‘This book provides an excellent practical introduction for postgraduate students wanting to know “how to” use grounded theory.’

Michael D. Myers, University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand

‘This is an important and very helpful book on grounded theory. It will be useful for both the established qualitative researcher and those who are just beginning their research careers. It is very well written and provides numerous examples of using grounded theory. I highly recommend this book.’

R. Brent Gallupe, School of Business, Queen’s University, Canada

Based on the author’s own wealth of experience, this timely, engaging book helps first-time researchers to discover the excitement of grounded theory.

Fresh, innovative and clear, this book traces the history and development of grounded theory and examines how the method is evolving for new contexts today. It sets out the principles involved in using grounded theory and explains the process and theory associated with coding in grounded theory.

The book introduces us to the practicalities of research design, theory building, coding and writing up and gives us the tools to tackle key questions:

- What is grounded theory?
- How do we code and theorise using grounded theory?
- How do we write up a grounded theory study?

This is an exciting new text for students and researchers across the social sciences who want to use grounded theory.

Cathy Urquhart is Professor of Digital and Sustainable Enterprise at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, UK.
Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research
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Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research

A Practical Guide | Cathy Urquhart
## Contents

Dedication ix  
About the author x  
Acknowledgements xi  
How this book is structured xii  

Chapter 1 Introduction  
Introduction 1  
What this book does not do 3  
Is GTM difficult to use? 3  
What is grounded theory method (GTM)? 4  
Why is it useful? 10  
Summary 11  
Exercises 12  
Web resources 12  
Further reading 13  
Frequently asked questions 13  

Chapter 2 Grounded theory method (GTM)  
Introduction 14  
The discovery of grounded theory 14  
The key characteristics of GTM 15  
Evolving coding procedures in GTM 21  
Myths about GTM 28  
Summary 32  
Exercises 33  
Web resources 33  
Further reading 34  
Frequently asked questions 34  

Chapter 3 Getting started with coding  
Introduction 35  
Coding – a first example 36
Different approaches to coding – what is and isn't GTM? 37
Coding as theory building – not just concepts
  but relationships, too 41
Coding procedures used in GTM 45
Summary 51
Exercises 52
Web resources 52
Further reading 53
Frequently asked questions 53

Chapter 4 Research design using GTM 55

Introduction 55
Philosophical position 56
Methodology 62
Data-collection methods 69
Ethics 70
Reflexivity 70
Theoretical memos 71
Breadth versus depth in research design 72
Summary 72
Exercises 73
Web resources 74
Further reading 74
Frequently asked questions 75

Chapter 5 Coding and conceptualising 78

Introduction 78
Open coding: Example 1 78
Selective coding: Example 1 88
Open coding: Example 2 91
Selective coding: Example 2 99
A word on software for data analysis 101
Summary 102
Exercises 103
Web resources 104
Further reading 104
Frequently asked questions 105

Chapter 6 Building the theory 106

Introduction 106
What is a theoretical code? 107
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical memos</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative diagrams</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical coding: Example 1</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical coding: Example 2</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web resources</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further reading</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently asked questions</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7 Scaling up the theory</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why scale up the theory?</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels of theory</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating the emergent theory to the literature</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing the scope and generalisability of the theory</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web resources</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further reading</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently asked questions</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8 Writing up a grounded theory study</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The writing up process</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The challenges of writing up a grounded theory study</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much context of the study should be presented?</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing the coding procedure</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting a chain of evidence</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting findings</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting the substantive theory</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical integration and presenting the literature</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web resource</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further reading</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently asked questions</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9 The contribution of GTM – some reflections</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key insights</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Guidelines for grounded theory studies
182

### The future of GTM
185

### Summary
187

### Exercises
188

### Web resources
189

### Further reading
189

### Frequently asked questions
189

### Glossary
191

### References
195

### Index
201
Dedication

This book is respectfully dedicated to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1916–1996) for their gift to the world that is grounded theory.
About the author

Cathy Urquhart is Professor of Digital and Sustainable Enterprise at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, UK. She has taught qualitative research methods around the world in universities in Australia and New Zealand as well as the UK. She is a senior member of the editorial board of MIS Quarterly, the journal with the highest impact factor in the field of business.
No book gets written without a lot of help and I am truly grateful for all the support I have had from various people along the way. First, I’d like to thank both my editors at Sage – Patrick Brindle and Jai Seaman. Patrick approved the original book proposal and gave me invaluable support and constructive criticism on the early draft. Jai has provided encouragement, support and the final push to finish the book. I’d also like to thank David Hodge at Sage for his detailed and helpful critiques of early chapters. Anna Horvai, as editorial assistant at Sage, has provided prompt and helpful assistance at every stage. Thanks, too, to the anonymous peer reviewer who provided invaluable feedback on the book. Thanks also to Ian Antcliff, production editor, and copyeditor Michelle Clark at Sage who helped the prose run more smoothly.

I’d also like to thank all those colleagues and students who have debated and discussed grounded theory with me over the years, helping me form ideas about grounded theory method, especially Gillian Reid, Karin Olesen, Antonio Díaz Andrade, Mariyam Adam, Karen Day, Riitta Hekkala, Gary Furash, Muhammad Sulayman, and Darren M McDonald. Special thanks go to Hans Lehmann, Walter Fernández and Gaetan Mourmant for robust conversations about Glaserian grounded theory. Special thanks to Stefan Seidel for his incisive and enormously helpful comments on the draft, provided at just the right time.

Finally, no acknowledgements are complete without heartfelt thanks to those who have sacrificed so much on the domestic front. Thank you to Harry and Hannah for being patient when Mum was working on the book. Thank you to Sheila, Ruth and Helen for being there for me. Last, and most important, thanks to Chris, for taking care of the home front, formatting beyond the call of duty and being a loving constant in my life – I am truly grateful, always.

March 2012
How this book is structured

This book is designed for you to use how you want, and contains three major strands, aimed at not only first-time users of grounded theory method (GTM) but also the more experienced. Each chapter focuses on particular aspects, and ends with exercises, Web resources, further reading and frequently asked questions (FAQs) to extend your knowledge further.

The first strand (Chapters 1 and 2) gives the background and intellectual foundations of GTM. The second strand (Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6) addresses the practical business of doing GTM by, first, getting started with coding (Chapter 3), then designing a GTM study (Chapter 4) and, finally, providing detailed, worked examples of coding and theorising using GTM (Chapters 5 and 6).

The third and final strand addresses issues of scaling up your emergent theory (Chapter 7), issues encountered when writing up and presenting a GTM study (Chapter 8), then concludes by revisiting GTM, its strengths as a research method and the continuing evolution of GTM (Chapter 9).

Below is a more detailed outline of the contents of each chapter.

- Chapter 1 introduces the purpose of the book, then gives a brief overview of GTM. It discusses the key features of GTM under four different headings – Theory, GTM and the literature, Using GTM in the field, and Data analysis using GTM.
- Chapter 2 gives some further background on GTM and how it has evolved into several different versions. This chapter considers some of the intellectual history of GTM. It also explores some myths about it that you may also encounter along the way.
- Chapter 3 helps the new user to get started with coding. It’s important to see how GTM fits within broader approaches to coding, so this chapter discusses the key differences between GTM and other coding approaches. There is also discussion of the importance of distinguishing between description and analysis – a vital skill for the grounded theorist – as well as how coding builds theory. A brief example of how grounded theory approaches theory building is also provided, in preparation for Chapters 5 and 6, where we look at coding in detail.
- Chapter 4 discusses research design using GTM. In this chapter, we look at key first questions about the use of GTM in a research design and how the research philosophy and methodology might be considered when designing a grounded theory study. We also discuss how GTM might fit into various research designs and how theoretical sampling might be built into the research design. We look
Contents

too at types of data collection, the notion of reflexivity, the use of theoretical memos in the field and ethics.

- Chapter 5 explains coding and conceptualisation in GTM, using two detailed worked examples. The chapter demonstrates open and selective coding through the two examples. It also discusses when to ‘elevate’ an open code, and when to decide which codes are dimensions of other codes.

- Chapter 6 explains theoretical coding – the all-important stage in GTM – building on the examples in Chapter 5. Diagramming is introduced as a key tool for understanding relationships. Glaser’s coding families and other options for building conceptual relationships are considered in the context of the worked examples. How links at lower levels of coding also help build the theory is also discussed. Theoretical memos, and their key role in theorising, are also discussed.

- Chapter 7 gives some options about scaling up the emergent theory from a grounded theory study. It discusses descriptive, substantive and formal levels of theory and their role in theory building. The chapter also considers how to engage the generated theory with the literature, and why this is important. It also illustrates the process of relating theory to literature using the worked examples from Chapter 6.

- Chapter 8 tackles the issues around writing up a grounded theory study. It considers why the process of writing is important and how we can overcome blocks when writing. The chapter then gives some suggestions on how the theory generated by using the method can be written up in a dissertation or a journal paper. It discusses how to position your use of GTM – is your study a grounded theory study or does it just use the method? The chapter also looks at how the chain of evidence provided by a grounded theory study can be represented in a paper or dissertation and gives examples from various studies.

- Chapter 9 concludes by revisiting GTM, its contributions and its strengths as a research method. Some key insights are considered and some guidelines for grounded theory studies. GTM as a living and evolving qualitative method is the final consideration.
1

Introduction

This book aims to provide a simple and practical introduction to grounded theory. I’ve used grounded theory myself in research for many years and feel there is real need for a book that provides examples and gives as much guidance as possible. This is not to say that this is a prescriptive text – there is no one way to do grounded theory – but the book does aim to be as clear as possible. The idea is to give you the basic techniques to be able to do your own grounded theory study and enough information to then proceed with your own adaptations and exploration in grounded theory. This book:

- explains the grounded theory analysis process through clearly worked examples
- explains how the grounded theory process can lead to new theory and new insights about data
- explains how to engage the findings from a grounded theory study with existing literature
- provides exercises, Web resources, further reading and frequently asked questions in each chapter.

This book largely came about through requests from my postgraduate students about the ‘how’ of grounded theory method (GTM), due to their perception of a lack of practical guidance and examples in the grounded theory literature. This set me thinking about the best way to explain the ‘how’ without being prescriptive about the method. Although they were convinced by my passionate advocacy of it as a method of analysing qualitative data and the grounded theory studies they had read, they still faced a real problem with understanding and applying the method. So, this book aims to fill that gap – to explain the ‘how’, without sacrificing the flexibility of the method in the process. It aims, above all else, to be an accessible guide to grounded theory method for first-time users, so I make no apologies for the straightforward tone of this book. While precise terms are sometimes needed to explain complex concepts, I believe it’s also important to not hide behind terms that complicate rather than illuminate!
This book is also a highly personal view of grounded theory – it is very much the product of my own experiences and those of my wonderful students. The book aims to be the sum total of the advice I might give a first-time user of grounded theory and distil the experiences of over 15 years of using grounded theory in many contexts.

It has become apparent to me how much knowledge about the actual practice of coding remains opaque, and is not available in either research texts or journal papers. There are probably some good reasons for this. First, it is difficult to explain how the coding process is carried out – the best type of learning in this case is to try it out. So, in this book there are lots of examples and exercises. When I teach grounded theory, I try to get people to apply the method to an example as soon as possible – there is no substitute for simply doing it! Second, journal articles do not afford researchers the space required to explain how they have analysed their data in detail. The process of analysis is often messy and iterative, and this sort of truth-telling does not fit well with the notion of a finished piece of research. So often, researchers do not discuss their processes of analysis for fear of being criticised for not following the right path. What happens in research is real and often untidy and any analysis procedure is prone to be affected by the context, how the data was collected, the circumstances of the field, who was carrying out the analysis and many other factors.

So, this book aims to show the reflexive nature of the coding process and encourage you to embark on it yourself as soon as possible. You’ll hear a lot about the ‘coding process’ in this book. Put simply, this is the process of attaching concepts to data, for the purposes of analysing that data.

My experience with the method in the field of information systems has led me to believe that many researchers use grounded theory as a practical coding method, concentrating on the mechanics of coding, rather than as the theorising device it was designed to be. This is a pity because, in doing so, researchers are using the first part of the method only and neglecting the unique power of grounded theory. This is rather like an artist deciding to paint pictures, but never framing them, exhibiting them or describing what they are doing in the context of current art practice. So, throughout the book, the issue of what a theory is, as well as how it might be built and then engaged with other theories, is discussed. You can read this book to find out about coding procedures in grounded theory and not propose to build any theory yourself, but the examples in this book do show how to do so.

In the book, you’ll see the term ‘grounded theory method’ (or its acronym, ‘GTM’) used rather than the more commonly seen ‘grounded theory’. Antony Bryant (2002) uses this term to make the useful point that grounded theory is a method that produces a grounded theory, and this is a helpful distinction to make.
What this book does not do

This book does not claim to be a definitive text on the grounded theory method (GTM), nor stake out particular territory. The method has a history that started in 1967 and there are many views on and variants of it. It is an evolving method, too, as researchers increasingly turn to it as a powerful tool in qualitative work. The book does aim to share some useful rules of thumb about applying GTM, however, and gives a personal view. It does not claim to be applying ‘pure’ grounded theory as there are many debates about what ‘pure’ grounded theory might be – it is almost inevitable that I will offend someone with my own view of grounded theory.

This book does not spend a lot of time on the philosophical position of GTM, interesting and important though that issue is. Students often ask me if GTM is ‘valid’. What they mean by this is whether or not GTM is seen as a scientific method within the positivist paradigm. These issues are further discussed in Chapter 2, but, for now, suffice it to say that GTM can be used within positivist, interpretivist and critical paradigms of research.

Is GTM difficult to use?

When research students say they wish to use GTM, often they are told that it is difficult to use. This book is written to support those students, and defend their use of GTM. It was a revolutionary method of analysing qualitative data when it was launched in 1967, and it still retains its controversial qualities to this day.

Why should it be controversial and why do scholars still debate, and sometimes criticise, GTM? One reason is found in the chequered history of the method itself. From the time the seminal book, The Discovery of Grounded Theory, was published (Glaser and Strauss 1967) there have been countless applications of GTM, but also many adaptations and evolutions of the method. With the publication of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) book came a very real disagreement between the co-originators about the very nature of GTM itself. So, students of GTM have to acquaint themselves with the Strauss and Glaser variants of the method and decide which to use. This book inclines towards the Glaserian strand, for reasons explained later.

Students of the method also have to deal with the fact that many journal articles use the term ‘grounded theory’ as a blanket term for coding and analysing qualitative data. When we attach a code to data, we are also attaching a concept to that data and it is those concepts that help us build theory, as discussed in Chapter 3. GTM is indeed a method that can be used to analyse qualitative data, using codes attached to data, but it is so much more than that, too. It also builds relationships between concepts informed by the codes,
which allow us to build theory. As previously remarked, this is an important and, in my opinion, sadly under-utilised aspect of GTM, especially when you consider that the original aim of GTM was to build theory.

GTM also, in my opinion, is a wonderful method of analysing data and building theory. In this book, I want to share what is, for me, the excitement and passion of doing analysis in this way. For me, the experience of using GTM as a PhD student (Urquhart 2001) was a life-changing one. The features of the method mean that you are so close to the data you gain all sorts of rich insights; these insights almost invariably result in excellent research. I have become an advocate of GTM not so much because I used it for my own PhD, but because experience using the method with postgraduate students has led me to see that it produces strong theory grounded in the data. From a postgraduate perspective, I have found that the use of GTM all but guarantees an excellent piece of research, if applied carefully in all its stages.

Of course, GTM is not for everyone. I have two sorts of postgraduate student – the first sort, when encountering GTM, look as if they wish to run from my office immediately and beg to be able to use a framework or theory from the literature instead. The second sort look somewhat nervous, ask some questions about how long the analysis will take and generally have some unexpected joys along the way as they build concepts from their data and experience theory building. It is to this second sort of student that this book is dedicated – I hope it is a useful companion on your journey. I also hope fellow researchers will find this book a useful reference on grounded theory.

What is grounded theory method (GTM)?

It is perhaps best to start with how the creators of grounded theory defined their method, in their seminal book that launched grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). They defined it as ‘the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analysed in social research’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 1). The key point here is that the theory produced is grounded in the data.

The emphasis on theory in the original book is in sharp contrast to the use of grounded theory method (GTM) today, where it is known primarily as a method of qualitative data analysis. So, one of the emphases in this book (as well as helping with practical issues of coding and data analysis) is on what to do with that coding – how to build the theory from it.

For the record, the following are the key features of GTM as explained by Cresswell (1998) and Dey (1999). They provide a good starting point and we’ll discuss them in the next sections.

1. The aim of grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory.
2. The researcher has to set aside theoretical ideas in order to let the substantive theory emerge.
3 Theory focuses on how individuals interact with the phenomena under study.
4 Theory asserts a plausible relationship between concepts and sets of concepts.
5 Theory is derived from data acquired from fieldwork interviews, observation and documents.
6 Data analysis is systematic and begins as soon as data is available.
7 Data analysis proceeds through identifying categories and connecting them.
8 Further data collection (or sampling) is based on emerging concepts.
9 These concepts are developed through constant comparison with additional data.
10 Data collection can stop when no new conceptualisations emerge.
11 Data analysis proceeds from open coding (identifying categories, properties and dimensions) through selective coding (clustering around categories) to theoretical coding.
12 The resulting theory can be reported in a narrative framework or a set of propositions.

Theory

Let’s consider first the statements about theory.

1. The aim of grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory.
4. Theory asserts a plausible relationship between concepts and sets of concepts.
12. The resulting theory can be reported in a narrative framework or a set of propositions.

It’s important to appreciate, then, that GTM is all about theory, even though its procedures are often more commonly used to analyse data than generate theories. Chapter 1 of the revolutionary book The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which launched grounded theory, states that the aim of the book is to generate theory based on data, rather than verify ‘grand theory’. The authors also contended that the classic theories of sociology did not cover all the new areas of social life that needed exploration. They also discussed the idea of qualitative versus quantitative data and concluded that both types of data are needed to generate and verify theories.

So, the very first book on GTM begins by putting forward two major points:

• the need to generate new theories rather than force data into a few existing theories
• the idea that qualitative data and quantitative data are both useful.

It is worth, at this point, discussing what a theory actually is.
We all formulate theories in everyday life – for instance, we might say, based on our experience, that people who are good at maths tend to be more introverted [my apologies at this point to all those people who are both fine mathematicians and extroverts – this is just an example]. This working theory is based on our experience of the world and may not be true. It is, after all, an individual perception, so not really ‘grounded’, in the true sense of the word, but it has the key components of a theory: some constructs – ‘good at maths’ and ‘introversion’ – and a relationship between the two.
Shirley Gregor (2006), in her paper on theory, gives some useful building blocks of a theory. Table 1.1 shows how these theory components appear in GTM.

So, the theory discovered or generated as a result of using GTM is often represented by a narrative framework, a diagram or a set of hypotheses. In all three cases of representation, it is important that there be a plausible relationship between the constructs because this is a cornerstone of all theories. In GTM this relationship is not usually causal because, in the majority of cases, it uses qualitative data. The relationships between constructs therefore tend to be more a case of ‘A is a part of B’ or ‘A influences B’.

There is extensive guidance in GTM on how to formulate these relationships between constructs (see Glaser [1978] and Corbin and Strauss [2008]). These are the most controversial aspects of GTM, as we will discuss later. For now, though, the important thing to note is that GTM is a method of generating theories and theories contain relationships between constructs.

Table 1.1 Components of a theory in GTM (adapted from Gregor 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory component</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>In GTM</th>
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<tr>
<td>Means of representation</td>
<td>The theory must be represented physically in some way – in words, mathematical terms, symbolic logic, diagrams, tables or graphically.</td>
<td>Theories are often represented by a narrative framework, diagrams or statements of hypotheses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructs</td>
<td>The phenomena of interest in the theory (Dubin’s ‘units’). All of the primary constructs in the theory should be well defined. Many different types of constructs are possible – for example, observational (real) terms, theoretical (nominal) terms and collective terms.</td>
<td>The aim is to get to one or two core categories or constructs. This makes for a more coherent theory. All the constructs in a grounded theory, are, well, grounded in observations; they come from the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements of relationship</td>
<td>These show relationships between the constructs. Again, these may be of many types – associative, compositional, unidirectional, bidirectional, conditional or causal. The nature of the relationship specified depends on the purpose of the theory. Very simple relationships can be specified, such as ‘x is a member of class A’.</td>
<td>Because the theory is often based on qualitative data, relationships are not often causal. There is a lot of guidance about the sorts of relationships that are possible between constructs, in the form of coding families (Glaser 1978) and a coding paradigm (Corbin and Strauss 2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Specified by the degree of generality of the statements of relationships (signified by modal qualifiers, such as ‘some’, ‘many’, ‘all’ and ‘never’) and statements of boundaries showing the limits of generalisations.</td>
<td>The aim is to produce substantive theories that pertain to the area being investigated. The scope and generalisability can be extended by theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978). The substantive theory can and should be engaged with existing theories – existing theories can also be seen as slices of data that help build the theory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GTM and the literature

A key feature of GTM is the following point from our list above.

2. The researcher has to set aside theoretical ideas in order to let the substantive theory emerge.

Of all the features of GTM, this is the one that causes most difficulty for new users. The idea here is that the literature about whatever you are researching is referenced after, not before, you build the theory. Glaser and Strauss recommended this because they wanted the data to speak to the researcher, rather than for the researcher to force theories on the data. To me, this is one of the reasons GTM was revolutionary in its time and still is tremendously relevant, today. The idea that we should seek to see what the data indicates, rather than shoehorn it into a theory that already exists, means there is more chance of discovering something new. It also seems to have more integrity as a research process, because it does not seek to impose preconceived ideas on the world.

Of course, no one enters the research process as a blank slate – we will all have read something about the phenomena. The founders of GTM ask that we put that aside, so we do not influence the coding of our data. In practice, it’s quite possible to do a literature review before we enter the field – on the understanding, though, that it does not influence the coding process. Once the theory has been developed, then we engage our theory with the existing theories and use them to help with the densification of our emergent theory. The literature review we developed initially may then change.

This is not the barrier to using GTM that people might think. In Chapter 2 I give some more advice and information on how to deal with the literature, but, for now, suffice it to say that I have seen many students conduct a literature review and do a successful GTM study! It’s the use to which the literature is put, not the act of searching the literature in itself, that is the key point here.

Using GTM in the field

The following aspects from our original list above all relate to using GTM in the field.

3. Theory focuses on how individuals interact with the phenomena under study.
4. Theory is derived from data acquired from fieldwork interviews, observation and documents.
5. Further data collection (or sampling) is based on emerging concepts.
It is true to say that many GTM studies do focus on how individuals might interact with the phenomena under study – for instance, how a work group might react to a new information system – but the use of GTM is quite flexible and varied. I have seen it applied to all sorts of phenomena, from analysing citation information to the design of software. GTM is perfect for studying micro-phenomena, too, because it involves the close examination of data, but it’s worth considering that GTM can be used to study larger units as well, such as firms. This is consistent with the idea of theory building – which is when we build larger theories from smaller, substantive ones. We’ll discuss this further in Chapter 4, how the unit of analysis may influence a GTM research design.

As previously stated, GTM builds theory from the data acquired from fieldwork interviews, observation and documents. All these data sources are qualitative, and the use of qualitative data fits well with the inductive process that GTM is. When we say that GTM is inductive, what we mean is it reasons from the ground up – from specific instances in the data to more general conclusions. How the data is analysed – completely or partially – will, again, depend on the research design (discussed in Chapter 4). As a point of interest, it’s worth noting, too, that quantitative data can be used in GTM, as part of a mixed method design (again, we’ll look at this option in Chapter 4).

It’s also important to note that the use of GTM implies overlapping data collection and analysis. This means that researchers analyse the data in the field and use the emerging concepts from that analysis to decide where to sample from next. This process is known as theoretical sampling, because the emerging theory directs future data collection. So, for instance, if a particular concept (such the effects of job losses on remaining staff) arises from an interview, the researcher could decide to carry out more interviews (with other individuals who have witnessed such job losses). This strategy may not always be practical, depending, of course, on the amount of access granted to the researcher. Sometimes there may be only a set number of interviews permitted in an organisation. So, one good idea for a grounded theory study is to allow for more than one phase of data collection, as Charmaz (2006) suggests (we will return to this in Chapter 4).

Theoretical sampling does two things:

- it enables researchers to build up justification for concepts in the theory by finding more instances of a particular concept
- it allows researchers to follow an emerging storyline suggested by the data.

**Data analysis using GTM**

6. Data analysis is systematic and begins as soon as data is available.
7. Data analysis proceeds through identifying categories and connecting them.