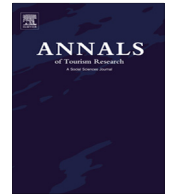




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## Elaborating on grounded theory in tourism research

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## ABSTRACT

Grounded theory method has been gaining momentum within qualitative tourism research. However, different versions of grounded theory exist, and tourism researchers rarely address this variety in their work. This article addresses this issue and engages with grounded theory's core tenets, its epistemological and ontological underpinnings, and its contribution to theory building. We present an overview of grounded theory studies in tourism. In light of the trends in qualitative research towards a blurring of genres and creativity, we also suggest that Gilles Deleuze's philosophy may take grounded theory researchers to new research territories. In our view, the constructivist orientation to grounded theory, impregnated with Deleuzian thinking, is seen as a methodological tool most capable of facilitating positive change.

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## Introduction

Grounded theory has been gaining momentum as a methodological approach among tourism researchers. Its popularity may be attributed to clear methodological procedures, which are particularly attractive to novice researchers (Mehmetoglu & Altinay, 2006). Researchers may also enjoy engaging with grounded theory because they are able to craft their own categories instead of refining extant ones (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Another reason for this popularity in tourism may be due to grounded theory's conception as a more "objective" way of doing qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2008a). Qualitative researchers operating within the largely dominating positivistic and post-positivistic cultures of their tourism management departments (Hollinshead, 2004) may have seen in grounded theory a method that could be considered competitive with those used by their quantitative counterparts. They particularly appreciate that it opens up opportunities for new theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in areas of little extant research or where new insights are needed.

Although grounded theory articles are now more frequently published in tourism journals, a limited number of researchers critically discuss the approach they employ. This lack of reflection is problematic and may thwart the ambitions of many novice researchers who wish to embark on grounded theory research projects. Worse, the lack of critical reflection on the method and its application may even erode the status of grounded theory, as an emerging and respected research strategy, among the tourism scientific community.

The objective of this article is fourfold. First, we attempt to explicate what the grounded theory method is about. Here, its core tenets, the concepts of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation, comparative analysis, and coding procedure are addressed, followed by a presentation of the different versions of grounded theory. Second, we present an overview of grounded theory studies in tourism. This literature review will help us point to a number of issues on the use of grounded

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theory by tourism scholars. Third, drawing upon the wider literature, we discuss grounded theory's ontological and epistemological underpinnings. We will contrast grounded theory with critical realism and argue that, despite some differences, critical realists, post-positivists, and constructivist grounded theorists share a similar worldview. Such a discussion is deemed important because few tourism researchers discuss the contribution of the grounded theory method to theory building, which may be subject to criticism (Tribe, Xiao, & Chambers, 2012). Furthermore, as Bryant (2009) remarks, early career researchers are increasingly expected to position themselves against the current debates in the methodological literature. Fourth, given recent calls within tourism research to encourage researchers to methodologically experiment beyond their disciplinary boundaries (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015), and to consider new modes of knowing guided by ethics (Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011), we suggest that a Deleuzian reading may take grounded theory in a new performative direction. This new interpretive empirical work is described as performative because it involves collaborative constructions of meaning which may be unsettling, empowering, and transformative. Tourism researchers working closely with communities such as those operating within policy development, volunteer tourism, creative tourism, and social tourism may be looking for empowering research practices that could open up exciting avenues. Therefore, plugging grounded theory into Deleuzian philosophy, we argue, may stimulate researchers to engage creatively with the world through practices of ethical approximation.

A Deleuzian inspired inquiry intimates new ways of thinking research (Mazzei & McCoy, 2010) which reminds us of the participatory paradigm for its emphasis on embodied ways of knowing in a world in which human subjects and matter are treated as equal. Tourism can forcefully shape natural landscapes and social relationships as evidenced in studies of tourism impacts. It is urgent that the power of tourism be deployed to do good for communities, tourists, and the natural environments where people and other species—sometimes endangered—live. In our view, a constructivist/constructionist orientation to grounded theory, impregnated with Deleuzian thinking, is a methodological tool most capable of facilitating positive change. We hope, therefore, to clarify a number of grey areas around grounded theory, such as the epistemological and ontological positions of grounded theorists, and we also hope that the ideas expounded here will generate further methodological discussions.

### Grounded theory method

Grounded theory was formulated in the late 1960s by American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in an attempt to provide an alternative to the dominant positivistic research methodologies in the field of sociology. Despite this attempt, ironically, grounded theory has been often relegated to being considered the most modernist and positivistic approach of all interpretive methods (Charmaz, 2008a). Nevertheless, Glaser and Strauss's merit, Charmaz argues, has been to inspire successive generations of qualitative researchers in disciplines—such as tourism—hitherto dominated by positivistic research. Since publishing *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, Glaser and Strauss have followed different paths in elaborating the method. To complicate the matter, Glaser and Strauss have not been the only ones to rework the original text, as a number of other scholars (e.g. Clarke, 2005) have cast their own interpretations upon this approach. Of particular relevance is the constructivist orientation by Kathy Charmaz (2000, 2011), which she distinguishes from the original concept of grounded theory, but also from Glaser's objectivist (1992) and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) post-positivist versions. Regardless of variations in approach, Charmaz (2011, p. 361) explains grounded theory as “an iterative, comparative, interactive, and abductive method”. The aim of the method, like other qualitative research approaches, is not to build universal laws but to develop fresh insights about a phenomenon and to offer theoretical propositions where little is known.

So what makes grounded theory a distinctive method? Based on their reading of the *Discovery* book, Gibson and Hartman (2014) highlight five core principles of the method, namely openness, explanatory power, generation vs. justification, theory structure, and the research process. Openness means that research is not led by a particular theoretical framework and that research questions should remain open throughout the enquiry. Explanatory power means that work should be credible and relevant to people; grounded theory should be shaped by local needs (Denzin, 2007). Subsequently, grounded theory focuses on gaining insights or constructing knowledge about phenomena, not on justifying preconceived ideas. Theory structure refers to a set of theoretical propositions that are linked to core categories, whereby categories need to be defined and related to other categories. The fifth principle demands the research process to be flexible and iterative, consisting of various phases throughout which data is coded and interpreted.

The constant comparison of data—a corner stone of grounded theory—is at the heart of this cyclical research process. Data in the form of statements, stories, and incidents are respectively compared with other statements, stories, and incidents. Likewise, interview one is compared to interview two, and then interview two is compared to interview three, which is also compared to interview one, and so on, until common patterns emerge. Moreover, this cyclical fashion of data analysis goes hand in hand with what has been referred to as theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling means that new research participants or information are purposefully sought based on the findings of previous data analysis. The problem of theoretical sampling is that it requires researchers to enter and exit the field on a regular basis (Connell & Lowe, 1997)—a process which may not be easy when researchers only have a week or two to collect data outside their region of residence. In other words, collecting data over too short a period of time does not allow researchers to transcribe and analyze in subsequent waves, in order to exploit the full potential of theoretical sampling; this processual issue may impinge upon the quality of the analysis or the goodness of fit. Charmaz (2006) further clarifies that theoretical sampling differs from initial

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