



MASTERCLASS

# Grounding osteopathic research — Introducing grounded theory



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**Abstract** Over the last four decades there has been a proliferation of qualitative research into healthcare practice, including manual therapy. Grounded theory is the most widely used qualitative research methodology, and has contributed to the knowledge base of a number of healthcare professions. This Masterclass provides an introduction to grounded theory and uses a recent doctoral study into osteopathic clinical decision-making as an example to illustrate the main processes and procedures when conducting and evaluating grounded theory research. This paper highlights how grounded theory research may be of help in developing a robust and rounded evidence-base in relation to osteopathic practice.

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## Introduction

Qualitative research methodologies have been used in the social sciences for over half a decade, and in recent years the value that qualitative approaches can add to the knowledge bases of a range of manual therapy professions has been highlighted, for example in musculoskeletal physiotherapy,<sup>1–5</sup> chiropractic<sup>6</sup> and osteopathy.<sup>7</sup> Since

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the inception of the International Journal of Osteopathic Medicine in 2001, 68 original articles have been published, of which 5 (7%) have taken a qualitative approach (Table 1). The dominance that quantitative research has had in healthcare means that many practitioners will be unfamiliar with the variety of different qualitative methodologies and how these can help inform clinical practice. This Masterclass aims to provide the reader with an introduction to one of the most popular qualitative research approaches, grounded theory. A comprehensive and systematic literature search has identified that between 1991 and 1998, out of a total of 4134 citations in the Social Science Citation Index (SCCI), to *all* types of methods (both quantitative and qualitative), 'grounded theory' received 2662 citations (64%).<sup>8</sup> Whilst this illustrates its popularity, the high number of citations for 'grounded theory' in the SCCI makes no guarantee of the quality nor the type of grounded theory that is being cited.<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate the main procedures of grounded theory, examples will be provided from a recent doctoral study which used the approach to explore the clinical decision-making and therapeutic approaches of experienced osteopaths in the UK.<sup>9–11</sup>

## Qualitative research – a paradigm shift

The important role that qualitative research has in building a robust evidence base in osteopathy lies in its ability to embrace both the patient-centred and biopsychosocial models of healthcare.<sup>7,19</sup> In line with these models of healthcare, qualitative research recognises the individuality of patients' perspectives and experiences and seeks to explore and understand them. In contrast, quantitative research, often using randomised controlled trials tends to view individual patient characteristics as unwanted variables which need to be controlled, and attempts to obtain as homogeneous sample as possible.<sup>20</sup> The findings from quantitative research are able to generate valuable knowledge to help inform the 'technical-rational' aspects of practice,<sup>21</sup> such as the reliability and validity of clinical testing procedures or the risks (and benefits) associated with treatment interventions. Whereas qualitative research has the capacity to explore the many different types of knowledge associated with practice, which are often concealed from quantitative research, such as: embodied knowledge<sup>22</sup>; tacit knowledge<sup>23</sup>; professional craft knowledge<sup>24,25</sup>; and scientific knowledge.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, qualitative research recognises the 'professional-artistic'<sup>21,27,28</sup> side of practice (such as how practitioners make

clinical judgements during complex and uncertain situations), which is often improvised, tacit<sup>23</sup> and difficult to access using quantitative research. Table 2 summarises and compares three commonly used qualitative research approaches; phenomenology, discourse analysis and the focus of this paper, grounded theory.

The differences in quantitative and qualitative research approaches are due to very different theoretical and philosophical assumptions about knowledge and reality, which together form a research *paradigm*. Typically, a positivist/post-positivist paradigm underpins quantitative research and an interpretive/constructionist paradigm underpins qualitative research approaches.<sup>30</sup> The philosophical orientations of positivism/post-positivism assume a stable, single and objective reality that can be observed, so that evidence can be gathered and measured in a systematic way to generate knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, interpretivism/constructionism maintains that there are multiple subjective realities and that knowledge and meaning is not automatically 'out there' or present in objects or social situations, it is created and constructed by individuals.<sup>1</sup> The major differences between these two research paradigms are summarised in Table 3. We argue that both quantitative and qualitative research approaches are necessary for osteopathy to develop a robust evidence base which can help explain and understand the complexities of clinical practice and enhance patient care.

## Grounded theory – an introduction

Grounded theory involves systematic methods of gathering, analysing and conceptualising data so that a theory can be built to explain a social process, action or interaction.<sup>32</sup> Originally described in the 1960s by two social scientists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*<sup>33</sup> was revolutionary in that it challenged the then dominant quantitative research methods used in sociological research.<sup>34</sup> Prior to the conception of grounded theory, most social research involved utilising existing sociological constructs and theories to analysis research data (such as a predetermined coding framework developed by existing literature, theory and research). Therefore, the findings were seen as only verifying the existing 'grand theories' rather than producing new theories to explain social processes. Glaser and Strauss proposed that grounded theory would allow for the 'discovery' of new theory rather than merely describing social

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