



Methods for Change

Constructivist Grounded Theory

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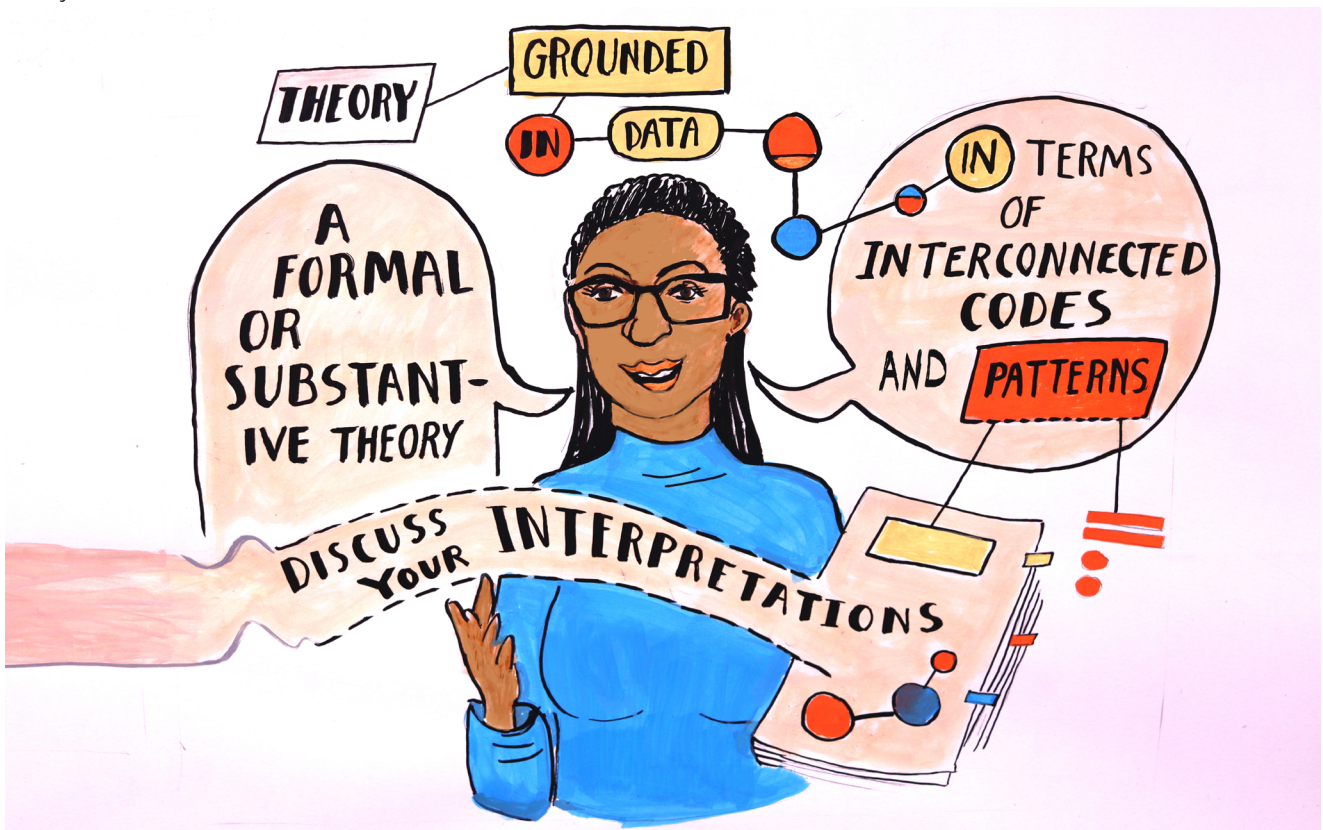
Constructivist Grounded Theory



Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) is an effective method for finding out about a phenomenon where little is known. The appeal of CGT is that unlike many other approaches, it embraces the idea of subjective reality. In other words, the notion that a researcher's own knowledges and worldviews can influence the research process, and potentially the findings, is not a problem. Rather, CGT researchers do not shy away from explaining their subjectivities – their personal perspectives, feelings, beliefs or experiences.

In fact, this is an essential element in building an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives, and in generating a unique explanation about their practices, actions and perceptions.

That said, reflexivity is a key component of CGT research. Reflexivity asks that researchers recognise, and in essence, take responsibility for how their subjectivities impact all aspects of the research process, including the impact on participants, the research questions, the data collection, and indeed, the ways in which data is analysed.





How does Constructivist Grounded Theory create or contribute to change?

One way that CGT can create or contribute to change is through its use in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts. EDI provides a virtuous framework for safeguarding all people's rights to receive equal opportunities, irrespective of their backgrounds. However, recent events across the world have compellingly demonstrated how far we have (not) come in terms of enacting principles of EDI. From a psychological perspective, while it seems resistance to changing the status quo might be an inherent feature of human nature, transformational change cannot take place without a willingness to include traditionally marginalised people in change-making conversations. CGT offers a means to do just this. CGT affords opportunities to hear about 'othered' people's lives, their experiences, and their perspectives, in their own words. In this sense, CGT captures the aspirations of transformative emancipatory approaches to research, where participants can be incorporated as co-researchers and change agents in ameliorating their experiences of exclusion, disadvantage, and much more.

What ideas or concepts influence Constructivist Grounded Theory?

Glaser and Strauss (1967) first introduced grounded theory in the 1960s as a method of generating a theory from qualitative data. In short, they were dissatisfied with the ways in which quantitative research methods were overshadowing sociological research. Accordingly, Glaser and Strauss sought to redress the overemphasis given to so-called 'objective', numerical, and computational methods, by introducing a methodology that could guide qualitative researchers through a continuous theory development process. More recently, Charmaz (2003), an American sociologist, developed a constructivist approach to grounded theory that is much more appreciative of the ways in which researchers generate and interpret data through their interactions with research participants. Charmaz asserted that Grounded Theory was predicated on 'outdated assumptions of an objective external reality, a passive, neutral observer, or a detached narrow empiricism' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). Hence, unlike Glaser and Strauss's original version, Charmaz focuses on the co-construction of knowledge by the researcher and their participants, and on the ability of the researcher to generate a deep and meaningful understanding of the data. Charmaz argues that data and resultant theories do not 'emerge' and are not 'discovered' by the researcher (Puddephatt 2006). Put differently, the researcher is a co-contributor of new knowledge development.



Why might I want to use Constructivist Grounded Theory?

- CGT is particularly well-suited for researchers in pursuit of developing a deep and abiding understanding of under-examined issues; where shared knowledge and experience, and where in-depth collaborative discussion between the researcher and the researched is required to expand a body of knowledge and generate a new credible theory.
- CGT researchers are not bound to test hypotheses. Instead, they have many opportunities to creatively, interactively and reflexively co-construct insightful and potentially ground-breaking theory.
- CGT offers a relatively flexible methodological approach and guidelines within which to work. It is therefore very helpful for people who may lack confidence in their skills as researchers, including those who, for various reasons, do not have extensive research experience, e.g., early career researchers, practitioners, and marginalised researchers.
- In generating a transparent audit trail, CGT researchers are afforded ample opportunities to establish confirmability of their research aims, objectives and findings.



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Step by step guide to using Constructivist Grounded Theory:

1. Recruit participants. If you are interested in understanding the experiences of a particular group of people that share common characteristics, the first step is to think about the various ways in which you can contact and recruit participants. For instance, participants could be selected in a non-random, purposeful manner (e.g., via personal and professional networks) and it might be prudent for your sample to share a relatively high degree of homogeneity. It seems likely that the more homogenous the participant sample, the quicker you will reach theoretical saturation. Saturation is the point at which the researcher stops finding new insights, themes etc.

In my study (Miller 2021), the participants were comparatively homogeneous in the sense that they were all Black British female managers working in children and young people's services. Participants' similarities were sufficient to confidently declare saturation by the tenth interview.

2. Prepare for interviews. Having invited consenting participants to take part in the study, you can prepare for the interviews by first referring to the academic literature.

To elicit in-depth narratives and salient stories from your participants, you will need to gain their trust and confidence. So, while knowing about the extant literature and the realities of your participant's lives is crucial, taking the time to understand how you might establish a good sense of rapport and remain sensitive to their feelings (especially when researching emotive topics) is also vital.

Finally, and most importantly, in preparing for interviews, remember to press the 'record' button!

Situating your research within relevant existing literature is a great way to sensitise yourself to key topics that are likely to surface. In turn, this knowledge and understanding can helpfully inform the types of questions you might ask your participants.

In essence, semi-structured interviews provide the interviewer with latitude to ask pre-determined questions and then follow-up with probing ones that are designed to fully examine new insights.

3. Keep notes. Although your interviews will be recorded, it is wise to also have a notebook handy. Here you can write down aspects of the interviews that were not captured by the voice recorder (e.g., a participant's facial expression or tone of voice during the interview). These notes or memos can then be used as an aide-mémoire, e.g. to record surprising topics that arose during the interview. You can also jot down your thoughts about the success of your research approach and questions. For example, did your pre-determined questions elicit the information you wanted, or not? If not, you might consider revising the questions before the next interview, and/or you might engage in theoretical sampling – where the researcher adjusts their approach to data collection, to support the development of a theory. A benefit of CGT is that this is permissible.



4. Transcribe interviews. Before starting data analysis, the interview recordings will need to be transcribed. You can either do this yourself, bearing in mind that it is a time-consuming process, or you can contract someone to do it for you. Ideally, aim to complete or have the transcripts returned to you within 14 days of the interview so that the experience is still fresh in your mind.

To ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions, you should listen to the interview recordings (several times) at the same time as reading the transcribed interviews. Any inaccuracies or omissions can then be corrected immediately. Although this can be a laborious task, it is well-worth the time taken to complete this stage as thoroughly as possible. By re-reading, listening to, and correcting inaccuracies, you will inevitably gain a much deeper understanding of your participants' lives.



5. Code and sort data. Coding involves categorising and tagging portions of your data with labels that succinctly encapsulate meanings. Performing word-by-word, line-by-line and issue-by-issue analysis means that you will be able to thoroughly compare and remain open to the words and phrases voiced by the participants. Coding and comparing the data in this way will undoubtedly help to strengthen the credibility of your interpretations of implicit meanings. At this stage, if you have not already done so (through memo-writing) look out for 'in vivo' codes. This is where you can derive verbatim codes directly from the participant's words and phrases (Charmaz, 1983). These types of codes are of great value since they help to keep researchers close to the expressive language used by participants.

During the sorting phase, you will need to retrieve coded sections of interview transcripts and compare them with other similarly coded fragments to ensure that the codes have been applied consistently and accurately. If you find any evidence to suggest that your interpretations are inaccurate (which is highly probable), simply go back and recode that segment of the interview and/or revise the code and definition.

6. Develop the Grounded Theory. Through the meticulous application of CGT methods you now have the basis for developing a theory grounded in data. In other words, you can now discuss your interpretations of the findings in terms of interconnected codes/categories, articulated as a formal or substantive theory.



Example of Constructivist Grounded Theory in social science research

Black British Female Managers – The Silent Catastrophe

Researcher: *Dr Denise A Miller, University of Greenwich, Institute for Lifecourse Development, Centre for Inequalities*

In this study, CGT was used to examine the experiences of Black British female managers who worked for UK-based Children and Young People's Services (CYPS), including, schools, colleges, universities and social care and educational psychology organisations. These women had studied hard and worked hard to realise their goals. The study was borne of the researcher's observations that Black British women appeared to encounter 'concrete ceilings' when trying to progress their careers, and despite this, they still managed to achieve managerial positions. As an aspiring Black British female manager myself, I wanted to find out (1) How do Black British female managers encounter prejudice, discrimination, and racism, and (2) how do they cope with it?

Purposive and theoretical sampling were used to recruit ten Black British women who had similar demographic characteristics. That is, they were all Black British women who had been managers for at least five years. I interviewed all participants individually, and the transcripts were thoroughly analysed using CGT methods. In due course, over 200 codes were categorised, resulting in six key themes.

Five themes explained the aversive practices that Black British female managers perceived thwarted their careers: (1), The Organizational Culture, (2) On the Outside Looking In, (3) Stereotype Threat, (4) Prejudice, Discrimination, and Institutional Racism and (5) Espoused Practice vs. Reality. The final theme described the ways in which Black British female managers coped with various forms of prejudice, discrimination, and institutional racism, i.e. (6) The Silent Catastrophe.

The findings were published in reputable peer-reviewed journals ([Miller, 2021](#); [Miller 2022](#)) and they have been viewed/downloaded by people across the world. Additionally, the findings have been presented at major local, national, and international conferences/webinars; including an 'Educational Equity Services' webinar (that was livestreamed to YouTube and attended/viewed by over 400 participants); the Division of Educational and Child Psychology conference (2021), and a University Research Café (2021). All events were attended by academics, researchers, teaching professionals, doctoral students, psychologists, and decision-makers. Participants said how 'moving', 'informative' and 'challenging' the presentations were.

The study brought to the fore the aversive experiences that ambitious Black women encounter in large organisations, and in this sense, the study also provided the foundation for decision-makers to develop well-informed policies and practices that serve to reduce racial inequalities in workplaces. The study has also provided the grounding for researchers to replicate and build upon the findings.

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Where else could Constructivist Grounded Theory be used?

CGT is very well-suited as a method for change in social justice research especially where the researcher's interaction with participants is a necessary ingredient for deriving innovative understandings and theories. For instance, [Vanidestine and Aparicio \(2019\)](#) used CGT to examine trainee social workers, nurses, and doctors' views on racism in healthcare provisions, in the USA. Similarly, CGT was used to theorise minority ethnic medical student's experiences at a Swedish medical school ([Kristoffersson and Hamberg, 2022](#)). Given its adaptability, the CGT approach to research might be a useful way to examine the experiences of migrants. For instance, the war in Ukraine has given rise to an increase in the number of Ukrainian people living in the UK. However, little is known about their needs and experiences. In this sense, by hearing about the lived experiences of Ukrainian diaspora, children and adults alike, CGT research has the potential to shed light on the phenomenon, including the challenges, the potentialities, and the implications.

Top tips

1. Organize your time. CGT research is likely to be an intense and time-consuming endeavour.
2. Quickly get into the habit of writing copious notes. Reflexive memo-writing (or journaling) enhances methodological rigour and helps to make sure your interpretations are firmly and comprehensively grounded in data.
3. If you are seeking to examine an emotive or sensitive topic, put in place supportive networks, not only for participants, but also for yourself.





Further reading

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To reference:

Miller, D.A. (2023) 'Constructivist Grounded Theory' in Rodekirchen, M., Pottinger, L. Briggs, A., Barron, A., Eseonu, T., Hall, S. and Browne, A.L. (eds.) *Methods for Change Volume 2: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester



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