

Grounded Theory and the Constant Comparative Method: Valid Research Strategies for Educators

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Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss who believed that theory could emerge through qualitative data analysis. In grounded theory, the researcher uses multiple stages of collecting, refining, and categorizing the data. The researcher uses the strategies of the making constant comparisons and applying theoretical sampling to obtain a theory grounded in the data. The justification of this paper is to provide discussion on the validity of grounded theory and the constant comparative method as effective research strategies for educators. The qualitative design of grounded theory will be the focus of this paper, along with a discussion of the constant comparative method, issues related to trustworthiness, and limitations inherent in grounded theory methodology.

Keywords: qualitative research, grounded theory, constant comparative method, education research, qualitative methodology

INTRODUCTION

Grounded theory is one of four qualitative designs frequently used in the human and social sciences; the other designs are ethnographies, case studies, and phenomenological studies. The major difference between grounded theory and the other designs is the emphasis on theory development (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The qualitative design of grounded theory will be the focus of this paper, along with a discussion of the constant comparative method, issues related to trustworthiness, and limitations inherent in grounded theory methodology.

Grounded theory was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss who believed that theory could emerge through qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In grounded theory the researcher uses multiple stages of collecting, refining, and categorizing the data (Strauss & Corbin). As identified in the literature, making constant comparisons and applying theoretical sampling are necessary strategies used for developing grounded theory (Creswell, 2007; Locke, 1996; Strauss & Corbin; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Constant Comparative Method

The constant comparative method is used by the researcher to develop concepts from the data by coding and analyzing at the same time (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The constant comparative method "combines systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling in order to generate theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing" (Conrad, Neumann, Haworth, & Scott, 1995, p. 280). Constant comparative methodology incorporates four stages: "(1) comparing incidents

applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). Throughout the four stages of the constant comparative method, the researcher continually sorts through the data collection, analyzes and codes the information, and reinforces theory generation through the process of theoretical sampling. The benefit of using this method is that the research begins with raw data; through constant comparisons a substantive theory will emerge (Glaser & Strauss). Grounded theory is a labor-intensive task that requires the researcher to invest time in the processes of analysis and data collection.

DATA COLLECTION

Data can be collected from observations, interviews or other research sessions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). During the process of gathering data the researcher can employ a variety of methods to elicit information pertaining to the study. The techniques commonly identified in the literature for collecting data are document collecting, participant observing, and interviewing (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Document Collecting

Collecting written documents provide a source of information such as meeting dates or events as well as in-depth descriptions of how individuals think about their world. The research examines written documents to gain a deeper understanding and description of the participant's convictions, conduct, and experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Glesne and Peshkin stress the value of document collecting in corroborating observations and interviews and generating further trustworthiness among data (1992).

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Table of Contents Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid

1. Understanding the eBook Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid User Reviews and Ratings
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid Free and Paid eBooks
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid Public Domain eBooks
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid eBook Subscription Services
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid Budget-Friendly Options

6. Navigating Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid Compatibility with Devices
 - Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Interactive Elements Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
8. Staying Engaged with Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Setting Reading Goals Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Grounded Theory And The Constant Comparative Method Valid
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements

- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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