

# Addressing the Need for New Tourism Theory: The Utility of Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology for Theory Development

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## **Addressing the Need for New Tourism Theory: The Utility of Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology for Theory Development**

Like management scholars (Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011), tourism scholars have produced few theories of their own. Instead, they typically borrow theories from other disciplines and use/adapt them for their own purposes. Is the borrowing and adapting of theories from other disciplines sufficient for the generation of new knowledge? If not, then why are so few new theories produced? And, why is this problematic? Firstly, the creation of new knowledge is critical for both scholars and practitioners and secondly, researcher perspective shapes discovery.

A number of authors express concern for the lack of new theories and suggest both reasons for this absence and suggestions for increasing the development of new theories (Delbridge & Fiss, 2013; Shapira, 2011). The creation of new theories is exacerbated by a lack of consensus on the definition of theory (Abend, 2008) and what counts as a theoretical contribution (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Additional authors talk about how to build theory (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Swanson & Chermack, 2013). Still others discuss the difference and purpose of theorizing and theory (Swedberg, 2012) or delineate what theory is not (Sutton & Shaw, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to examine constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology and suggest its utility for developing new theory. We begin the paper with definitions of theory, followed by the processes of theory building and the location of conceptual research within that process. We conclude with an examination of the methodological aspects of CGT and suggest its utility for advancing conceptual research and the development of new theory.

### **What is Theory? And, How Can We Develop New Theory?**

Coming to terms with the definitions of theory, criteria for evaluating theory, processes for developing theory, and the actual creation of a theoretical contribution in the social sciences is complex, confusing, and frequently steeped in controversy as incommensurate paradigmatic differences preclude absolutes. Gioia and Pitre (1990) define theory as “any coherent description or explanation of observed or experienced phenomena” (p. 587). Swanson and Chermack (2013, pp. 20-22) suggest that there are three types of theories: grand theories with broad boundaries that have universal applicability, midrange theories with a bounded domain that have some degree of generalizability or transferability, and local theories that have a tightly bound context which becomes part of the theory and may be minimally transferrable. Swanson and Chermack (2013, pp. 38, 51) also suggest that there are five phases of theory building: conceptualization, operationalization, confirmation, application, and refinement and that although conceptualization is the usual starting point for theory development in applied disciplines; the phases can be pursued in a non-linear process.

These various definitions of theory, phases of theory building, and the lack of new theories in travel and tourism become even more problematic when considering the findings of Xin, Tribe, and Chambers (2013, p. 77) with regards to the lack of pure conceptual research in travel and

tourism journals. Although they provide a comprehensive definition of conceptual research, identify 12 conceptual themes in the tourism literature, outline nine quality protocols for assessing conceptual research, and discuss five examples of exemplary concepts in tourism, they do not address research methodologies for conceptual research. Instead, they suggest that future research is needed in this area (Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013, p. 84).

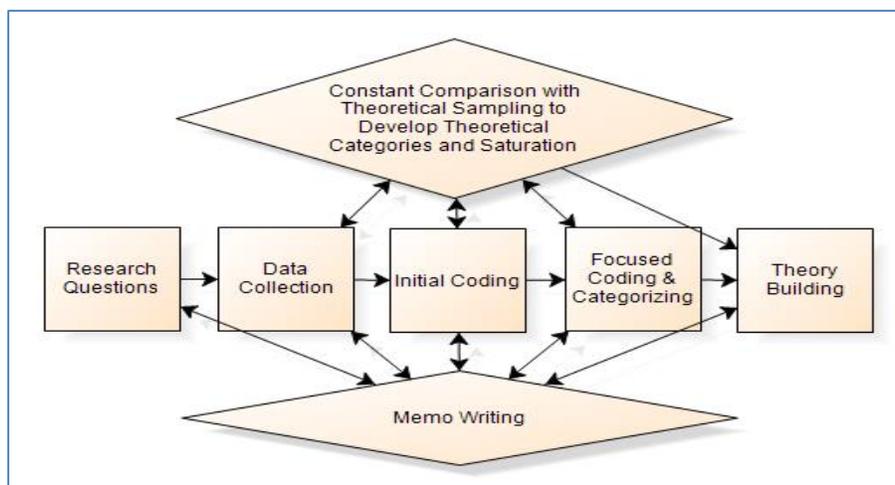
### Constructivist Grounded Theory, Conceptual Research, and Theory Development

While there are a number of compelling ways to approach conceptual research and the development of new theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Weick, 1989), we suggest that CGT is particularly useful, rigorous, and well-suited for an applied discipline such as travel and tourism. So what is CGT? Grounded theory has evolved since the seminal work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the adaptations of the method by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994) and the location of grounded theory in the constructivist paradigm by Charmaz (2006, 2104). The nuances of the various grounded theory traditions (see Charmaz, 2014; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006) are beyond the scope of this paper as is an exposé on the constructivist paradigm (see Schwandt, 1994).

### Mapping the Methodology

While we introduce the process of CGT (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) in a linear progression, the process is multi-circular as various parts of the process are constantly compared to other parts and changed, refined, or redirected. This type of inductive process enables the researcher to generate more abstract concepts with greater depth and breadth. Figure 1 maps CGT methodology and progression towards theory development.

**Figure 1: CGT Methodology and Progression towards Theory Development.**



Initial research questions are the starting point for CGT and lead to data collection that can include extant empirical materials as well as interview data and field notes. Initial coding

provides the link between the collection of data and emergent theory and includes line-by-line coding which helps the researcher make sense of their data and keep them enmeshed in the data. CGT specifically codes with gerunds in order to make processes and actions explicit and is very different than thematic coding. In addition, initial coding is not based on *a priori* themes or categories found in extant literature. Initial coding can also employ coding incidents with incidents in order to examine patterns and *in vivo* coding in order to capture the speech and meanings of the participants.

Whereas initial coding helps the researcher take apart the data, focused coding condenses and sharpens the analytics of the researcher and helps them conceptualize larger segments of the data and advance the theoretical directions for their work. This particular stage advances more abstract thought processes and conceptual development.

Memo writing, a reflexive activity that occurs throughout the entire CGT method, is an integral part of the process that enables researchers to streamline the process of developing codes into categories, focus and refine their analytics, and increase the level of abstraction of their thought processes. Theoretical sampling is also integral to CGT and is used to illuminate and delimit the properties, boundaries, and applicability of a particular category or set of categories. When using this technique, researchers seek additional information, new information, etc. in order to reach a theoretical saturation point when the gathering of information leads to no further theoretical insights about the emergent theory. The use of abductive reasoning through theoretical sampling allows the researcher to move beyond induction towards new knowledge.

### **Utility of Constructivist Grounded Theory for Conceptual Research and Theory Development**

Some researchers choose to employ CGT solely for data analysis and do not continue forward toward theory development. We suspect that positivist and post-positivist perspectives about what counts as theory may contribute to the perception that theory cannot be developed through CGT. At a minimum, we believe that the emergent theory that CGT affords is consistent with multi-paradigm notions of what counts as conceptual research. Without this first step and the hallmark ideas that are foregrounded by conceptual research, new theory has little chance of development. Scholars with a wider paradigmatic perspective could also consider CGT's emergent theory a tightly bound, context specific local theory (Swanson & Chermack, 2013, p. 22) – a weak theory, but a theory nonetheless.

From an interpretive paradigm perspective, CGT is particularly well suited for theory development that privileges multiple, co-created realities, the linkage between values and facts, and provisional truth. The purpose of theory, from this philosophical perspective, is to understand meanings and actions as well as how participants and researchers construct them. Additionally, this world view “gives *abstract understanding* greater priority than explanation” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 20).

This paper contributes to new theory development by examining CGT methodology and suggesting its utility for advancing both conceptual research and theory development in an applied discipline such as travel and tourism. We embrace Shapira's (2011) notion that the important goal of theory development is meaningfulness, not merely significance (p. 1319). We also believe that good theory should be useful to practitioners and that CGT's roots in the pragmatism of the Chicago school will ensure that its emergent theory can be applied to industry.

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