

Seductiveness in classic grounded theory

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Abstract

Grab and conceptualization are two vital components of a theory derived from the classic grounded theory design. But for novice researchers, these concepts are difficult to put into practice. In this short paper, the researcher examines the concepts of grab and conceptualization from different perspectives to understand more clearly why these concepts are so challenging.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, grab, conceptualization

Introduction

Those readers who are, as the French people would say, of a certain age would, no doubt, recall a now rather famous misquote "Why don't you come up and see me sometime" ^[1], ^[2]. This line invokes the thought of the sultry and seductive Mae West, a famous 20th century American actress, sex symbol, and writer ^[3], who was often remembered as someone using lots of sexual double *entendres* ^[4]. Though she was not the only 20th century actor to double *entendres* and sexuality ^[5], she was, at least in the United States, perhaps the most well-known.

In this paper, I present two important concepts, grab and conceptualization, and why they are often challenging for novice researchers using the classic grounded theory design. To talk about Mae West, the actress-slash-sex symbol and her bawdy play-on-words as an introduction to these concepts seems as far afield as perhaps one could get. Yet, a relationship exists. These terms are interconnected on a much deeper, inextricable level just as Mae West and her seductiveness and scripted double *entendres* were to her. In this paper, I will examine the ideas of grab and conceptualization. These concepts, though seemingly diametrically opposed from each other, work together in a tightly linked manner. Trying to separate them causes anxiety in researchers inexperienced in the classic grounded theory design. Yet, to understand the concepts in a detailed manner, it is necessary to decouple them.

Mae West

As an actress, Mae West was sexy and flirtatious; people wanted to see her and enjoy naughty pleasures. After all, if people in the United States did not want to see her and her movies (and her writings, too), she would not have been as popular as she was ^[3, 6]. According to Dr. Rita Marie O'Brien (personal communication, 5/18/16), people can relate immediately to Mae West; she "draws you in." But just as she was attractive and sultry, Mae West had a script to memorize. Once the text was memorized she had to recite the words. Such behavior, on a superficial level, is pragmatic. However, the way in which she intoned the words coupled with her body language were linked together much like grab and conceptualization are intertwined in classic grounded theory.

Grab

In order to understand grab and conceptualization, it is important to take several steps back and fully explain and analyze each of the terms vis-à-vis the classic grounded theory design. As novice researchers in classic grounded theory are taught, one of the tenets is grab ^[7]. Grab is defined as a person's ability to understand and easily describe a concept ^[8]. This term is simultaneously easy and difficult to explain. It is easy because the aforementioned definition is accurate, clear, and aphoristic. It is difficult to explain because the idea of attraction is a personal thing. What might be alluring or appealing for one person is not necessarily true for another. Additionally, when people are asked why something appeals to them, it is often an unknown, unexplainable gut feeling that people give as the reason that something is appealing. As much as such a response might be acceptable during the course of a conversation, it is necessary to delve further into why something grabs us and appeals to us. It is important to find a deeper, more academic explanation than "I don't know." The concept of grab—much like the double *entendres* of Mae West—is what makes a theory developed using the classic grounded theory design appealing and, by extension, far-reaching.

Grab is complicated not only because it is not easily explainable but also because multiple parts of the brain are involved ^[9]. When neurologists and neuroscientists study the brain and its components, they discover highly interconnected components ^[10, p. 68]. The diencephalon (of which thalamus and hypothalamus are part) and telencephalon (of which the amygdala is a part) are good examples of components that serve numerous functions. When we talk about out likes or dislikes, we are talking about preferences and emotions. In the brain, emotions are part of the amygdala, which is part of the limbic system in the telencephalon in the temporal lobe. Since the telencephalon develops prenatally ^[11], emotions are instinctual, innate behaviors. When we discuss emotions, neurologists and neuroscientists know that the amygdala gets information from different sources in the brain. According to Wright (2016), "The link between prefrontal cortex, septal area, hypothalamus, and amygdala likely gives us our gut feelings, those subjective feelings, about what is good and what is bad" [12, Section 6.5, para. 5].

Thus, the grab of an idea is subjective and affective; why it is appealing is difficult to explain. Very often, doctoral candidates who undertake a classic grounded theory dissertation—often their first—are not used to honing in on their emotions. They were, most probably, trained to be highly pragmatic in their positivistic research. Thus, learning a complicated design like classic grounded theory coupled with the inexperience of validating one's emotions make grab a challenging concept.

Though grab might be subjective, it does not have to be individualistic. Further, the idea of grab can be learned and developed. As human beings, we share some common experiences. Though a person might have never have been attacked or been in a plane with intense turbulence, he or she can relate to the idea of fear or not being in control. Similarly, with grab, it is important to find the right concept that elicits the greatest grab. It is vital for the reader to say "I get it." In order to elicit such a response, the researcher needs to get in touch with his or her emotions and acknowledge instincts rather than be pragmatic.

Conceptualization

Conceptualization, on the other hand, is not based on emotion; it is more cognitive than affective. Novice researchers using the classic grounded theory design are often more experienced in and more comfortable with cognition and pragmatism. Yet, conceptualization poses its own issues for novice researchers. Some researchers might inaccurately equate conceptualization with description.

Though describing concepts and terms in classic grounded theory might prove easy because "descriptions run the world" [8, p. 24], it is important for researchers to remember that a theory discovered via the classic grounded theory design must have "conceptual generality [rather than] unit generality" [13, p. 125]. As such, the concepts, categories, and theory are not tied to a person, place, or time [14, 15]. A researcher cannot merely describe an aspect of the theory (code, category, or property) vis-à-vis the substantive area and his or her participants; he or she must conceptualize the idea. Glaser (2001) commented that "immaculate description is not the goal in GT, nor is replication of description. Empirical accuracy is not the issue in GT" [16, 48].

Chametzky (2013) gave an example of conceptualization involving online foreign language students who were afraid to speak [7]. Descriptively, the idea of being afraid to speak in an online foreign language class is rather focused and "stale dated" [16, 15]; it pertains only to those group of people at that time and in that location. The idea of being afraid or tongue-tied, however, is highly generalizable and not tied to a single person, place, or time [16, 14, 15]. It is a concept to which everyone can relate; it globally explains [17] the behavior of the participants.

Grab and Conceptualization: The connection

The concepts of grab and conceptualization seem to be opposed one with another for one is affective and the other cognitive. Yet, both are tied to one another just as Mae West brought together text and sensuality to her acting. For Mae West, her uniqueness was the titillation that attracted people. As human beings, we all enjoy titillation for it appeals to our base, emotional level. Movie producers had knowledge of this idea intuitively, no doubt; they dressed Mae in provocative

attire. Just as this stimulation attracts us because on a deep level, so too must classic grounded theory concepts, categories, and theories. Mae West "draws you in" much like the concepts draw you in on a base level.

Yet, educational researchers, as with Mae West, have a pragmatic side. Saussure (1959) stated "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" [18, p. 23]. In the case of Mae West, she brought to life the word and ideas on the page through her gestures, intonations, and double *entendres*. She combined cognition (the need for conceptualization and the words on a page) with affection (grab and emotion). Here is a more practical example: The idea of a casual offer to visit a friend or acquaintance whenever in town is relatable to everyone regardless of the specific context. As such, this idea of "friendly visiting" (to use a conceptual gerund as is expected in classic grounded theory) can be viewed as being a conceptual idea. Mae West gave that conceptual idea grab with her sensuality, titillation, and oral delivery.

For novice researchers using the classic grounded theory design, it is necessary to find the connection between grab and conceptualization. I contend that the connection is *the other person*, almost in a Saussurian [18] perspective. For something to have grab it must be universally appealing. In classic grounded theory, it is vital that the theory and its categories and properties have universal grab. People who read a particular theory must find it relatable and "get it." Similarly, the theory (and its categories and properties) must be sufficiently conceptual so as to be generalizable and relatable to other people not only those in the substantive area. Just because all participants might exhibit a particular behavior, in and of itself, it is not generalizable. For example, Chametzky (2015) [19] wrote about the stress that part-time adjunct educators experience as they deal with various suboptimal experiences in their teaching experiences. All of the participants exhibited the same behaviors. Yet, for a theory to be generalizable, it must have conceptual universality. A person can survive the suffering endured in a situation [19] regardless of whether he or she is a contingent educator dealing with a lack of office space or feeling invisible in the college department, or a nurse trying to deal with demanding colleagues in a continually overworked environment experiencing burn-out; the idea is conceptual and thus generalizable.

Where a problem (and additional anxiety) could occur, for an inexperienced researcher using the classic grounded theory design, is in creating terms (codes, categories, properties, etc.) that have grab and conceptualization simultaneously. Often, terms that have high grab are descriptive and thus not sufficiently abstract. Similarly, to have highly conceptualized terms might not produce sufficient grab. Finding the right balance—much like Mae West had to balance her sensuality and her memorized lines—is vital for a successful theory developed using the classic grounded theory design. Finding such equilibrium takes time, patience, and experience.

Contribution to knowledge

Experienced researchers using classic grounded theory know that developing a theory is creating new knowledge. By exploring the two concepts of grab and conceptualization in classic grounded theory in light of some extant literature, I have shed light on important elements in this research design.

Further, I have clarified the connections between the two terms so that novice researchers would more easily be able to “get it.” Only when they “get it” can their anxiety levels ^[7] be lowered while their awareness is increased. With this deeper understanding and increased awareness, novice researchers can more easily make new connections and see that grounded theory is, indeed, all around.

Conclusion

The concepts of grab and conceptualization are fundamental to the study of classic grounded theory. When novice researchers decide that classic grounded theory design is appropriate for their study, they begin their journey of transformation. Just as experienced researchers know, grounded theory is all around; a person just needs to be made aware and look for it. Similarly, novice researchers need to be made aware of grab and conceptualization. Once they are aware of what those concepts mean and how they manifest themselves, they can begin to understand how to achieve them in their research. If they study carefully and diligently, the results from the classic grounded theory research will be highly conceptualized with great grab: a yin and yang of sorts with one part being inseparable from the other. At that point, since this author enjoys discussing research using the classic grounded theory design, the final suggestion to any novice researcher would be to visit whenever you are in the neighborhood ^[1, 2].

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