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**SAMPLING** *and*  
**CHOOSING CASES**  
*in* **QUALITATIVE**  
**RESEARCH**

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a realist approach

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# 1

## THEORETICAL SAMPLING

This chapter presents the first of three cases in the book, theoretical sampling in grounded theory. Brought together here are methodological accounts spanning nearly 50 years, from the ground-breaking writings of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* to much more recent constructivist accounts of grounded theory. The debate about how theoretical sampling should proceed in a piece of research reflects wider methodological debates about how we generate legitimate knowledge about the social world. There is significant diversity discussed in this chapter. The boundaries of the case are defined by an enduring principle of grounded theory approaches within this diversity; theory emerges or is discovered through empirical investigation in which the decisions and implementation of theoretical sampling play a key role.

### The discovery of grounded theory

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss were concerned that qualitative research was seen, up to the 1960s in the United States, as largely an enterprise to verify theory. It was often used as a preliminary exploratory effort to provide insight and hypotheses to be tested more rigorously through quantitative methods. These methodologists wanted to show that qualitative research was an enterprise in its own right, capable of providing scientifically robust accounts of the social world. It was not merely a useful precursor to quantitative research. Qualitative research was quite capable, with the right methodological strategies, of generating credible, reliable, and useful theory derived from the qualitative investigation of social interactions.

This theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 32) suggest, is a 'theory of process' which is an ever-developing and never-perfected product. Through a rigorous method of constant comparison, qualitative research has the ability to generate theory at different levels of generality. Theory may be empirical and substantive, such as patient care, race relations, or the relationships in an organisation. And at a higher level of abstraction, theory can be formal and conceptual social theory, of stigma, deviant behaviours, or authority and power as examples. Together these empirical and formal theories are described by Glaser and Strauss as theories of the middle range, drawing

on the work of Robert K. Merton. For Merton (1968: 39) middle-range theory is:

Intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular classes of social behaviour, organization and change to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all. Middle-range theory involves abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing.

The challenge of the discovery of grounded theory is to systematise a method that allows for a move from empirical observation to the generation of grounded (middle-range) theories and the testing of these theories through empirical observation. These observations are of meaning making, its modification and interpretation between people in their social interactions, a theory of symbolic interaction. Grounded theory, through its investigation of micro-empirical interaction, can discover theory that falls somewhere between “minor working hypotheses” of everyday life and “all inclusive” grand theories’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 33 – emphasis in the original). Instrumental in this discovery and testing of theory is theoretical sampling.

### **Theoretical sampling**

Theoretical sampling is set to work to generate theory in qualitative research through the investigation of the empirical social world. The ‘grounded’ in grounded theory is where the theory is to be found, it is observable and can be interpreted from the behaviour of groups in their everyday social interaction. Herbert Blumer (1978: 38) employs a metaphor of ‘lifting the veils’, which obscure the area of group life that the researcher intends to study. And, in a further metaphor, research is ‘digging deep (in these group lives) through careful study’. Grounded theory respects and stays close to these empirical domains in its research.

To make visible the hard-to-see elements of the empirical social world requires three different dimensions to be addressed in theoretical sampling, according to Glaser and Strauss. These are the controlling influence of emerging theory, the open and theoretically sensitive researcher, and constant comparison.

### **The controlling influence of emergent theory**

Emerging theory is central to processes of theoretical sampling, in which the researcher:

jointly collects, codes, and analyzes ... data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop ... theory as it emerges (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 45).

The emphasis here is not only on the methodological process of sampling, but on the central role of this process in the generation of theory. As such, we cannot talk about a theoretical sample. Theoretical sampling can neither be reified to a thing – the identification by researchers of a person, an organisation, document, or research instrument to be sampled – nor can the sample be identified ahead of the research. Instead, the researcher is continuously guided by emerging theory as to where to go next in search of their sample. Structural (or practical) concerns are not the guide to identifying the sample; rather it is the impersonal criteria of emerging theory. As Glaser and Strauss (1967: 47 emphasis in the original) observe:

The basic question in theoretical sampling ... is: *what* groups or sub-groups does one turn to *next* in data collection? And for *what* theoretical purpose?

In conceptualising the sample in this way a grounded theory approach is distancing itself from the sampling strategies of quantitative researching and from qualitative researchers whose aim is to verify theory. Qualitative researchers, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 30) argue, neither need to 'know the whole field', nor are they seeking to represent all the facts in the sample through random selection to ensure every member of a given population has an equal chance of being in the sample. In using theoretical sampling, researchers are not seeking a perfect representation of a concrete situation under study. They are aiming to generate general categories and their properties for general and specific situations and problems, through the acts of writing memos and coding.

Theoretical accounts are tied to particular social phenomena through these memos and codes. But, in emphasising the impersonal way in which theoretical sampling is linked to emergent data, the aim of grounded theory is to remain objective through maintaining a distance between researchers and researched. The account of theoretical sampling in early grounded theory holds to a strongly positivist approach. The characterisation of the researcher as open and theoretically sensitive emphasises this positivism.

### The open and theoretically sensitive researcher

An approach to sampling driven forward by emergent theory rather begs the question, where does one begin? The answer lies, in part, in the personality and temperament of the researcher, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967).

The grounded theorist is an open and theoretically sensitive researcher. At the outset researchers begin with a partial and unelaborated framework for their research. They will have only a basic outline of the problem to be researched. Researchers must guard against making decisions about what to sample based on a preconceived framework. Openness to discovering concepts in the field is seen as important in ensuring a researcher is able to identify and refine concepts in the early stages of the research. The concepts that inform these early stages of fieldwork sampling are no more than a general sociological knowledge and an understanding of the general problem area of the research. The researcher, Glaser (1978: 44) suggests, can go anywhere, talk and listen to anyone, read anything with nothing more than the overarching problem in their mind, but that researcher must be 'capable of conceptualisation'.

Researchers capable of doing theoretical sampling are characterised by their receptiveness to emergent theory in the field. A researcher with 'complete openness is often more receptive to the emergent (theory) than others with a few pre-ideas and perspectives' (Glaser, 1978: 46), although it is grudgingly accepted that researchers do come to research with some theory. But this theory must be articulated and tested against the empirical data and emergent theory in the research. Most theory is induced through observing, seeing, hearing, reading, and recording particular incidents. The researchers' open minds are directed towards the coding of observations and the fashioning of emergent theory. The search in early theoretical sampling is for these incidents, which are sampled as they are found. So, for instance, Glaser and Strauss (1967) talk about how they might sit at a nursing station on a hospital ward watching the nursing staff at work, or talk about the research area with key informants. The conversations are broad, the observations general.

At this early stage in the research, it is the sampling and exploration of various incidents to discover underlying uniformities and varying conditions that are of interest. Given that the early research is based on such openness, false starts and starts that do not quite get at the concepts under investigation are inevitable, but these are soon corrected by the constant comparison of theoretical sampling, Glaser and Strauss (1967) assure us.

### Constant comparison

The third controlling influence in theoretical sampling is constant comparison. Table 1.1 identifies each of the different kinds of comparison Glaser and Strauss advocate in theoretical sampling. The linear progression from the sampling of incidents, occurring in the first stage of theoretical sampling, is mediated by theory, described as concepts, as the research progresses. Constant comparison seeks an ever-increasing refinement of emergent theory.

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**Table 1.1** Constant comparison in theoretical sampling: an overview (after Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978))

| Stage  | Theoretical sampling activity                                     | Purpose  |
|--|---|--|
| 1  | Comparing incidents with incidents                                | Establishing underlying uniformity and varying conditions  |
| <b>Open coding and analysis to discover concepts</b>                           |   |  |
| 2  | The concept to more incidents                                     | Testing concepts towards enriching their explanation, elaboration, and the generation of further concepts              |
| 3  | Concept to concept  | Establishing the best fit of concepts to a set of indicators, drawing on hypotheses between concepts to develop theory |
| <b>Choosing groups to control the scope and conceptual level of the theory</b> |   |  |
| 4  | Outside comparison of the substantive area (Once it is safe ... ) | Going outside the data, to literature for instance to strengthen the 'stabilised' grounded theory                      |
| 5  | Outside comparison beyond the substantive area                    | A must for generating formal theory  |

Theoretical sampling becomes much more selective, focussing on the concepts identified in the researchers' emerging theory.

The initial focus of constant comparison on observable incidents such as a particular behaviour, like Glaser and Strauss's (1967) example of the ways in which nurses respond to dying patients for instance, assures ample data will be collected which can be coded. From these codes, memos describing theoretical concepts can be written, which when elaborated allow for the theoretical sampling of individuals and groups to the research. Theoretical sampling is far more difficult than collecting data with pre-planned groups; individuals and groups selected theoretically require that decisions are made informed by thought, analysis, and search. The sample's ongoing inclusion in the study is for a strategic reason, to test emerging theory. Here again Glaser and Strauss differentiate themselves from their nemesis, the verifier of theory. Evidence, they suggest, is not collected because it will accurately describe or verify some preconceived theoretical position, nor is the researcher selecting groups because they show difference in a particular variable. The logic is not one of: 'I plan to sample this group because they use this service, and this group because they do not use this service'. These rules of evidence hinder the discovery of theory. Groups are chosen because the data they produce relates to a particular category in the research. The search is for groups that display the category under investigation in different situations. Thus, in their study of the *Awareness of Dying*, Glaser and Strauss

(1965) observe the interaction between nurses and their patients in hospitals, the home, nursing homes, ambulances, and even in the street following trauma, and through these the various interactions between nurses and dying patients. Such diversity of investigation allows for observation of the similar and diverse properties of categories.

### Strategies of constant comparison and their purpose

There are a further three considerations in the choice of which group to sample next. First, the scale of generality the researchers wish to achieve with their theory. What is the scope of the theory? Does it relate to a particular setting, or is the research making claims for other settings too? If Glaser and Strauss's 1965 study *Awareness of Dying* discussed in the last section had just been conducted in a hospital, then the theory would have been confined to hospitals alone. The scope of the theory would have been limited by these choices.

The second sampling choice is whether to minimise or maximise similarities in data categories. These conceptual categories discovered in the early research are transformed into hypotheses to be tested with similar and diverse groups. The purpose of this strategy in the research is threefold. It 'forces', to use Glaser and Strauss's term, the researcher to generate categories, their properties, and interrelations in their emergent theory. Similar data collected in similar groups verifies the usefulness of the categories, aids in the generation of basic properties, and establishes the conditions in which the emergent theory will apply. Understanding these conditions of context allows the researcher to make predictions about the generality of the theory to other settings. These claims can be made stronger and the emergent theory refined through the strategic sampling of similar data categories between maximally varied groups. The emergent theory's scope is extended.

An overarching logic of grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is the linearity of its implementation. This is the reason for numbering the stages in Table 1.1. Iteration between the joint collection, coding, and analysis of data happens within each stage. Nonetheless, while they accept some overlapping of the stages, the rigour of the discovery of emergent theory rests on theoretical sampling proceeding from stage to stage. The basic work of establishing concepts, properties, and categories through minimising the difference between the groups sampled in the research precedes strategies of maximisation. The early work of openness and categorisation are the precursors to emergent theory. Maximum variation is sampled to bring out:

the widest possible coverage of ranges, continua, consequences, probabilities of relationships, process, structural mechanisms ... all necessary for elaboration of theory. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 57)

However, such a wealth of insight requires these methodologists to accept that they might have to revisit their early data collection, as their understandings of phenomena change. So, for instance, Glaser and Strauss (1967) note how through observing the ways in which Malayan families care for their dying relatives in Malaysia, they were obliged to go back to their own data on US families. Their conceptual framework had characterised US families as ignoring their dying relatives who they regarded as a nuisance. But a re-examination of the data led them to identify 'not-so-observable' phenomena in their data, leading them to discover several different ways in which US families care for their dying relatives.

The purpose of constant comparison is to extend empirical theory into the realm of formal theory. This theoretical sampling can only be done, according to Glaser (1978), when the emergent and empirically generated theory has been stabilised. Then, at last, the researchers can make their weary way to the library in search of other studies and other theoretical accounts or sample dissimilar and non-comparable groups. These comparisons provide the researcher with further instances to facilitate explanation at the higher conceptual level of formal theory and extend the scope of the findings from the research.

### Grounded theory in action in a study of the awareness of dying

An important influence in the development of grounded theory was the study *Awareness of Dying* conducted by Glaser and Strauss (1965), in which they note that they have written theory on almost every page. Our interest here is not the theories discovered, however fascinating, but the methods used to arrive at these theories, and in particular the decisions made about who and what to sample in the research. In an appendix Glaser and Strauss (1965) discuss their methods of data collection and analysis. The first notable feature, which appears to sit at odds with the position taken in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, is the amount of work that was done before entering the field. They discuss a preliminary stage in their data collection, which 'governed further collection and analysis of data' (1965: 286). In this section, they discuss how their understanding of their research interest, an awareness context of death and dying, was 'fore-shadowed' by personal circumstances and experiences. These authors describe how these circumstances and experiences informed theory development in the early research. First, a state described as 'closed awareness' and then a 'mutual pretence awareness' experienced by Strauss during the death of his mother. A while later he was involved in 'an "elaborate collusive game" designed to keep a friend unaware of his impending death (closed awareness)', (Glaser and Strauss, 1965: 287). Glaser, too, had



recently been through the experience of his father's death and had gained sociological insight about death expectations through the ways in which professionals had talked with family about his father during his dying days.

As a preliminary to data collection, Glaser and Strauss (1965: 287) had 'systematically worked out the concepts (and types) of death expectations and awareness contexts and the paradigm for the study of awareness concepts'. This guided preliminary data collection. But also evident are the openness and theoretical sensitivities of the researchers to investigate social interactions:

Fieldwork allows researchers to plunge into social settings where the important events (about which they will develop theory) are going on "naturally". The researchers watch these events occur. They follow them as they unfold through time. They observe the actors in the relevant social dramas. They converse with or formally interview the actors about their observed actions' (Glaser and Strauss, 1965: 288).

From memos written in the study of the *Awareness of Dying*, theory was ever present in the minds of the researchers. They made decisions from the outset, first looking at sites where patient awareness of dying was minimised – premature baby services and those dealing with comatose patients, then quick dying – the intensive care unit, and then where staff expected death to be slow such as cancer services. The study is one of constant comparison where groups are sampled by the logic of the emerging analytic framework with the aim of:

verifying (in diverse settings) our initial and later hypotheses, of suggesting new hypotheses, and providing new data either on categories or combinations of categories. (Glaser and Strauss, 1965: 289)

The purpose of this comparison is to increase the scope of their study through searching out the structural conditions in which hypotheses can be tested, while at the same time delimiting their theory and its generality. Claims are bracketed by the approach to constant comparison taken in the research. Their intention is always to formulate substantive theory faithful to the empirical situations they have observed. This faithfulness, Glaser and Strauss (1965: 276) observe, 'cannot be formulated by merely applying a formal theory to the substantive area'.

### A reworking of grounded theory

In 1990 Anselm Strauss and a new collaborator Juliet Corbin published a reworking of the methodology of grounded theory. The contribution they make to theoretical sampling has a rather different feel to it. In part, the clue as to how these authors wanted to develop grounded theory is in the sub-title

to their book. *The Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) is about procedures and techniques. It is a practical response to a number of problems, as they perceived them, with the original methodological approach, including theoretical sampling.

In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* little attention is paid to resources in research. While procedures were discussed, their practicality was often elusive; these feel like a promissory note to not worry unduly, you will soon find your bearings when searching for your sample informed by emerging theory. Indeed, as one reads this account one's thoughts reflect back to halcyon days (if they ever existed) when undergraduate and Masters dissertations did not have a fixed hand-in date, PhD research didn't have a time limit of three years to complete, and research funders were not overly concerned whether the outputs from research made an impact. We are constantly obliged in research to reach decisions before we start any research about its resource implications; crudely, how long it will take, how much researcher time we will need, and how much it will cost. Answers to these issues are never open ended. They are most often fashioned and expressed through the priorities of funding bodies, the institutions with which we study and do research, and pressing social need. The times when there were opportunities for open-ended research that starts with nothing more than an overarching problem in mind are long gone, if they ever existed.

In contrast to the impractical, almost mystical tone of Glaser and Strauss's *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and Barney Glaser's *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978), the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) is, as Kath Melia (1996: 375) has observed, 'rather formulaic' and rule-like in approach. In a reworking of their earlier work, Corbin and Strauss (2008) list 15 rules for doing theoretical sampling, for instance. The claimed intent of both these accounts is that the techniques and procedures they lay out will make learning grounded theory easier.

### Making decisions in the design of the research

Alongside these pedagogic issues and an acceptance of the importance of resource issues in the design and implementation of research, Strauss and Corbin (1990) also re-shape the role of researchers in theoretical sampling. The open, theoretically sensitive researcher, essential to theoretical sampling advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and discussed above, is required to be much more reflective and proactive in designing the research. There is now recognition that researchers must have more than just an overarching problem to address. They are now called upon to spend time developing research questions, research

goals, and plan how these will be achieved with the resources they have available to them. 'The research question in a grounded theory study', Strauss and Corbin (1990: 38) observe 'is a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied.'

Social phenomena are characterised as features of the social world that can be described in some way or another. These descriptions use variables and categories. While they may be seen as inadequate, they are the concepts available to researchers at the beginning of their research that start to frame a study. Corbin and Strauss are edging towards this framing of the study in their re-working of grounded theory. They observe that in designing a study, consideration is given to:

concepts pertaining to a given phenomenon (that) have not been identified, or aren't fully developed, or are poorly understood and further explanation on a topic is necessary to increase understanding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 25)

They stress that not all concepts relating to a phenomenon are emergent or discovered in the research. Some must be conceived of and worked out by researchers in planning the research. But they will inevitably be recognised as inadequate.

The fiercest critic of this change in emphasis and approach was Barney Glaser (1992) who, in a rather disparaging manner, described this new methodological development in grounded theory as 'full contextual description'. Going on to note that:

The research question in a grounded theory study is not a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. The problem emerges and questions regarding the problem emerge by which to guide theoretical sampling. Out of open coding, collection by theoretical sampling, and analysing by constant comparison emerge the focus for the research. (Glaser, 1992: 25)

Glaser went further, accusing Strauss and Corbin of misconceiving the original principles of grounded theory. He argued that the new strategy abandoned theoretical sensitivity, and therefore theoretical sampling. The untainted emergence of theory through the observation of incidents was replaced, in Glaser's view, by the 'forcing' of emergence through strategies that introduce preconceived and substantive understandings of phenomena into the research design.

### **Accepting reflection in choosing samples**

Strauss and Corbin (1990) were responding to new ways of thinking about doing qualitative research. The demand for objective distance between researcher and researched, which had informed the earlier methodological

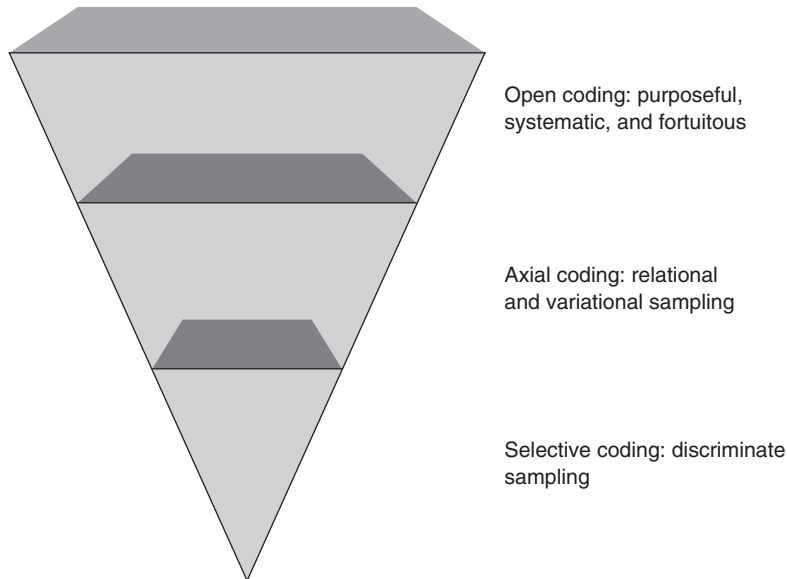
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account of grounded theory had to a degree been superseded by recognition of the researcher as a reflective agent in the research. Decisions about whom or what to sample are no longer entirely guided by emergent data, but are made, at least in part, by researchers.

The changes Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) made to grounded theory do not punctuate the equilibrium of grounded theory with totally new thinking, however. Their approach is gradualist. This reworking of grounded theory still holds to the principles of theoretical sampling laid out in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* through sampling theoretically relevant incidents, which are described as:

what people do, their interactions and action in the range of conditions that give rise to these actions and interaction and its variation; how conditions change or stay the same over time and with what impact; also the consequences of either actual or failed action/interaction or of strategies never acted on (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 177).

Theoretical sampling is still firmly anchored in observable empirical data and guided by symbolic interaction and constant comparison. Like in Glaser and Strauss's initial formulation of grounded theory, sampling aids the researcher to discover and relate relevant categories, their properties, and dimensions. But, while pedagogically the presentation is rule laden and structured, the approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) is



**Figure 1.1** Focussing the researchers' understanding of the phenomenon under investigation: the funnel-like structure of sampling and coding in grounded theory as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990)

less positivist than its predecessor. This reworking accepts the ways in which researchers bring theory to their research, particularly in the early stages. The emergence of theory from micro-empirical observation, nonetheless, continues to direct sampling through much of the research. These changes have an impact on the shape of the research. Grounded theory loses its linear structure of discovery, as suggested earlier in Table 1.1, the strategies for sampling proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) take on a funnel like character (Figure 1.1), in which sampling becomes more focussed as the research progresses through open, axial, and discriminate coding and sampling. And, as we see in the next section, the way in which theoretical sensitivity is conceptualised changes as well.

### **Theoretical sensitivity and the focussing of sampling, coding, and emergent theory**

For Strauss and Corbin (1990) initial concepts and observations contribute to the planning of research, drawn from literature, existing research, and experience, which allow for the selection of sites or groups with reference to the main research question. These general considerations also facilitate decisions about the kinds of data, such as observations or interviews, for instance, that 'best capture(s) the kind(s) of information sought' (1990: 179). Furthermore they allow for detailed methodological plans to be made about how the study will proceed. It is suggested, for instance, that:

If studying a developmental or evolving process, you might want to make some initial decisions about whether to follow the same person over time or different persons at varying points. (1990: 179)

As can be seen, the emphasis on initial decisions in this account is rather different to that of Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the earlier formulation of grounded theory.

The relation between refining the sample and theoretical sensitivity is also presented rather differently from the earlier version of grounded theory. For Strauss and Corbin there is an increasing focus to theoretical sampling, with coding and analysis aligned to a growing theoretical sensitivity. This is a different characterisation of theoretical sensitivity to the one defined in the initial version of grounded theory. Open, axial, and discriminate coding and sampling guide the research, or act as a springboard for future sampling decisions. In this process the researcher becomes more theoretically sensitive, it is no longer an attribute of the researcher, but intrinsically linked to the process of researching.

### Sampling in open coding

Developing this theme of the increasing theoretical sensitivity of the researcher, Strauss and Corbin suggest that in the early research researchers are at their least sensitive, their early fieldwork requires sampling in open coding. This aids discovery and the naming and categorising of phenomena. Openness rather than specificity guides the search for the most relevant data and instances. These will provide the greatest opportunity for insight into the phenomenon and facilitate data comparison. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest three techniques of open sampling. These may be used alone or in combination in the early research.

First, sampling may be purposeful. Sites, persons, or documents are chosen deliberately because they have a bearing on the categories, dimensions, or properties of the social phenomenon under study. Strauss and Corbin describe, for instance, how in an investigation of hospital equipment they identified various 'properties or dimensions' that they thought were important. Amongst these dimensions, or dependent variables, were size, cost, and status. They chose to sample the biggest, costliest, and highest status equipment, the Computerised Axial Tomography (CAT) scanner, because it 'maximized opportunities for discovering differences made by such machinery to patient care and the work of medical personnel' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 184).

The method of purposeful sampling offers opportunities for exploring difference. The second method proposed, systematic sampling, exposes more subtle differences, Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim. Sampling is done through proceeding from one person to the next, from place to place, or document to document, searching out incidents and events of interest to the study. A systematic sampling approach increases the chance of uncovering similarities and differences. Through going from unit to unit in a hospital to observe head nurses at work they identified differences in organisational structure between units that provided a useful basis for comparison in the study.

The third of the methods of sampling in open coding is fortuitous sampling. Unexpected insights from the fieldwork are incorporated into analysis. This is a method of chance. Strauss and Corbin (1990: 184) emphasise the importance of the researcher's 'open and questioning mind'. But this is also a mind aware of the significance of events or incidents to the study, which suggests more than an ability to ask questions like What is this? What can this mean? in a merely open way. Researchers are bringing theoretical presuppositions to the research that mediates their theoretical sensitivity.

### Sampling in axial coding: relational and variational sampling

Sampling in open coding exposes variation and process and encourages theoretical sensitivity. Sampling in axial coding, aided through the researcher's ever

increasing theoretical sensitivity, seeks to make more specific the theoretically relevant concepts (categories and sub-categories) in the research. Juliet Corbin suggests that sampling in axial coding goes hand-in-hand with open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Their earlier account of theoretical sampling deals with each of these strategies separately. I consider axial coding separately here as this aids in understanding what each part of the sampling strategy is used for in the research.

Axial coding is undertaken to relate different categories identified during sampling in open coding. Sampling is directed systematically and purposefully towards uncovering and validating the relationships between categories. Its purpose is to explain how categories relate across 'conditions, contexts, actions/interactions, and consequences' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 196). The aim is to relate these categories to this 'paradigm', or emerging theory, through sampling on the basis of theoretically relevant concepts.

Sampling in axial coding happens through both chance and choice. At each step along the way the purpose of axial coding proceeds through analysis and hypothesis testing of emergent theory. Sampling in axial coding is a strategy that recognises the likelihood of any two conditions, or contexts, actions or interactions, or consequences being the same are slight. Sometimes, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest the researcher may even manipulate the research experimentally through varying the dimensions of properties of the phenomenon, through sampling at different times of the day for instance. The purpose of sampling in axial coding is to 'find as many differences as possible at the dimensional level of data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 185) through investigating the relationships between categories and sub-categories and finding variation and process between these.

### **Sampling in selective coding: discriminate sampling**

The researcher is now at their most theoretically sensitive, having repeatedly analysed, categorised, and sampled on the basis of theoretically relevant concepts through sampling in axial coding. Discriminate sampling is employed to validate statements about relationships, fill in categories, and form theory. It is directed and deliberate, a series of choices used to verify the emergent theory in the research. It may require returning to units that have been sampled in the research to ask new questions, or seeking out of new contexts to test theory. Negative cases that do not express the categories at all may also be sampled. All of these are used to test theory. As Strauss and Corbin (1990: 187) note, these are 'a crucially important and integral part of grounded theory'. Hypotheses are tested against the data and inform each step of the coding, analysis, and sampling in the research.



### The grounded theory sample of empirical reality

The link between analysis and sampling is emphasised in the increasing focus of the sampling strategy outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). I have suggested a funnel-like character to this proposed method in Figure 1.1 on p. 21. Corbin chooses a different simile, likening the processes of sampling/coding/analysis in the research to an assemblage of blocks towards the building of a pyramid (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Whatever way up you choose to see the structure of the sampling strategies, the aim is increasingly refined theory from its discovery or emergence predicated on empirical observation of social interactions.

These interactions are, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) observe, fluid, and complex. In keeping with the ontological assumptions of symbolic interaction, it is the creation and change of the world by human beings in their ceaseless actions and interactions, whether rational or not, that are the focus of sampling and enquiry. The theoretical sampling of empirical units that display, or fail to display the actions/interactions as categories and sub-categories under investigation allow for the discovery and building of theory. Sampling of empirical regularities and associated coding and analysis make possible the testing of emergent theory through seeing empirical data as real. As Corbin and Strauss (1990: 187) observe:

Though not testing in a statistical sense, we are constantly comparing hypotheses against reality (the data), making modifications, then testing again. Only that which is repeatedly found to stand up against reality will be built into the theory.

The constant comparison proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) equates empirical observation with an external reality. This, however, sits uncomfortably with the observations already made about the ways in which this reworking of grounded theory opened the door to a degree of researcher reflexivity. As discussed, this is proposed at two levels, first in the theoretical work done in shaping the initial research problem or question, and secondly through the ways in which the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher is conceived of as a process driven forward through sampling/coding/analysis. For Strauss and Corbin theoretical sensitivity is not an inherent characteristic of the researcher.

In part, we may see the grounded theory method proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as an attempt to resolve a central ontological challenge of grounded theory, what counts as reality. It is a challenge that remains unresolved in both *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and in its reworking. As Kathy Charmaz (2009) observes, grounded theory brought together two contrasting philosophical and methodological traditions. Barney Glaser studied



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| Objectivist grounded theory                                      | Constructivist grounded theory  |
|--|---|
| Assumes an external reality                                      | Assumes multiple realities  |
| Assumes discovery of data  | Assumes mutual construction of data through interaction                             |
| Assumes conceptualisations emerge from data                      | Assumes researchers construct categories  |
| Views representation of data as unproblematic                    | Views representation of data as problematic, relativistic, situational, and partial |
| Assumes neutrality, passivity, and the authority of the observer | Assumes the observer's values, priorities, positions, and actions affect views      |

Figure 1.2 A comparison between the foundational assumptions of objectivist and constructivist grounded theory (after Charmaz, 2009: 141)

with Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton at Columbia University, while Anselm Strauss was supervised by Herbert Blumer at the Chicago School (of Sociology). These disparate traditions of positivism and pragmatism/symbolic interaction, as Charmaz (2009: 129) goes on to observe, placed grounded theory on ‘somewhat unsteady ontological and epistemological grounds and planted the seeds of divergent directions of method’.

This divergence is exemplified in the ongoing debates about theoretical sampling in grounded theory. Charmaz (2009) suggests that the methodological accounts of grounded theory now sit along a continuum between an objectivist grounded theory and a constructivist grounded theory. The foundational assumptions of each of these polar positions are outlined in Figure 1.2. What is considered to constitute reality clearly discriminates between the two diverging traditions. It is to an examination of the implications of these when considering theoretical sampling in the ongoing debates in grounded theory that I now turn.

### Theoretical sampling in an objectivist grounded theory

The work of Janice M. Morse (1991, 2007) exemplifies the objectivist approach in modern grounded theory. This approach draws extensively on the work of Glaser (1978), in which he restated and to some degree clarified the original conception of grounded theory. Morse insists that theoretical sampling can only happen through an open theoretically sensitive researcher whose focus, even at the outset, is guided by receptiveness to incidents of phenomena in the field. Thereafter theoretical sampling is guided by concepts, which are emergent theories derived from the coding and analysis of empirical data.

This approach assumes that conceptualisations emerge from the data, and that everything going on in the research scene is data. As Glaser (2002) asserts, 'all is data'. Morse (2007: 231), states that it is inappropriate to select participants using variables or categories, or as she puts it, 'demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, and so forth'. The criteria for selecting a theoretical sample should be the conceptual and informational needs of the study. We might question quite what the differences between these are, but what is being emphasised is the emergence of theory over imposition of theoretical constructs.

In pursuing this theme, Morse asserts that using a random sampling strategy based on a variable is not an appropriate way to select a sample. This will provide a representative sample of the population, but it will only be representative of the demographic characteristics used in selecting the sample, she argues, which will tend to provide insight into common experiences that cluster around the mean of a normal or skewed distribution. Less common experiences, represented at each of the tails of the distribution are poorly represented. Qualitative data, according to Morse (2007), should be thought of as being represented by a more rectangular distribution, with purposeful choices made to ensure that all experiences are represented in the account.

Neither should a stratified sample be considered in which participants are selected in proportion to their frequency in the population. To emphasise this point, Morse (2007) argues that because a given population is 40% Caucasian, 20% Black, 20% Hispanic, and 20% other, the sample should not be made up of eight Caucasians, four Blacks, four Hispanics, and four others, providing a sample of 20 to the study. A far better approach is that of the convenience sample. This allows researchers to go to the places or sites where they think they are most likely to see the social actions and interactions they are interested in investigating. Through openness and theoretical sensitivity they are likely to identify potential categories through enquiry, coding, and analysis.

This objectivist approach to theoretical sampling assumes that empirical regularities are the external reality and the representation of data is unproblematic. Any deviation from openness and theoretical sensitivity will inevitably lead to conceptual blindness, Morse (2007) argues. The appropriate ways to proceed in identifying a purposeful sample is through sampling participants who are going through a critical juncture in a particular trajectory of a phenomenon. Researchers choose particular relationships and different stages in the developing relationships. This is a deliberate strategy of selection based on what is understood about the phenomenon from its empirical investigation and the coding of these data that precedes the purposeful theoretical sampling strategy. Morse (2007: 238) claims to be 'solving problems detective-style, looking for clues, sifting and sorting, and creating a plausible case'.

The assumption that the researcher is neutral and authoritative in the research is emphasised through a prescription to seek out these optimal rather than average experiences. Objectivist approaches advocate an inherent selection bias, predicated on empirical emergence. The best cases are selected for analysis in the first instance. This is done because:

By using the worst – or best – cases, the characteristics of the phenomenon or experience we are studying become most obvious, clear, and emerge more quickly and cleanly' (Morse, 2007: 234).

Only once these worst or best cases have been explored and the researchers know what characteristics to look for in the data, can they move on to sample and interrogate less optimal examples. This selection bias means that a focus can be maintained on identifying the best empirical cases to discover and test theory through the external reality of the empirical world.

In this account Morse (2007) emphasises the comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach to theoretical sampling. Objectivism, and indeed positivism, is the key underlying assumption in this approach. Maintaining a distance between observers and observed, alongside theoretical sensitivity and openness are further key coordinates of this theoretical sampling. Janice Morse does suggest that the original account of openness suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) might need tempering a little. A middle course, which characterises the researcher as less passive is appropriate:

The researcher should not go into the setting with an agenda of using some theoretical model, and sort the data accordingly. Neither should the researcher enter a setting blindly, without a vast compendium of (social science) knowledge (Morse, 1994: 4).

The researchers are neither forcing data into preconceived theoretical positions, nor are they a passive bystander. What is more, despite the feeling of 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not' in Morse's methodological prescriptions, she, like Glaser and Strauss (1967), emphasises the creative approach of grounded theory research. This insistence on flexibility, while apparently resisted by Glaser (2002) in his increasingly grumpy rejections of changes to his formulation of grounded theory, opens up opportunities for a description of grounded theory as constructivist. This sits at the opposite end of the continuum to an objectivist approach as described in Figure 1.2.

### Theoretical sampling in constructivist grounded theory

Recent accounts of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006, 2009; Clarke, 2009; Bryant, 2003) have advocated a constructivist grounded theory. This approach, echoing and indeed amplifying Strauss and Corbin's (1990) method of how research and theoretical sampling starts, explicitly recognises

the researchers' reflexivity is a point of departure for the research. As Kathy Charmaz (2006) explains, theoretical knowledge, hunches, and hypotheses are necessary starting points in planning a research project. What is more, emergence and discovery give way to the construction of theory. Adele Clarke (2009) describes the researchers' analysis within the research as moving beyond the knowing subject searching out silences, absences, structural discourse, and hidden positions that resonate through participants' accounts. It is accepted that researchers bring theoretical constructs to the research to co-produce theory with their participants.

For some, including Barney Glaser (2002), this is not grounded theory at all, but qualitative data analysis. But despite Glaser's objections, Charmaz and colleagues do see their reformulation as grounded theory. They note the significant critique of positivism that has happened since the first rendering of grounded theory fifty years ago (Charmaz, 2006, 2009; Bryant, 2003), their aim is to reposition the methodology of grounded theory. Charmaz (2000: 510) seeks to add:

another vision for future qualitative research: constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory celebrates first hand knowledge of empirical worlds, takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research into the 21st century. Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretative understanding of subjects' meanings.

The middle ground between postmodernism and positivism may be disputed territory, but what connects these poles is empiricism. For Kathy Charmaz it is a place where theory is constructed. This construction privileges participants' narrative accounts of experiences rather than material observation of interaction. To get to this middle ground requires theoretical sampling with its purpose of directing researchers to the empirical accounts of experiences which allow for data to be obtained through which to develop the meanings and implications of categories. These categories, when full, will reflect the qualities of 'respondents' experiences and provide a useful analytic handle for understanding them' (Charmaz, 2006: 100).

Karen Henwood and Nick Pidgeon (2003) describe this approach to theoretical sampling as theoretical agnosticism, in which theoretical concepts have to earn their way into the narrative of the research. They are always treated as problematic. Researchers must look for the ways in which they are lived and understood. This is the engine of theoretical sampling in constructed grounded theory.

Necessarily, therefore, theoretical sampling does not start at the beginning of the research. It is preceded by an initial sampling strategy, which

presupposes that theoretical categories cannot be known beforehand. They are not articulated in the research question, but are constructed through the analysis of data. The only lead as to what should be sampled at this initial stage is a set of criteria to sample particular people, organisations, or settings where the topic of the research might happen. In doing this initial sampling researchers are obliged to both confront preconceptions about the topic under investigation and refine the scope of the topic to be investigated. Access to participants requires a recasting of the topic. Similarly, finding that certain groups interact in a particular way may lead to the research being circumscribed.

Jane Hood (quoted in Charmaz, 2006: 101) describes theoretical sampling as allowing the researcher to:

tighten ... the corkscrew or the hermeneutic spiral so that you end up with a theory that perfectly matches your data.

This hermeneutic spiral is made up of data collection, coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is specific, and systematic, and through this strategy facilitates predictions into where and how data will be found to fill gaps and saturate categories. It is an informed search for statements, events, or cases that will in some way illuminate categories. There is a constant interplay between inductive strategies, forming hypotheses from data, and then deductive investigation to test these hypotheses against the empirical world of the investigation. This abductive strategy, with its constant reference back to the empirical world keeps theoretical sampling moving towards emergent objectives. These, according to Charmaz (2006: 104), include delineating the properties of a category, checking hunches about it and saturating its properties. It allows for categories to be distinguished, and relationships between different categories to be clarified, and finally, Charmaz (2006) claims that abduction will help to identify process.

The focus throughout this constructivist formulation of theoretical sampling is the emergent theoretical categories that allow for the elaboration, checking, and qualifying of these categories. Emerging theory shapes and directs theoretical sampling, which allows for these inductively derived hypotheses to be tested deductively within a topic area and across substantive areas. What is more, this strategy of theoretical sampling allows researchers to return to participants and/or already collected data with more directed and esoteric questions to test hunches. As Antony Bryant (2003: 20) observes:

The constructivist position would argue that there is a dialogue between the researcher and the research subject – in both senses of the word “subject” – i.e. the person who is the concern of the research, as well as the research area itself.

Throughout this dialogue, what is emphasised is the ways in which researchers, and to a degree participants, co-construct theory from the empirical data collected, analysed, and mimeographed.

### Conclusion

A constructivist account of theoretical sampling is considerably removed from the formulation of the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The tracing of the ways in which theoretical sampling have been considered in the evolving methods of grounded theory suggest an increasing accommodation of a constructivist epistemology. The positivist account of theoretical sampling of Glaser and Strauss (1967) has not withstood the onslaught of standpoint and post-structuralist debates intact. As discussed through the historical account of grounded theory in this chapter, there are still methodologists who continue to hold to Glaser's account of objectivist theoretical sampling strategy. But even these have become more accepting of the post-structuralists' reflexive turn in the social sciences. The significant change in approach to theoretical sampling has been to change the characteristics of the open, theoretically sensitive researcher. *Tabula rasa* (or blank slate) was the device in the positivist account of early grounded theory. This may have been rhetorical (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006), but it could not withstand the historical and philosophical attacks on positivism of the last fifty years. Even so, the empirical renderings of theory remain central to all the accounts of grounded theory to the present day. Empiricism is the methodological orthodoxy of grounded theory and theoretical sampling.

The next case, purposeful sampling, considers what insight might be gained through putting aside orthodoxy in favour of a pragmatic approach to sampling. What might we learn from an account in which the main criterion for sampling in qualitative research is the appropriateness of the sampling method, recognising that different sampling strategies might be more or less appropriate in different situations?