) concepts when embarking on their flagship grounded theory projects. The book's appendix also contains a worked example by Gemma Aburn (Aburn et al., 2021) that would greatly benefit readers and researchers who need a worked example of a real-life grounded theory study.

Additionally, each chapter contains reflections from researchers from various disciplines who have used grounded theory (called 'Researcher Voice' sections). These reflection pieces provide insights into the thoughts, feelings and issues these researchers experience at various phases of their grounded theory study. Such reflections may give useful tips and strategies for novice grounded theory researchers who may face similar problems and issues as part of their research. Reading this book has definitely piqued my interest in starting my own Grounded Theory research project. Thank you to the *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin* journal and SAGE Publishing for this opportunity to read and review this excellent book!

Correspondence

Muhamad Alif Bin Ibrahim

James Cook University, Singapore

muhamadalif.binibrahim@my.jcu.edu.au

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