Situating Sensitizing Concepts in the Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory Method

Shehr Bano Zaidi

Abstract
This study reimagines the use of sensitizing concepts in a grounded theory variant titled as the Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory Method. Generally taken as one of the starting points of a research inquiry, employing sensitizing concepts is one of the initial strategies that grounded theorists (and by extension qualitative researchers) rely on; the underlying assumption being that researchers do not enter a research site tabula rasa. The approach becomes problematic when grounded theory is used in the critical paradigm. Most literature (on grounded theory or qualitative research methodology) skims over sensitizing concepts. By foregrounding the same, this paper endeavors to achieve three main objectives: it points to the oft neglected paradigmatic genesis of the device and situates it within the qualitative approach before contextualizing it in grounded theory. In doing so, a close epistemological and methodological link with in vivo codes is made; this is done by teasing out the language aspect. Finally, a reference to two broad strands in the way that sensitizing concepts are used, caps the argument; one conforms to the Blumerian version and the other to the Bulmerian. This paper shows that the former is suitable for acritical grounded theory research, whereas the latter for critical under which Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory falls. The paper argues for grounded theory working in the critical paradigm to enter the site with an informed theoretical perspective rather than loosely framed sensitizing concepts.

Keywords
Sensitizing concepts, constructivist-critical grounded theory, Charmaz, Flemmen
GTM’s broad and general features. Kathy Charmaz’s (1939–2020) notable achievements are suitably mentioned next as well as the reasons for her adopting a deviant stance to that of the grounded theory’s originators—Barney Glaser (born 1930) and Anselm Strauss (1916–1996). As the main argument of this project rests on the views of two notable sociologists on sensitizing concepts, Herbert George Blumer (1900–1987) and Martin Bulmer (born 1943), the paper is further divided accordingly. Both sections evaluate sensitizing concepts as used in grounded theory (having a critical stance). The first stems from the point of view of George Blumer, the father of the term; this part also studies the way this strategy is used in qualitative research in general. The second part is devoted to an evaluation of the term from the perspective of Martin Bulmer.

A short background of the grounded theory methodology and its variants is in order here. The methodology was introduced by Barney Glaser (born 1930) and Anselm Strauss (1916–1996) in 1967 in The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (1967)—a book considered to be a bible for grounded theory practitioners no matter which variant they are following. The book’s aim is to show “how the discovery of theory from data-systematically obtained and analyzed in social research-can be furthered” (1967, p. 1). The reasoning followed is inductive (p. 5–6) rather than logico-deductive. Inductive logic enhances the visibility of the process and contributes to its “usefulness,” whereas logico-deductive only strengthens the extant theory through hypotheses testing. In grounded theory, the development of theory starts with data and not an existing theory. The originators do not discount quantitative data from theory generation although most studies use qualitative (p. 18).

Over time, scholars using grounded theory developed its variants to suit different research interests. It is important to mention here that Strauss (1916–1996) himself developed differences with Glaser (born 1930) later on and developed his own version generally known as the Straussian version—well documented by Onions (2006, p. 5) in his conference paper (“Grounded Theory Applications in Reviewing Knowledge Management Literature”). Onions enlists a total of 12 differences between the two erstwhile partners. The differences pertain to different aspects of the grounded theory methodology. For example, if Glaser recommends theory to be “grounded in the data,” Strauss believes in the interpretation accuracy of the observer. Or, while Glaser advocates the researcher to be passive, for Strauss he is active.

Continuing with the tradition of Anselm Strauss (1916–1996) by adapting the original grounded theory to suit the demands of the day, Kathy Charmaz (1939–2020) a student of both Glaser and Strauss’ (2006, p. xiii), introduced a variant of GTM which she labeled as constructivist grounded theory (italics my own; non-italic henceforth). She does not concur with the positivist leanings of the originators. Notable among those who agree with Charmaz, are Antony Bryant (2002) and Adele Clarke (2003). In her 2006-magnum opus, Charmaz states (p. 9) that by 1990s grounded theory became known more for “its (italics original) positivistic assumptions” than anything else; the approach was conceived as a reaction against the positivist hegemony of social sciences in the 1960s. In the second edition of the same work, Constructing Grounded Theory (2014), Charmaz argues that where positivism stands for “an objective external reality,” constructivists see reality as “multiple” and “constructed” (p. 13). Constructivist grounded theory, however, retains strategies like constant comparison, induction, and emergence. Providing a reason for using “constructivist” and not “constructionist” for her variant, Charmaz (2014, pp. 12–13) writes that it was her dissatisfaction with the social constructionists’ style of analysis that led her to use the term “constructivist” instead of “constructionist.” Her term acknowledges “the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of data” rather than only an “accurate rendering” (2014, p.14) contrary to the constructionist way. Though it is not the mandate of this particular paper to assess the variants in all their aspects, it can be safely claimed that the foundations of GTM themselves allow for divergences; Charmaz lauds “the flexibility of the method” to accommodate different approaches under one umbrella as long as the basic strategies are adhered to (2014, p. 12).

This marks the end of the introductory section. The next section evaluates the Blumerian version of sensitizing concepts as they are used not just in grounded theory but in qualitative research also. A special focus is on grounded theorists theorizing critical social phenomenon.

Use of Sensitizing Concepts in Qualitative Research: A Nod to Herbert Blumer

Having its genesis in sociology, the term sensitizing concepts was first introduced by Herbert G. Blumer (1900–1987) in his 1954-article “What is Wrong with Social Theory?”. Before moving onto the oft repeated difference between definitive and sensitizing concepts, there is another aspect of his treatise that deserves a mention. Blumer (1954, p. 3) gives us three types of social theory and declares that he is concerned with only one of the three that, according to him, is the real empirical science. He does not neglect to give characteristics of the two that do not make up his study. The first is “interpretative” which outlines and defines “life situations so that people may have a clearer understanding of their world, its possibilities of development, and the directions along which it may move”. He further observes that most research “wittingly or unwittingly” falls in this category. The second type is a theory-based analysis done to analyze “a given social situation/structure or social action as a basis for policy or action.” Neither fulfill the criteria of empirical research.

Blumer (1954, p. 5) informs his readers that it is the third type, exemplified by terms like “attitudes, social class, value, cultural norm, personality, reference group, social structure, primary group, social process, social system, urbanization, accommodation, differential discrimination, and social control,”
that he is targeting. These terms make up the empirical science which is studied primarily through conceptualization hence the importance of concept formation. Blumer bemoans the “ambiguous nature of concepts” in social theory. It is in the context of this third type of research that he advocates the use of sensitizing concepts. Blumer pits them against definitive concepts which refer “precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks” (1954, p. 7). Sensitizing concepts equip “the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.” As has been noted above, sensitizing concepts are not just the domain of grounded theory but are actively used in qualitative inquiry, also. By extension of their comparison with definitive concepts, they are discussed in quantitative studies, too. A few studies in the following lines illuminate how sensitizing concepts are viewed in qualitative research.

Literature on sensitizing concepts as used in qualitative research points to its widespread (but somewhat unacknowledged) presence as affirmed by researchers and theorists (van den Hoonoar, 2008, pp. 813–814; Flick et al., 2004, p.9). They are labeled as a heuristic device (Stebbins, 2008, p. 221; Swedberg, 2012, p. 22; Ciprani, 2012, p. 51) or as “guiding principles” (Böhm, 2004, p. 270), pointing to their place in qualitative inquiry. Gilgun (2002) notes that “[r] esearch usually begins with such concepts, whether researchers state this or not and whether they are aware of them or not” (p. 4). A researcher cannot cleanse himself of his disciplinary perspectives as he enters a research site. Therefore, it is more productive to deal with them upfront rather than pretending that they are not there. Parenthetically, Stebbins (2008, p. 221) advocates their utility in deductive (mostly quantitative) research expanding the scope of sensitizing concepts which are normally used in qualitative inquiry.

Some theorists have equated sensitizing concepts with in vivo codes. These are the type of codes that are based on participants’ verbatim (or close to) language. Spencer et al. (2012, p. 218–219) make the connection in the following way: some concepts may be known as in vivo codes which are “rather loosely defined and mundane possibly using participants’ own terms, or what Blumer termed sensitizing concepts.” Ciprani (2012, p. 51), too, makes the linguistic aspect of sensitizing explicit by calling them as “common sense language and knowledge.” For van den Hoonoar, the concepts are “derived from the research participants’ perspective, using their language or expressions” (2008, p. 813). Sensitizing concepts viewed as in vivo codes is one way of extending their methodological and epistemological potential in qualitative practice.

It is clear from the above exposition that Blumer advocates the use of sensitizing knowledge for a specific type of social theory—the empirical type and discounts the interpretative type and the theoretical analysis. The interpretative type requires a “meaning clarification” in order to understand the human society better and there is no need for “scientific propositions” as formed in empirical science, whereas the theoretical analysis (or policy type) involves an analysis of a structure/policy. The examples he gives here are important as they refer to the critical element: a communist strategy or a racial practice. None of the two types is dependent on concept formation which is the hallmark of empirical science. Blumer clearly does not include critical studies that can benefit from sensitizing concepts. He does not include those studies that seek to develop an understanding about the society, either. The way Blumer defines social theory needs to be assessed by comparing it with Harrington’s (2005, p.1) definition: “Social theory can be defined as the scientific study of thinking about social life.” Clarifying what he means by scientific, Blumer writes that it is the application of “a method or methods to the study of something and to follow these methods consistently and transparently” (1954, p.5). For Harrington (2005, p.13), social theory does not just provide researchers the means to explain social phenomenon, but enables them to “think critically about the conditions of possibility of scientific constructs.”

Critical Grounded Theory and Blumerian Sensitizing Concepts

This section analyses two important aspects of critical grounded theory: the use of sensitizing knowledge and the potential of GTM to study social justice issues pertaining to domination and social inequalities. Gregory Hadley (2015; 2017) and Barry Gibson (2007) are the other two theorists other than the originators, Glaser and Strauss, that feature in this section. The views of both Hadley and Gibson are juxtaposed alongside Charmaz’s as the latter is the most notable campaigner, and among the earliest advocates of using the grounded theory platform for a critical inquiry into social inequalities. Hadley and Gibson form an important voice in the contemporary GTM circles. Here, they are referred to for how they advocate the use of sensitizing concepts in studies generating critical grounded theories. What unites Hadley and Gibson with Glaser and Strauss, is that they all subscribe to the Blumerian view of sensitizing concepts.

In the seminal work (1967) on GTM that Glaser and Strauss share, they refer to Blumer’s version of sensitizing concepts in a footnote on page 39. Metaphorically, a footnote is something that is of relatively less importance, but here it seems that the duo does not want to contest Blumer’s description or classification. Writing in the context of hypotheses formation, the two point out that a researcher may start in “a confused state of noting almost everything he sees because it all seems significant,” or he may start “with a more defined purpose” (p. 39). The latter citation seems to entertain the possibility of having prior knowledge on the part of a researcher which he might think feasible to apply. Glaser and Strauss do not seem to make it binding for a researcher to apply his prior knowledge onto data analysis, at least in the earlier stages.
Both Glaser and Strauss, in their separate works, dwell on using sensitizing concepts. In one work of his, Glaser (2005, para 13) argues from the point of view of symbolic interaction, a default approach for many GT studies: “SI (Symbolic Interaction) perspective people can use it as a sensitizing perspective” to enter a research site. He, however, cautions that SI researchers should not claim that this is the only way to approach data in the grounded theory methodology. Corbin and Strauss (2014, p. 59) though do not use the term “sensitizing concepts,” refer to the importance of entering the research site without an “empty mind” and instead, advocate making use of previous knowledge “for the purpose of sensitizing the researcher” to possible leads and directions in the data.

Gibson (2007) and Hadley (2017) broadly concur with the views expressed above. No concept should be forced into analysis. Though Gibson does not explicitly mention the mental state of a researcher as he enters a research site, it can be inferred that he acknowledges that a researcher is not a tabula rasa and that he should test his concepts with data (Gibson, 2007, p.439). For Hadley, all sensitizing knowledge must earn its way into analysis or should be dropped: “If the perspective fits, use it. Otherwise, keep looking. Other problems and processes are equally pressing, and a grounded theorist should try to be open to as many different perspectives as possible” (Hadley, 2017, p.57).

While Gibson and Hadley posit about the need for grounded theory to cover social justice issues, Glaser and Strauss are silent. The silence, however, does not seem to indicate their disapproval. The following quotation from their seminal work shows that the grounded theory methodology was not meant to remain limited for one kind of research: “Grounded theory can help to forestall the opportunistic use of theories that have a dubious fit and working capacity” (1967, p. 4).

Hadley (2015; 2017) strongly advocates employing grounded theory assumptions to work in areas of social justice. He offers unambiguous advice in this context: “Critical grounded theorists should be allowed to give a voice to the voiceless, but only in a manner that is reflexively critical both of themselves and of their informants” (p. 57, 2017). He cautions the misreading of the data on account of it being qualitative. An interpretation and conceptualization of the data must take the perspectives of “both the powerful and powerless” as “it is possible to see how ‘exploiter’ and ‘exploited’ may share certain similarities. Social processes of ‘victims’ may be oppressive to others, and such issues cannot be ignored if they emerge during data collection.” Hadley is perhaps the first grounded theorist (or the only one so far) to articulate the above in the way that he does. He does not give a clean chit to “victims” and wants their stances assessed also.

Charmaz (2019) does not mention giving a voice to the apparently aggressor side but when she argues for an in-depth analysis, it can be safely assumed that Charmaz is pointing to the same issue. She, however, cautions a researcher to be aware of their “parochialism” (p. 2) as there might be certain angles or issues that a researcher comes to know only after entering the research site and interacting with the data.

As mentioned above, Gibson concurs with both Hadley (2015; 2017) and Charmaz by supporting the critical grounded theory as a valid and much needed project for studying processes and practices which lead to injustices. Gibson warns against forcing data against emergence. He points out that certain “values can lead to a bias in favoring certain codes” (2007, p. 439) which can be addressed through reflexive practices on the part of a researcher. Charmaz (2019, p. 9), too, puts premium on self-reflexivity as it can aid a researcher in producing sound analyses rather than erroneously subjective ones.

This section has contextualized sensitizing concepts first in the qualitative paradigm and then in critical grounded theory. The frame of reference is Blumer’s definition of sensitizing concepts. The next section introduces Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory and embeds it within Charmaz’s views on sensitizing concepts and the Blumer-Bulmer distinction.

Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory: A Blumer versus Bulmer Distinction

The title of the current paper consists of a compound adjective constructivist-critical modifying the term grounded theory methodology. Hadley (2015, pp. 10–11, 2017, p. 55) uses the term critical grounded theory (non-italic henceforth) for a kind of grounded theory that uses critical social theory in its conceptualization process. The reason the word “critical” is trailing in my title, is the importance this study assigns to the Charmizian constructivist approach when making a critical analysis; this critical grounded theory is constructivist as it uses the constructivist approach of Charmaz. Hadley’s (2017, p. 53; 2021, private correspondence) critical grounded theory, the source of inspiration for the title, is compatible with all variants of GTM, be it Glaserian (classicist), Straussian, constructivist or any other.

Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory reimagines Charmaz’s use of sensitizing concepts. For this, an elaboration of Charmaz as a practitioner of sensitizing concepts is done; her “engagement in critical inquiry and commitment to social justice” (2019, p.6) is in order. Charmaz (2006, p. 16) defines sensitizing concepts as “initial ideas to pursue” which prompt a researcher to “ask particular kinds of questions” about the topic. Another term used for the same is “disciplinary perspectives” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11). Kathy Charmaz (2008) in her article on symbolic interactionism (SI) declares her intention to revisit SI to find its potential for social justice. There are three things that she aims to focus on: getting a first-hand knowledge about the research site, thoughtfulness towards participants and using sensitizing concepts. In her opinion, sensitizing concepts can provide a direction yet leave open space for new possibilities. Charmaz (2008) addresses questions regarding the equation between a researcher’s prior
knowledge and the data (or “the empirical world”) collected. “Sensitizing concepts may guide but do not commandeer inquiry. Simply using sensitizing concepts as possible guides subject to change would help us to take a fresh look at the empirical world” (2008, p.54); a researcher parts with pre-conceived notions. There is, of course, not a necessity to do so if the data do not demand.

The citations above seem to suggest that Charmaz subscribes to the Blumerian version. In another article, Charmaz (2005) dwells on developing grounded theory for social justice inquiry in the 21st century. Pitting her constructionist approach against Glaser’s objectivist, she contends that in order “[t]o develop a grounded theory for the 21st century that also advances social justice inquiry, we must build upon its constructionist elements rather than objectivist leanings” (2005, p. 514). While comparing social justice researchers with grounded theorists, Charmaz makes an interesting comment: “Social justice researchers are likely to understand their starting assumptions; others may not-including grounded theorists” (2005, p. 518). There are two things that are of importance here. One that she places the social justice researchers on a higher pedestal. Two, this comment also advises grounded theorists not to enter the research site apoletically. She is not asking them to “paste” (2005, p. 515) critical concepts like “hegemony and domination” but to “treat them as sensitizing concepts-to explore in the field settings”; in another article (2019, p.3) where she exhorts the “constructivist grounded theorists to make their sensitizing concepts and perspectives explicit,” it is ambiguous as to how exactly Charmaz wants her researchers to use sensitizing concepts. The point to notice here is that she admits that social justice researchers understand their assumptions better than grounded theorists. The former may not even acknowledge that they start their entry with sensitizing knowledge. She does not follow up this comment anywhere else which could have given a clue as to what she means here.

An effort was made to mine for more research studies that could throw light on Charmaz’s (2005) comparison between grounded theorists and social justice researchers. Only one study was found that adequately reflected what Charmaz is pointing to in her comparison-which in turn is of significance to Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory. Flemmen (2017, p. 84) working in intersectionality, calls sensitizing concepts a “tool of sociology” to facilitate a position in which a researcher can perceive something new. It allows empirical researchers to start with a concept to provide direction and to develop theoretical/analytical tools in close dialogue with data. She advises researchers to keep changing their sensitizing concepts as it helps “sense new relations, perspectives and worldviews.” When Flemmen notes that sensitizing concepts act as “heuristic devices,” her views are broadly in consonance with those of other qualitative researchers as expressed above also (Stebbins, 2008, p. 221; Swedberg, 2012, p. 22; Ciprani, 2012, p. 51).

Taking a Bulmerian (1979) line rather than Blumerian, Flemmen argues that a concept like intersectionality is not something that can be picked from participants. The gravity of the notion is such it needs to brought intentionally to the analysis: “The concept of intersectionality was a theoretically inspired concept that we chose to bring with us into our study, not a lay concept introduced by the study’s informants” (2017, p.89). She clearly fashions her version of sensitizing concepts after Bulmer than Blumer (Bulmer, as cited in Flemmen). Bulmer (1979, pp. 668–670) provides 10 ways that can help in concept formation as Blumer does not give a clear-cut path of the same; it must be noted that Bulmer is not in broad disagreement with Blumer. He sums them as “general sociological, orientation of the researcher, the richness of existing literature, and the nature of the phenomena being studied” (p.671).

Flemmen (2017, p.89) prefers Bulmer over Blumer when it comes to sensitizing concepts. It seems that Charmaz (2005, p. 518) alludes to the same when she acknowledges that a social justice researcher has a better understanding of her/his starting assumptions as compared to a grounded theorist. The current study done to explicate the contours of sensitizing concepts in Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory, concurs with Flemmen (2017) only to the extent that researchers working in critical areas should not wait for participants (or the documents in case of archival research) to point them to a certain sensitizing concept; a person working in critical inquiry cannot hop from one concept to another. Starting a critical inquiry is different from an acritical inquiry in the sense that a researcher in the latter is clear about the purpose of her/his work.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper honors the legacy of Kathy Charmaz by explicating her use of sensitizing knowledge in order to generate critical grounded theories. This insight is used as a spring-board situate the same in Constructivist-Critical Grounded Theory—a variant of Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory. The argument starts with Blumer (1954), the father of sensitizing concepts and ends with Bulmer (1979). An effort is made to show that Blumer’s definition needs some revisiting when used for critical inquiry as he mainly refers to social theory which can be assumed to have acritical aspirations.

**Suggested Directions for Future Research**

The current study provides a few directions for further exploration of the different dimensions of the argument presented here. It remains a question, given Glaser’s exhortation to challenge extant theory, as to how he would respond to the use of sensitizing concepts in a grounded theory adopting a critical stance. Blumer’s (1954) tripartite division of social theory and what qualifies as empirical science can also form
the argument of another study. A more nuanced reading of Bulmer (1979) for critical grounded theory can be done to advance the argument presented in this article.

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ORCID iD
Shehr Bano Zaidi  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9886-3573

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