

Article

Examining the Nexus Between Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism

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Abstract

Grounded theory is inherently symbolic interactionist; however, not all grounded theory researchers appreciate its importance or benefit from its influence. Elsewhere, we have written about the intrinsic relationship between grounded theory and symbolic interactionism, highlighting the silent, fundamental contribution of symbolic interactionism to the methodology. At the same time, there are significant insights to be had by bringing a conscious awareness of the philosophy of symbolic interactionism to grounded theory research. In this article we discuss the symbolic interactionist concepts of mind, self, and society, and their applicability in grounded theorizing. Our purpose is to highlight foundational concepts of symbolic interactionism and their centrality in the processes of conducting grounded theory research.

Keywords: symbolic interactionism, grounded theory, qualitative methods, mind, self, society

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The adequacy of a theory for sociology today cannot be divorced from the process by which it is generated. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 5)

Grounded theory emerged at a time when researchers were not overly concerned with the intricacies of ontological and epistemological issues related to their work. In the mid-1960s, research was embedded in an unexamined, more or less positivist worldview, and therefore in their seminal work, Glaser and Strauss (1967) put considerable effort into justifying the rigor of the method in ways that a positivist might understand. Nonetheless, grounded theory was developed on a philosophical platform imbued with symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism is a worldview that provides a philosophical underpinning to grounded theory; it provides the researcher with a set of sensitizing concepts. Using symbolic interactionism is not the same as applying a philosophy or theory that limits the range of theoretical coding by imposing a set of predetermined concepts on a data set, in spite of Glaser's (2005) assertion to the contrary. Rather than limiting data collection and analysis, symbolic interactionism provides some initial windows through which the researcher can view and think about the phenomena under study, thus expanding the breadth of theoretical codes available. An understanding of symbolic interactionism obviates any notion that it "possesses" (Glaser, 2005, p. 4) grounded theory.

In this article, we explore further the role of Mead's (1934/67) basic tenets of symbolic interactionism, specifically the nature of symbols, the mind, self, and society, and their relevance to grounded theory. Our intent is to explicate the specific contributions of symbolic interactionism to grounded theory method.

Background

Grounded theory and symbolic interactionism have a long history together. Both of the originators of grounded theory were interested in nonpositivist thinking and symbolic interactionism itself. For example, Strauss had a long-standing interest in it as a graduate student of Blumer, who himself was a student of Mead. Strauss edited a posthumous collection of Mead's papers (Mead & Strauss, 1965), and both Glaser and Strauss were "long-standing" (Bunch, 2004, p. 441) members of the Social Interactionist Society, a group that was interested in, and supportive of, the work of Blumer.

Grounded theory emerged as a research method to study social processes in context and, as we have discussed elsewhere (Milliken & Schreiber, 2001), is inherently symbolic interactionist in nature. The ontology, epistemology, method, and techniques of grounded theory are all steeped in symbolic interactionism, such that the two cannot be divorced. Therefore, any grounded theorist is, at least passively and by default, relying on ideas founded in the symbolic interactionist tradition. The implicit presence of symbolic interactionism in grounded theory research does not preclude overlap with other theoretical and philosophical perspectives, such as postmodernism, feminism, or critical race theory (Elteto, Jackson, & Lim, 2008; MacDonald & Schreiber, 2001; Wuest, 1995, 2001). At the same time, there are positive, active contributions of symbolic interactionism to grounded theory that a knowledgeable researcher can use to improve the quality of a study.

In the recent flurry of interest in grounded theory as a method, it seems that much of the complexity of which Glaser and Strauss wrote is lost when researchers overlook its philosophical origins. Too often, authors use grounded theory solely as a data analysis technique, without understanding, apparently, the centrality of interaction in the research process. For example,

theoretical sampling involves interaction at the juncture of the researcher, the data, and the emergent analytic process to inform the ongoing recruitment of participants and the identification of other data sources. Instead, in attempting to provide for variation in the sample, and consequently in the data, researchers have sometimes used sampling procedures that can only be seen as stratification according to demographic variables (see, for example, Isaksen & Gjengedal, 2000; Jack, DiCenso, & Lohfeld, 2005). Such practices are not in keeping with the grounded theory principle that only those variables that “earn their way” into the theory are relevant (Glaser, 2001). In privileging a set of a priori demographic variables, these researchers have imposed from the onset a predetermined structure on their data. By reflecting on symbolic interactionism, the researcher moves beyond pre-established understandings and is sensitized to interactions and meanings hidden in the data.

Locating the research methodology within symbolic interactionism provides a means for investigation not only of the social world but also of the contextualized processes by which human beings construct and engage with their social worlds. Thus, without attending to the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the method (Milliken & Schreiber, 2001), it is impossible to develop fully grounded and contextualized theories that explain human experience.

The Nature of Symbols

A foundational principle within symbolic interactionism has been that human beings are distinguished from other animals by their use of symbols (Blumer, 1962; Mead, 1934/67). In fact, symbols have been understood as the very basis of social interaction, mediating between stimulus and response. Symbols are abstract representations of social objects that enable people to communicate both verbally and nonverbally and understand each other's intentions and actions. Because social action and interaction are symbolic in nature, people interpret the objects in their environment and the behaviors of others around them and, rather than reacting directly, respond on the basis of their interpreted meaning of those objects and actions (Blumer, 1962; Charon, 1992; Meltzer, 1972). In stable interaction, people respond to one another in light of their shared understandings. Conversely, in circumstances in which people define the situation differently, conflict might arise until they are able to develop overlapping conceptualizations. Furthermore, a person's verbal and nonverbal communications might contradict one another, causing confusion or conflict for the receiver. Thus, symbols are socially derived and modified through interaction, rather than inherently attached to objects and events.

Although symbols arise from social interaction, at the same time, they shape social interaction and create social realities. Languages are powerful symbol systems that structure the nature of what can be *seen* and considered. For example, in French there are two words for power: *pouvoir* and *puissance*. *Pouvoir* is more formal, authoritarian, and positional, as in the power granted to a mayor or governor. In contrast, *puissance* refers to a more personal type of power or influence, in addition to denoting physical strength. English does not have separate words to distinguish between formal and personal power.

Recently in the West, efforts have been made to promote gender equality and inclusion through the conscious adoption of nonsexist language; we now say “postal worker” instead of postman, for example. This represents conscious attention to the meanings of words with the specific intent to counteract gendered assumptions in our use of language. Changing previously gendered symbols to neutral language creates a changed social reality in which the implicit assumption of males as the definitive players is removed. Similarly, languages develop and are used differently by different groups of people in response to their needs. Farmers, physicians, and fashion models live in different social circles, each with a different awareness and sense of salience.

Consequently, the notion of “ideal weight” has different connotations for each of these groups. Farmers might be concerned with increasing the weight of their animals because they sell them by the pound, yet fashion models strive for thinness. Physicians have a notion of weight balancing height, and express it as body mass index. Each has a different understanding, focus, and intent when considering ideal weight.

The centrality of language as a symbol system has many implications for the grounded theorist. Data are chiefly composed of either spoken or written language, and field observations are recorded either electronically or in writing. Visual data, such as photographs or pictures, as well as nonverbal actions, are interpreted through the use of words. Music, art, and emotions are experienced directly, and each person is likely to experience them somewhat differently. Nevertheless, for purposes of research, these experiences must be interpreted through language in order to be analyzed. Thus, language is the only means we have to consider what we see and to communicate our understandings of social phenomena.

As grounded theorists, it is vitally important for us to explore fully the meanings participants assign to the words they choose, so that we do not impose our own meanings onto their intents. For example, a researcher studying men who have sex with men, but identify themselves as “straight,” would want to know more about what terms like “straight” and “sex” mean to these participants. Occasionally, re-contacting a participant to seek such clarification becomes necessary, when it becomes apparent during data analysis that the interviewer has not explored a particular meaning, probably because she or he assumed it was understood. For this reason, the prudent grounded theorist always includes as a last interview question, “If it is necessary, may I contact you again?”

Data analysis requires cautious explication of the meanings of words and phrases used to describe the phenomena of study, both in interview and documentary data. Coding begins with assigning in vivo codes to words and phrases that might represent concepts in the data. At this stage, the researcher is unclear what the words and phrases mean. By assigning codes that are as close to the original wording as possible, large numbers of codes are generated, often at different levels of abstraction. The researcher then must compare codes to other codes and determine whether or not they represent the same or different concepts. This is one aspect of constant comparison. We have found that as the theory comes together, we struggle to find the exact words to label concepts at increasingly higher levels of abstraction. A good grounded theorist is conversant with a thesaurus, as well as with an excellent dictionary that includes the etymology of words. This latter resource is highly useful, in that selection of the right word to label a category can add nuance to the findings. For example, the term *keeping vigil* was selected to describe the work of nurse anesthetists because of the practical and religious connotations of a sacred act of watchfulness (Schreiber & MacDonald, 2010a, 2010b). Nurse anesthetists see themselves as “taking the patient as close to death as they will be in this life,” even breathing for them, which they view as an act of reverence. Thus, as grounded theorists, we strive to use language carefully, both in how we listen to participants and how we write, to be as clear as possible in translating the data to the reader and participants’ stories into theory.

The Interaction of Perspectives

Any qualitative study begins from the perspective of the researcher, who is challenged to move beyond her or his own understandings. Attempting to understand the meanings through which individuals interact and construct their worlds requires an emic research perspective, that is, the researcher must enter the everyday worlds of participants to learn the experiences of those living there. Mead’s proposition that the only way to understand the experience of another is through

significant symbols requires that researchers, who begin their endeavor as outsiders (Blumer, 1969/86, p. 35), take on the perspectives of their participants in order to learn about the insiders' behaviors and attitudes. Grounded theory diverges from some other qualitative methods by incorporating perspectives beyond those of participants per se. As the grounded theorist gains an understanding of the participants' perspective of the phenomenon, he or she also brings in other points of view, including observations, sensitizing concepts, and material gleaned from documents and other media, to enrich the emerging conceptualization(s). Thus, a successful grounded theory should be an abstraction of the phenomenon of interest that includes and honors the participants' experience of it, but is not bounded by it.

For instance, in a study of people with chronic back problems, participants experienced considerable loss, depression, frustration, and despair, and these feelings lasted for years. At the same time, participants indicated that those around them were not always supportive and comforting, and sometimes gave disapproving messages suggestive of malingering on the part of participants (Watanabe, 2002). Some participants indicated they believed that the invisibility of their injury contributed to these losses, and they felt invalidated and stigmatized by others. Watanabe came across the notion of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) that, with some massaging, seemed to fit with her understanding of participants' stories. Disenfranchised grief is grieving for a loss that is not socially sanctioned, and for which there are no comfort rituals or prescribed behaviors. Doka (1989) identified losses such as miscarriage as falling into this category, and indicated that the lack of acceptance and recognition of such losses interferes with people's ability to resolve their loss issues. Watanabe (2002) used the concept of disenfranchised grief to bring together a cluster of ideas she found within the data. When she presented her findings to participants, they identified with the concept of disenfranchised grief, and expressed strong endorsement of her theory, "Establishing a New Life."

In this way, the grounded theorist represents, but does not attempt to reproduce, the views of participants, and constructs a conceptualization of the data that transcends participants' stories. This example is a demonstration of how a grounded theorist continuously shifts perspectives and moves back and forth among participants' perspectives, other perspectives, and his or her emerging conceptualizations. In his or her mind, the researcher conducts an internal dialogue between and among the perspectives until understanding becomes clear. Thus, the researcher, in taking on the roles of others, engages in an internal dialectical process from which he or she formulates a model to explain the situation and its resolution. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this internal dialogue is known as *minded behavior*.

The Mind

A core concept in symbolic interactionism is the mind, which develops concurrently with the self. For symbolic interactionists, the mind is the process of internal conversation, of the individual in symbolic interaction with self. The mind is socially derived, arising from communication and association with others. Through this interaction and role-playing, the individual internalizes the definitions, symbols, meanings, and perspectives of others and is able to process information internally within a variety of contexts (Meltzer, 1972). It is the mind that enables people to understand and employ the symbols that make human society possible. Mead (1934/67) recognized three unique features of the human mind: (a) the use of symbols to designate objects in the environment, (b) the ability to rehearse covertly the alternative approaches to action toward objects and situations, and (c) the capacity to select appropriate courses of action.

As people come into contact with objects in the environment, they begin to ascribe meanings, symbolic representations, to the objects. Thus, meanings of objects, rather than being innate, arise

from, and are modified by, the social interaction through which people engage with them. Through experience of past interactions, and the present, people attend selectively to some symbols and disregard others. As such, perception becomes a matter of screening from the environment what is salient to one's needs at a given time (Mead, 1934/67; Meltzer, 1972, 2003). This selectivity does not necessarily reflect conscious behavior; nonetheless, it suggests that the individual plays a role in shaping his or her own environment. Minded behavior is a process by which the person, in his or her own mind, sees a problem, explores alternative approaches and considers their consequences, and chooses an action. In this way, the mind serves a social function, and rather than responding in a predetermined fashion, the individual constructs the act (Mead, 1934/67; Meltzer, 1972, 2003).

Similarly, from experience in interaction, each study participant has developed meanings about the world, including meanings of the matter under study. The development of meaning is the process by which each participant makes sense of what is happening. Each participant will have a somewhat different understanding and a unique story that highlights somewhat different events or issues. As revealed in Watanabe's (2002) study, people with chronic back problems varied in the extent to which they felt they received validation from physicians for their pain, as well as the importance they attached to that validation. Thus, from varied interactions with the world, each participant in this study derived a somewhat different meaning of physician validation, and these meanings influenced participants' actions. In the same way, other data sources, such as documents and field notes, contain ideas that are more (or less) salient to the originator of the data, based on meanings that have been socially derived within the context in which the data arose.

As described above, the processes of analyzing data and developing a grounded theory involve the researcher in symbolic interaction. With an understanding of how mind functions in symbolic interactionism, a researcher is more likely to be sensitized to the importance of any data that indicate a participant's mental processes. Examining participants' "thoughts, ideas, reasoning, foresight, imagination, understanding, judgment, deciding, choosing, evaluating, speculating, and numerous other mental processes" (Meltzer, 2003, p. 253) can help the researcher formulate hypotheses about the phenomenon being studied, that will inform further data collection and constant comparison. From reflection on participants' words, gestures, and inferred meanings, in light of the researcher's preexisting and emerging notions, the grounded theorist develops a sense of salience about the circumstances and issues under study. Some ideas might begin to take on more importance within the existing conceptualizations, while others, which earlier were thought to be important in the context of the study, are sifted out as the theory develops. Thus, the symbolic interaction in which the researcher engages is the process by which he or she makes meaning of the study data.

The Self

A second key concept of symbolic interactionism is the self. The self, as formulated by Mead (1934/67) and expanded by Blumer (1969/86), is a term used to indicate that a human being can act socially toward him or her self as she or he might toward others. This view of self as process is in contrast with the more static use of the term in behavioral sciences (Hewitt & Shulman, 2011). Individuals can see themselves in a variety of ways, such as male or female, good or bad, sick or healthy, and so forth. This self-reflection is the means by which one interacts with one's self, and becomes an object of one's own actions (Meltzer, 1972). The self develops through a social process of interaction with the environment, as the human infant gains the capacity to interact meaningfully with others. The mechanism for this is role-playing and role-taking, in

which children eventually learn to put themselves in the place of others and view themselves from that standpoint (Blumer, 1969/86; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011; Meltzer, 1972).

In Mead's theory, the self is composed of two phases, the "I" and the "Me." The "I" is the self as subject, and the "Me" is the self as object (as cited in Wallace & Wolf, 1986). The "I" is the part of the self that responds freely, creatively, and spontaneously. All action begins with the "I" (Mead, 1934/67). Shibutani (1991) describes "I" as "the impulse of an individual with a distinct personality" (p. 61). In contrast, "Me" is the organized and internalized set of attitudes, expectations, beliefs, understandings, and perspectives about the self that have been learned from others and is the only part of the self of which the actor is fully aware. As the internalized imperfect representation of the social group that surrounds the individual, "Me" is the socialized part of the self that exercises self-control and conformity (Ritzer, 1988). "Me" arises from the individual having learned the expectations of society both from particular others in interaction and from the "generalized other," in the form of culture. Consequently, an actor's identity is associated with "Me."

The self is not just the "I" and the "Me" added together; it is the relationship or ongoing interaction between the two. The self is the very process of interaction in which the "I" and the "Me" are engaged. This interaction between the "I" and the "Me" creates an internal dialogue that is known only to the individual. In this way, people are seen to be in constant interaction with themselves as they shift in their state of consciousness in self-reflection (Mead, 1934/67). Meltzer (1972) suggests that this perspective of the self defines the individual self as a society in miniature. In this way, people are seen to engage in interaction with themselves as two or more individuals might, in an internal representation of a social interaction.

An illustration of this interaction can be found in women's experiences with depression and recovery (see, for example, Jack, 1991; Schreiber & Hartrick, 2002). Women who had experienced depression told stories of working hard to live up to what they understood as expectations for themselves as women, mothers, daughters, and partners but never feeling like they got there. They described themselves, in hindsight, as subjugating their own internal needs and wishes to what they understood as the wishes of others. Recovery for these women involved attending more carefully to their internal dialogues, that is, listening to their own needs, and allowing more of the "I" portion of their selves to emerge.

Although we have explained the concepts of mind and self separately, even experienced symbolic interactionists find it difficult to distinguish between the two concepts because they occur simultaneously and are inextricably linked in symbolic interactionist thought. As explained by Weigert and Gecas (2003), the self is that part of the mind that is directed toward the self, that is, engaged in reflexivity (p.267). The self engages in a particular kind of internal conversation (between the "I" and the "Me") for the purpose of evaluating, motivating, praising, or disapproving of itself. Thus, when a researcher analyzes data, the mind works toward understanding the meaning in the data and explaining it with a theory, and the self continually assesses the adequacy of that understanding and explanation.

The Researcher as Self

As grounded theorists, we are concerned with the processual view of self at various levels. In speaking with and observing participants, we seek to understand their internal conversations and the meanings they attach to their experiences. Participants tell us about their lives and provide a window into the world as seen through their eyes, so that we might come to understand their actions and interactions. In making sense of this, the researcher begins by examining the data for

the varied meanings contained within. What stands out in the data as meaningful reflects, in part, the researcher's own understandings, developed through his or her process of internal dialogue. Although Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that prior knowledge and experience should not influence data analysis, they also said that ". . . the researcher does not approach reality as a *tabula rasa*. He [sic] must have a perspective that will help him see relevant data and abstract significant categories from his scrutiny of the data" (p. 3, footnote 3). Thus, the researcher's internal dialogue is the foundation for data analysis in grounded theory.

A key tool for grounded theorists is writing analytic memos, a process that allows the researcher to make her or his internal dialogue explicit and external. Grounded theorists write memos from the first inception of the study through to completion, recording their conceptualizations of the project and the data as they emerge and change. The researcher begins writing memos by explicating his or her own preexisting knowledge and understandings of the phenomena of study, and continues by recording evolving understandings in light of reflections on the data, and increasingly abstract representations. Early analytic memos are often only a sentence or two, sometimes in the form of a question. As analysis continues, and as the researcher's thinking develops, several increasingly complex memos may be written on the same concept. These memos document the researcher's internal dialogue in coming to understanding, helping to bring about conceptual clarity, and raising the level of theoretical abstraction.

This sounds clear enough, and others (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Schreiber, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) have had essentially the same advice for novice grounded theorists. What is less evident in the literature, however, is that the grounded theorist doing data analysis is thoroughly marinated in data, living, breathing, eating, sleeping, and showering with it. The data are never far from the researcher's conscious mind, and are always present as background noise in his or her thinking. Grounded theorists spend a lot of time reflecting and ruminating, conducting a complex internal dialogue in efforts to gain understanding. One of the most important functions of writing memos is to interrupt the cycle of rumination (however briefly) by putting ideas to paper, allowing the researcher breathing space and the possibility of sleeping uninterrupted by, potentially, profound thoughts. Experienced researchers carry a notepad or a small recording device at all times, even placing it next to their beds, to record key words and ideas as they occur. Full memos can be written when time permits. It is important to get the ideas down before they are forgotten or, alternatively, before the researcher loses too much sleep obsessing about them unproductively, only to awaken and not remember them. Glaser (1978) noted that if the idea is important, it will return repeatedly; however, we are uncomfortable with applying such a relaxed approach to data analysis.

To return to the symbolic interactionist view of self, in conducting a grounded theory study, the researcher is engaged in an all-encompassing internal dialogical process of making meaning of the data. In trying to make sense of the data, the researcher alternates between and among perspectives, "trying on" different possible meanings for fit with the data. In this process, the researcher alternates between inductive and deductive thinking, as she or he tests concepts and linkages between them against the raw data. Novice grounded theorists sometimes have difficulty appreciating the deductive aspects of the process and chafe at the notion of naming a concept or category for purposes of trying it on. This trying on process is vitally important in moving toward theory because it allows the researcher to compare one or more tentative names for a category with the emerging idea. It is only in tentatively assigning names to categories and concepts that the researcher can examine the fit and know what, if anything, is not encompassed by the selected label(s).

We have intentionally used the expression “trying on” to connote the similarity with trying on clothing. Only through trying on a garment can one evaluate its fit with self, and sometimes an item that looks attractive on the hanger does not fit or demonstrate the characteristics one wishes to convey. At other times, one might try on a garment and know immediately that it “fits, works, and grabs” appropriately. When this happens, the immediate reaction is to say, “This is it.” This recognition is similar to that of the researcher discovering a key concept or a basic social process (BSP), after having consciously and unconsciously tried on dozens of concepts and names throughout the analytic process (May, 1994).

Society/Social Interaction

The third major concept for symbolic interactionism is society. In symbolic interactionism, society is viewed as an organized process of ongoing, varied interaction among individuals. Thus, there is a constant and iterative interplay between people in interaction and the social context. When people interact, they do so within a socio-historical environment that provides certain meanings and shape to the interaction, at the same time as the interaction itself creates societal alteration (Katovich & Maines, 2003).

Because human beings are biologically frail, cooperation is necessary for survival, yet such interaction can only occur under certain conditions. Each individual must come to understand the intention of the acts of others and be able to guide his or her own response on the basis of that intention (Mead, 1934/1967; Meltzer, 1972). To understand another individual’s intentions, the person must be able to understand the symbols and gestures used, and respond accordingly. This necessitates minded behavior and self-hood, because the individual is seen to respond to others on the basis of his or her internal understanding of the meaning of the behavior, which is derived from past interactions and anticipated future interactions. In classic symbolic interactionism, human society is viewed as consensus, that is, shared meanings in the form of common understandings (Meltzer, 1972) that provide for patterned activity and predictability. Nevertheless, people engaged in joint action and collective processes can introduce adjustments. Thus, society is perceived as a framework for interaction, rather than a determining structure (Katovich & Maines, 2003).

Society provides the social context(s) and parameters within which action occurs. As grounded theorists, our job is, in part, to uncover the ways in which the social context shapes, and is shaped by, the actions and interactions of participants. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) represented the richness of social context as a frame for action and interaction in a diagram they called the conditional matrix. In their conceptualization, Strauss and Corbin depicted concentric (1990) or spiraling (1998) layers of society extending from individuals and groups through to organizations and communities, to nations and beyond.

The importance of attending to societal context is illustrated when comparing two studies of kidney donors. In Korea, Yi (2003) discovered that donors experienced many covert (e.g., induced guilt) and overt (e.g., payment) enticements to donate a kidney to their family member; some of these enticements would be considered unacceptable in many Western settings. These enticements contrast starkly with those of a similar study by Hilton and Starzomski (1994) in Canada, in which differences in individual perspectives were seen as the chief source of any difficulty encountered. In both studies, participants usually felt an altruistic motive or duty to donate; yet, donation appeared to be a simpler matter in the Canadian context. From this comparison, it is apparent that society is inherently part of the phenomena of study, and the basic social problem and basic social process are embedded within. In each study, the action and interaction of participants were framed within the social structures, meanings, and value systems

of the particular society. Thus, consideration of the conditional matrix is a useful perspective on the data, and helps sensitize the researcher to the multi-layered nature of the social context in which the phenomena of interest occur. At the same time, it was never intended for use as a coding device and should not be used as a preconceived structure for the development and explication of a theory.

Building on the work of Strauss, Clarke (2006) expanded the exploration of society in grounded theory by putting the situation itself, rather than actions and interactions, at the center of analysis. She proposed analytic techniques through which the researcher might explore the nature and quality of interactions between and among such structural elements as groups, organizations, history, symbolic elements, and discourses as they influence and are influenced by the situation under study. Clarke was interested in bringing grounded theory “around the postmodern turn” (2006, p.xx1), and focused on re-examining its roots; yet, her work does not negate anything inherent in symbolic interactionism, and in many ways builds on, and expands, a symbolic interactionist perspective on society.

Conclusion

Our intention in preparing this manuscript was to explore key concepts in symbolic interactionism and illuminate their usefulness for grounded theorists. Social phenomena are complex, and it behooves the researcher to approach social research in ways that honor that complexity. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) noted in their original writings, “... this is why grounded theory methodology emphasizes the need for developing many concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterizes the central phenomena studied during any particular research project” (pp. 6-7).

In the absence of an appreciation of the centrality of symbolic interactionism to grounded theory, researchers are limited in their capacity to develop a useful, deep, rich, explanatory theory. The grounded theorist’s internal dialogical process, resulting in a rigorous, substantive theory, has been described by May (1994) as the magic in the method, suggesting that grounded theorizing is not a linear process. Novice qualitative researchers are sometimes attracted to grounded theory because of its apparently formulaic procedures; however, the appearance of relative simplicity is deceiving. The complex interactions in the data, within the researcher, between the researcher and participants, and between and among inductive, deductive, and creative thinking cannot be conveyed with a recipe, no matter who writes it. These interactions can be understood, however, if the researcher appreciates symbolic interactionism as foundational to grounded theory. Symbolic interactionism is not only intrinsic (Milliken & Schreiber, 2001), but is useful, in grounded theory. Stern (2009) has recognized this in a chapter on Glaserian grounded theory, where she noted that “one ignores it [symbolic interactionism] at one’s peril” (p. 61).

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