



## Grounded Theory in Practice: Reflexivity and Innovative Approaches for Modern Qualitative Studies

Michael Mncedisi Willie

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to:

\* Michael Mncedisi Willie, Council for Medical Schemes, Pretoria, South Africa,

✉ [m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za](mailto:m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za)

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# Grounded Theory in Practice: Reflexivity and Innovative Approaches for Modern Qualitative Studies

Michael Mncedisi Willie 

Council for Medical Schemes, Pretoria, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Grounded theory remains a key methodology in qualitative research, providing systematic procedures for generating theory from empirical data. However, the expansion of qualitative research contexts, including digital environments, has introduced new methodological challenges related to reflexivity, analytical rigour, and methodological transparency. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the development of grounded theory methodologies and explore how reflexivity and innovative methodological approaches strengthen research rigour in contemporary qualitative studies. **Method:** This study employs a methodological review by synthesising seminal and contemporary literature on grounded theory. The analysis focuses on major methodological traditions, including Straussian, Glaserian, and constructivist grounded theory, while also examining issues related to coding procedures, theoretical sensitivity, and literature review management. The review further considers methodological adaptations in digital contexts, particularly the integration of netnography. **Results:** The review shows that grounded theory has evolved into diverse methodological traditions with distinct analytical procedures. Reflexivity, transparency, and methodological flexibility are increasingly recognised as essential for ensuring credibility and rigour in qualitative research. **Conclusion:** Grounded theory remains a flexible and relevant methodological framework for contemporary qualitative inquiry. **Contribution:** This study provides a synthesis of grounded theory traditions and highlights methodological considerations that support rigorous and reflective qualitative research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology developed to systematically generate theory from empirical data. Originating from the work of Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, it provides a structured yet flexible framework for interpreting social phenomena, emphasising inductive reasoning and iterative data analysis (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The methodology has evolved to encompass multiple traditions, including Straussian, Glaserian, and constructivist variants, each with unique perspectives on coding, memo writing, and theoretical sensitivity (Alemu et al., 2015; Charmaz, 2006). Understanding these approaches is essential for researchers aiming to align methodological choices with epistemological and practical objectives.

The choice between Straussian and Glaserian approaches represents one of the key methodological decisions in grounded theory practice. Straussian grounded theory emphasises structured coding procedures and analytic techniques, offering a clear roadmap for novice researchers, whereas Glaserian grounded theory advocates for flexibility and emergent analysis guided by theoretical sensitivity (Almusaed, 2025; Glaser, 1992). Constructivist approaches, as proposed by Charmaz (2006), further highlight the co-construction of meaning between researcher

\* **Corresponding Author:** Michael Mncedisi Willie, [m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za](mailto:m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za)

Council for Medical Schemes, Pretoria, South Africa

Address: Block A Eco Glades 2 Office Park, 420 Witch-Hazel Ave, Eco-Park Estate, Centurion, 0157, South Africa



and participants, integrating reflexive insights into data interpretation. These distinctions influence study design, participant engagement, and data management strategies.

A critical consideration in grounded theory research is the role of reflexivity. Researchers' positionality, prior knowledge, and interpretive frameworks inevitably shape analytical decisions, making reflexivity an ethical and methodological imperative (Markham, 2017; Mruck & Mey, 2019; Probst, 2015). Reflexive practice enables researchers to account for bias, enhance transparency, and document analytical choices throughout the research process. Moreover, attention to reflexivity fosters credibility and trustworthiness, particularly in studies involving vulnerable or marginalised populations.

Contemporary grounded theory research increasingly engages with digital and networked contexts. Netnography, or online ethnography, extends grounded theory principles to social media and virtual communities, allowing researchers to generate contextually rich theory from digitally mediated interactions (Kozinets, 2019). Integrating digital methodologies requires careful attention to ethical considerations, data validity, and theoretical abstraction, highlighting the evolving landscape of qualitative inquiry. This paper examines how these methodological dimensions intersect to inform robust and reflective grounded theory research.

Recent developments in grounded theory research demonstrate a growing emphasis on methodological reflexivity, transparency, and adaptability across diverse research contexts (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Berg et al., 2018). Contemporary scholars have expanded classical grounded theory through the emergence of multiple methodological traditions, including Glaserian, Straussian, and constructivist approaches, each offering distinct perspectives on coding procedures, theory generation, and the role of the researcher in the analytic process (Pascua, 2024; Khan, 2024). In addition, grounded theory has increasingly been applied in complex, digitally mediated environments, where methodologies such as netnography and digital qualitative analysis enable researchers to explore social interactions within online communities (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023; Nascimento et al., 2022). These developments highlight how grounded theory continues to evolve as a flexible methodological framework capable of addressing contemporary qualitative research challenges while maintaining its core principles of inductive theory development and theoretical sensitivity.

Despite the extensive body of literature on grounded theory methodology, several important gaps remain in the current scholarly discussion. Many studies focus on individual grounded theory traditions without providing a comprehensive synthesis that explains how these methodological approaches relate to one another within contemporary qualitative research practice. Furthermore, although reflexivity is widely recognised as a crucial component of qualitative inquiry, its systematic role in strengthening methodological rigour and transparency in grounded theory studies is not always clearly articulated. In addition, the growing use of grounded theory in digital research environments has introduced new methodological considerations that remain insufficiently integrated within existing methodological discussions. These gaps indicate the need for a conceptual synthesis that connects grounded theory traditions, reflexive practice, and emerging research contexts.

Based on the identified gaps in the literature, this study aims to provide a methodological synthesis of grounded theory and examine its relevance for contemporary qualitative research. Specifically, the study seeks to clarify the key distinctions between major grounded theory traditions, explore the role of reflexivity in strengthening analytical rigour and transparency, and discuss how grounded theory can be adapted to emerging research contexts such as digital and online environments. By integrating classical and contemporary perspectives, this review provides conceptual guidance for researchers in applying grounded theory in a rigorous, reflexive, and contextually responsive manner.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on grounded theory reveals a rich diversity of methodological perspectives, from its classical formulations to contemporary adaptations. Early works by Glaser (1978, 1992) and Strauss & Corbin (1990, 1998) emphasised systematic procedures for coding, categorisation, and theoretical sampling to generate grounded, data-driven theory. Constructivist grounded theory, articulated by Charmaz (2006) and Charmaz & Thornberg (2020), emphasises the interpretive role of the researcher, co-constructing meaning with participants rather than seeking an objective "truth." This epistemological shift reflects broader qualitative trends emphasising reflexivity, context, and participant voice.

Situational analysis and critical realist grounded theory have further expanded the methodological toolkit. Clarke (2005), introduces situational maps and social worlds/arena analysis to situate individual and collective actions within complex social systems, while Oliver (2011) applies critical realist perspectives to social work research, highlighting mechanisms, causality, and structural influences. These innovations demonstrate how grounded

theory adapts to disciplinary and contextual needs, providing nuanced analytic tools for contemporary social research.

The management of literature review in grounded theory has long been debated. Dunne (2011) and Dunne & Üstündağ (2020) emphasise the importance of integrating literature without constraining the inductive nature of theory generation. Early engagement with literature can enhance theoretical sensitivity and methodological rigour, but premature reliance may bias coding and category development. Effective grounded theory requires a dynamic balance between empirical immersion and scholarly awareness, ensuring that emergent theory reflects data while remaining theoretically informed.

Reflexivity emerges as a central theme in contemporary grounded theory practice. Scholars highlight both opportunities and challenges associated with self-reflexivity, including navigating personal biases, ethical considerations, and interpretive authority (Mruck & Mey, 2019; Markham, 2017; Probst, 2015). Reflexive practices encourage transparency, documenting analytical decisions and researcher positionality, thereby enhancing methodological credibility. These perspectives collectively underscore the ongoing evolution of grounded theory as both a practical and philosophically informed approach to qualitative research.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Grounded theory methodology involves iterative data collection, coding, and theoretical sampling to develop contextually grounded insights. Researchers begin with open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by axial and selective coding to explore relationships and refine emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sensitivity, or the researcher's ability to recognise and interpret meaningful patterns in data, remains central to generating robust theory (Glaser, 1978). This process supports the production of substantive theory that reflects participants lived experiences.

Choosing between methodological traditions influences the analytic approach. Straussian grounded theory provides structured coding procedures and emphasises verification, whereas Glaserian grounded theory prioritises emergent analysis and constant comparison without preordained categories (Alammar et al., 2019; Adaba, 2026). Constructivist approaches foreground reflexivity, emphasising co-construction and researcher-participant interaction, allowing theory to evolve through interpretive engagement (Gadella, 2025; Deshmukh & Sharma, 2026). These choices have practical implications for data collection, memo writing, and theoretical saturation.

Sampling strategies in grounded theory are guided by theoretical rather than statistical considerations. Researchers employ purposive and theoretical sampling to explore emerging categories until saturation is reached (Charmaz, 2007). Flexibility in participant selection ensures that data collection aligns with evolving theoretical concepts, supporting analytic depth. Netnography extends these strategies to online communities, introducing additional considerations related to ethical data collection, participant consent, and contextually valid interpretation (Kozinets, 2019).

Quality assurance in grounded theory relies on rigour, transparency, and reflexive documentation. Constructivist and critical realist approaches underscore the need to articulate assumptions, methodological choices, and analytic decisions throughout the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Oliver, 2011). Reflexive memoing, audit trails, and triangulation strengthen the credibility of emergent theory while maintaining openness to revision and reinterpretation. This methodological rigour ensures that grounded theory remains a trusted approach for qualitative research across disciplines.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Grounded theory's enduring relevance lies in its methodological flexibility, inductive orientation, and capacity to be applied across a wide range of research contexts. Unlike approaches that rely on predetermined theoretical frameworks, grounded theory allows concepts and explanations to emerge directly from empirical data through systematic analysis. This inductive logic enables researchers to explore complex social phenomena without imposing rigid analytical structures at the outset. Over time, the methodology has evolved into several traditions, including Glaserian, Straussian, and constructivist grounded theory, each offering different degrees of analytical structure and interpretive engagement. The integration of these traditions allows researchers to align their epistemological assumptions with the objectives of their studies while maintaining methodological coherence (Charmaz, 2006; Alammar et al., 2019). Within this process, reflexivity plays a crucial role, as researchers are encouraged to critically reflect on their assumptions, positionality, and potential influence on the research process. Such critical awareness deepens

analysis and ensures that the resulting theory reflects the social realities and contextual dynamics participants experience.

The expansion of grounded theory into digital environments further demonstrates its adaptability in contemporary research. As social interaction increasingly occurs through online platforms, researchers have begun to extend grounded theory principles to the study of virtual communities and digitally mediated communication. Approaches such as netnography, social media analysis, and situational mapping enable scholars to examine patterns of interaction, cultural expression, and knowledge exchange within online spaces. These methods allow researchers to capture naturally occurring conversations, narratives, and behaviours that unfold in digital settings, thereby providing new opportunities for theory development (Kozinets, 2019; Clarke, 2005). However, studying digital contexts also introduces additional methodological and ethical considerations. Researchers must address issues related to participant privacy, informed consent, data authenticity, and the interpretation of online identities. Careful attention to these factors is necessary to ensure that theoretical insights derived from digital data remain credible, contextually grounded, and ethically responsible.

Another key aspect of grounded theory research involves the careful management of the literature review and the development of theoretical sensitivity. While grounded theory emphasises the emergence of theory from data, researchers must still engage with existing scholarship in order to situate their work within broader academic debates. The challenge lies in integrating relevant literature without allowing prior theories to dominate the analytical process. Maintaining this balance enables researchers to preserve the inductive nature of grounded theory while still benefiting from established conceptual insights (Dunne, 2011; Dunne & Üstündağ, 2020). Theoretical sensitivity is developed through continuous interaction with data, methodological reflection, and critical engagement with scholarly perspectives. In addition, methodological transparency is strengthened through practices such as reflexive memo writing, audit trails, and data source triangulation. These strategies help document the analytical process, enabling readers to understand how categories were developed and how theoretical conclusions were reached.

Overall, grounded theory continues to evolve as a robust and influential qualitative methodology within contemporary social research. Its core principles, iterative coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and theory generation, provide a systematic framework for developing explanations that are closely connected to empirical realities. At the same time, the methodology remains open to innovation, enabling researchers to incorporate new analytical tools, digital data sources, and interdisciplinary perspectives. By embracing methodological pluralism and maintaining reflexive engagement with both data and theory, grounded theory researchers can produce nuanced and contextually grounded insights. Such contributions not only advance theoretical understanding but also inform practical interventions, policy development, and evidence-based decision-making across diverse fields of study.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

### 4.1 Implications

This review study provides important methodological implications for qualitative researchers who employ grounded theory in contemporary research contexts. The synthesis of classical and modern grounded theory traditions highlights the necessity for researchers to carefully align their methodological choices with their epistemological assumptions and research objectives. By emphasising reflexivity, methodological transparency, and analytical rigour, this review underscores the importance of documenting research decisions throughout the coding and theory development processes. Additionally, the discussion on digital research environments suggests that grounded theory can be effectively adapted to emerging contexts such as online communities and social media interactions. These implications demonstrate that grounded theory remains a flexible and relevant methodological framework capable of addressing complex social phenomena in modern qualitative research.

### 4.1 Contributions

This methodological review contributes to the literature by synthesising foundational and contemporary perspectives on grounded theory and clarifying the distinctions between its major methodological traditions, including Straussian, Glaserian, and constructivist approaches. By integrating discussions of reflexivity, methodological rigour, and digital research environments, the review expands the understanding of how grounded theory can be applied in evolving research contexts. Furthermore, this article provides conceptual guidance for researchers, particularly novice scholars, in navigating methodological choices and maintaining analytical transparency during theory development. Through this synthesis, the study strengthens the theoretical and methodological foundation of grounded theory research and offers a consolidated reference for future qualitative investigations.

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

### 5.1 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this review study has several limitations. First, the analysis is primarily based on selected seminal and contemporary literature, which may not fully represent the entire diversity of grounded theory applications across disciplines and cultural contexts. Second, the study focuses primarily on conceptual and methodological discussions rather than on empirical case studies demonstrating the practical application of grounded theory in specific research settings. Third, the rapid development of digital research methodologies means that new methodological adaptations may continue to emerge beyond the scope of this review. Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted as a conceptual synthesis rather than a comprehensive representation of all grounded theory practices.

### 5.1 Recommendation for Future Research Directions

Future research should further explore the integration of grounded theory with emerging qualitative methodologies, particularly in digital and online research environments. Studies that apply grounded theory within networked or social media contexts could provide valuable insights into how the methodology adapts to digitally mediated social interactions. Additionally, empirical investigations examining the practical implementation of reflexivity and methodological transparency in grounded theory studies would strengthen the credibility and rigour of qualitative research practices. Comparative studies across disciplines may also reveal how grounded theory can be adapted to diverse research traditions while maintaining its core principles of inductive theory development and theoretical sensitivity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Grounded theory remains a powerful qualitative approach because it bridges empirical data and theoretical development in a systematic yet adaptable manner. Its strength lies in the iterative process of data collection and analysis, where concepts emerge directly from participants' lived experiences rather than being imposed a priori. The choice between Straussian, Glaserian, or constructivist grounded theory is not merely technical, but epistemological, shaping how researchers interpret data, construct categories, and ultimately build theory. Therefore, methodological awareness becomes essential, as each approach carries distinct assumptions about reality, knowledge, and the role of the researcher in the analytic process.

At the same time, the credibility of grounded theory research is increasingly tied to the researcher's commitment to reflexivity, ethical integrity, and transparency. Reflexivity allows researchers to critically examine their positionality, assumptions, and influence throughout the research process, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded rather than biased. Ethical considerations, particularly in sensitive or digitally mediated contexts, demand careful attention to consent, privacy, and data representation. Transparency in documenting coding procedures, sampling decisions, and analytic pathways further strengthens trustworthiness, enabling other scholars to understand and evaluate how the emergent theory was constructed.

Looking ahead, grounded theory must continue to evolve in response to shifting research landscapes, especially as digital environments and online communities become increasingly rich sources of qualitative data. Integrating perspectives such as critical realism and constructivism offers promising avenues for expanding its analytical depth, particularly in capturing complex social phenomena. Future studies should also prioritise methodological innovation, including the use of digital tools for data management and analysis, while maintaining the core principles of rigour and theoretical sensitivity. Through continuous refinement and adaptation, grounded theory will remain a relevant and robust framework for generating meaningful, contextually grounded insights in contemporary social research.

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## CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

The author declares that the entire research and writing process for this article was conducted independently. The author assumes full responsibility for all data associated with this research. No other individual contributed as a co-author or made any significant contribution to the content of this work.

## Declaration of Generative AI (GenAI) Usage in Scientific Writing

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report.

## Informed Consent Statement

The author declares that this study is a methodological review based exclusively on previously published scholarly literature and does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures. Therefore, informed consent was not required. The study was conducted in accordance with academic ethical standards, ensuring proper citation and responsible use of all referenced sources.

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## Author Information

\* **Michael Mncedisi Willie**, ✉ [m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za](mailto:m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za),  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4322-7857>

Council for Medical Schemes, Pretoria, South Africa

Dr. Michael Mncedisi Willie is a distinguished researcher and practitioner in the private health industry, with a wealth of expertise in research, digital marketing, strategy, corporate governance, advanced data analytics, and service innovation. Throughout his career, Dr. Willie has demonstrated a passion for exploring the intricacies of the healthcare sector, with a particular focus on improving service delivery and promoting digitally innovative solutions.

Address: Block A Eco Glades 2 Office Park, 420 Witch-Hazel Ave, Eco-Park Estate, Centurion, 0157, South Africa