

Denscombe (2010) Advantages and Disadvantages of Grounded Theory

An excerpt from Denscombe's *The Good Research Guide* (2010, pp. 121-123).

Advantages of the grounded theory approach

- Suited to small-scale research. From a project researcher's point of view, use of the grounded theory approach can be appealing because it lends itself to being conducted by lone researchers working on a limited budget.
- Recognized rationale for qualitative research. The notion of grounded theory has currency in the research community and it has become a recognized rationale for qualitative research. Grounded theory provides a standard justification that can fend off potential criticism from those who might otherwise question the rigour of small-scale qualitative research.
- Adaptable. The approach is fairly adaptable, lending itself to use with a variety of qualitative data collection methods (e.g. interviews, observation, documents) and forms of data (interview transcripts, fieldwork, texts).
- Pragmatic. There is a focus on practice (human interaction) and what is practical (pragmatic philosophy), which makes the approach well suited to studies in areas, such as health, business and education, that are concerned with understanding and improving matters in terms of interpersonal relations.
- Systematic way of analysing qualitative data. Especially as developed by Strauss, this can be helpful to the newcomer who might wonder how on earth he or she can make sense of the data and how he or she can move towards developing concepts and ultimately theories.
- Data analysis can draw on computer software for help with the coding and sorting of the qualitative data.
- Theory development. The approach includes the means for developing theoretical propositions from data, and should boost project researchers' confidence in the realms of theorizing. All researchers – not just the venerable experts – are encouraged to arrive at modest theories on the basis of the data that they have collected.
- Explanations are grounded in reality. Concepts and theories are developed with constant reference to the empirical data and this means that, unlike speculative, abstract theory, they are built on a sound foundation of evidence. This ensures that grounded theories are kept in touch with reality.
- Well suited to the exploratory research. The approach permits a degree of flexibility in both the selection of instances for inclusion in the sample and the analysis of the data – both of which are well suited to the exploration of new topics and new ideas.

Disadvantages of the grounded theory approach

- **Planning.** The approach does not lend itself to precise planning. The use of 'theoretical sampling' means that it is not possible to predict in advance the nature of the sample that will be used. And the need to achieve 'theoretical saturation' makes it impossible to state at the outset the eventual size of the sample. The voyage of discovery comes with a price and that price is the ability to plan all aspects of the research in advance and anticipate when the research will be completed.
- **Context.** By focusing research on specific instances of behaviour in particular settings, there is a tendency to divorce the explanation of the situation being studied from broader contextual factors. In particular, there is the danger that the theory generated from the data might ignore the influence of social, economic and political factors (e.g. power, globalization, migration, social class, gender and race inequalities) and the historical background to events, which might be vital to any full and valid theory explaining the phenomenon.
- **Open-mindedness.** An 'open-minded' approach to the data is something that can operate at a variety of levels. The need to approach things with an 'open mind' is a fundamental principle of the grounded theory approach but, in practice, it raises some awkward questions. Researchers are inevitably influenced by prior conceptions based on their own culture and personal experience. The question is: how far can these be put to one side for the purposes of analysing the data? There is also the controversial point about how far previous concepts and theories should be allowed to influence matters. Should grounded theory researchers avoid undertaking a literature review in order to avoid having their minds 'contaminated' by existing concepts and theories? And, if so, does this invite the possibility of 'reinventing the wheel' or failing to learn from what has been researched in the past? Within the grounded theory approach different researchers adopt different positions on such issues.
- **Complexity.** The systematic way of analysing data developed by Strauss and Corbin can be daunting in terms of the complexity of the process. Indeed, Strauss's development of 'guidance' for the analysis of qualitative data actually incensed his former collaborator, Barney Glaser, who saw the template and framework for analysis as unnecessary and going against the spirit of grounded theory by 'forcing' categories and codes on to the data, rather than letting them naturally 'emerge'.
- **Positivism.** Interpretivists will be unhappy with any suggestion that substantive theories provide the one correct explanation of things. Yet within the writings of Glaser (rather than Strauss) there are occasions when this position is taken. There is a positivistic strand of thought in which the 'grounding' of theory means that it is not liable to be refuted by the later discovery of facts that do not fit the theory. If the theory emerges from the data and is meaningful to the participants, then it is a good theory that stands in its own right – not open to alternative interpretation.
- **Empiricism.** The approach can be criticized as being 'empiricist'. By looking to fieldwork data as the source of its theories, and by setting itself against the use of general theories, it opens itself to the criticism that it relies too heavily on the empirical data – expecting an explanation to exist within the accumulated data, waiting to be 'discovered' by the researcher. This inductive approach is rather

naïve about the complex relationship between theory and data collection and the way it calls for researchers to approach the data without the use of prior theories and concepts (Layder 1998).

- Generalizations. Generalizing from the findings can be misunderstood. It is important for those using the grounded theory approach to be clear that any generalizations derived from the research are theoretical generalizations. They are 'abstractions' from the data that are conceptual and which are used to construct theories. They are not generalizations in the sense that many people might think of them, and grounded theory researchers need to be careful to avoid any impression that they are attempting to identify patterns of behaviour in the population on the basis of the small, purposively selected sample that they have studied. The purpose of grounded theory is not to make generalizations from the sample to a wider population as a survey approach might do.

Reference

- Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide: For small-scale social research projects* (4th ed.). Open University Press.