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INVESTIGATING HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE LEADERSHIP PRACTICE – AN ARGUMENT FOR USING GROUNDED THEORY

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Abstract. *The study of course leadership in higher education focusses on an understudied area of research, with a limited number of publications discussing the role of the course leader in higher education, and a distinct lack of research on how course leaders in higher education undertake their professional practice. This lack of a pre-existing theory points the researcher towards grounded theory to investigate and generate a new theory on course leaders' experiences. Since leadership, and therefore course leadership, is an inherent complex social process, selection of grounded theory as a research methodology to explain how course leaders in higher education practice seems a logical choice. Grounded theory has been successfully used to investigate phenomena in education and in leadership practice in other disciplines. We therefore argue that grounded theory is an appropriate selection for research in education and higher education settings for areas of research where no theory currently exists. Moreover, grounded theories focussing on professional practice have been published in various contexts demonstrating that it is an appropriate method for investigating course leaders' professional practice. Finally, this paper outlines some perceived weaknesses of using a grounded theory approach for researching course leadership, and offers means to navigate these.*

Keywords: *Grounded Theory; Higher Education; Course Leadership; Staff Development; Methodology*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the use of grounded theory methodology to investigate how course leaders in small-specialist higher education institutions practice. It does this by first touching on the history of Glaserian (also known as classic) grounded theory, followed by a critical appraisal of classic grounded theory and its assumptions and practices. It then moves on to discuss measures of establishing and enhancing quality in classic grounded theory and subsequently presents a justification for the selection of classic grounded theory as an appropriate methodology to investigate the practice of course leaders in small-specialist higher education institutions. Finally, the paper discusses some potential shortcomings of using classic grounded theory, and offers solutions to these shortcomings.

2. WHY GROUNDED THEORY?

Course leadership is an understudied area of research, with few publications discussing the role of the course leader in higher education (van Veggel & Howlett, 2018). and a distinct lack of research on how course leaders in higher education approach their professional practice. As grounded theory is a research method that aims to explain basic social processes through generation of theory, this under-exploration of the phenomenon of course leadership practice by course leaders points the researcher towards the use of grounded theory methodology (GTM) to investigate and generate an explanatory theory on course leader practice (Ahmed & Haag, 2016; Engward, 2013; Jones & Alony, 2011).

Since leadership, and therefore course leadership, is an inherent social process (Parry, 1998), selection of GTM as a research methodology seems a logical choice. Indeed, Parry (1998), Toor and Ofori (2008) and Evans (2013) argue that grounded theory is appropriate for leadership research, and Levers (2013) poses that social processes are the main topics of interest for grounded theory research. As course leaders are cogs in the organisational machine that is the higher education institution, the selection of grounded theory to investigate course leadership aligns with Lakshman (2007), who utilised grounded theory to investigate organisational leadership.

Similarly, grounded theory has been successfully used to investigate phenomena in education. Various authors (Chong & Yeo, 2015; e.g. Kennedy & Lingard, 2006; Kolb, 2012) discuss the use of grounded theory for educational research, whereas Malik, McKenna and Griffiths (2017) investigated higher education teaching and learning practice, and Miller et al. (2017) discussed the professional practice of academic librarians. Grounded theory therefore is an appropriate selection for research in education and higher education settings for areas of research where no theory currently exists. Moreover, grounded theories regarding experiences and perceptions of professional practice have been published in various contexts (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Bhandari et al., 2003; e.g. Dubouloz et al., 1999; Gordon et al., 2009; Masso et al., 2014) demonstrating that it is an appropriate methods for investigating course leaders' professional practice. Finally, after discussing how and why Grounded Theory Methodology is appropriate for the research project presented in this paper, it is imperative to recognise the importance of the research methodology fitting the researcher (Evans, 2013; Walsham, 2006).

3. CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory is a methodology for inductive theory generation first proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the early 1960s. Against a prevailing positivist research culture where qualitative research was deemed of lesser value (Kenny & Fourie, 2014), Glaser and Strauss criticised the emphasis on verifying theories, rather than generating them (Glaser &

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Strauss, 1967). They argued that theory which arises from qualitative research without existing preconceptions would be “more successful than theories logically deduced from *a priori* assumptions” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6).

As grounded theory further developed, Glaser and Strauss’ paths diverged both professionally and methodologically. Strauss engaged in a partnership with Juliet Corbin and together these authors altered the original grounded theory method. With the publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) this methodological divergence was formalised. Glaser heavily criticised the modifications made by Strauss and Corbin (Glaser, 1992, p. 2) and considered himself the defender of the original, correct, grounded theory methodology. This methodological split led to the development of new terminology for the different grounded theory methods: Glaser’s original method became known as *classic* or *Glaserian grounded theory*, whereas Strauss and Corbin’s method became known as *Straussian grounded theory*. Over time, various other forms of grounded theory have been developed, particularly constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (2014), but also feminist grounded theory and various others (Engward, 2013; Levers, 2013). The differences between the various grounded theory approaches are philosophical in nature, and the language and terminology used in the various stages of a grounded theory approach is different

Table 1). However, the one thing all grounded theory approaches have in common is that they aim to produce a theory that explains a social process.

Glaserian grounded theory relies on theory emerging from data which explains a social process. It is an inductive approach to research where rather than starting research with a theory or from a theoretical perspective, the researcher starts without preconceptions in order to generate a theory that explains a social process (Engward, 2013). Grounded theory research therefore generates hypotheses and theories about people’s experiences, rather than testing and validating existing theories (Evans, 2013). As a result, it is a useful methodology to employ in areas of research where very little is known (Chong & Yeo, 2015; Engward, 2013; Evans, 2013). Glaserian grounded theory is a systematic, rigorous means of gathering and analysing data. Its central tenet is that the research should explore social situations through people’s experiences. In Glaserian grounded theory the researcher is considered a neutral observer who discovers data in an objective way, with an open and impartial mind (Glaser, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Contrastingly, Strauss and Corbin allow the researched to be an actively engaged party in the research, whereas in constructivist grounded theory the researcher is understood to be co-constructing data with their participants.

Table 1: Comparison of key features of the three main grounded theory approaches.
Adapted from Sebastian (2019)

Grounded theory approach	Glaserian Grounded Theory	Straussian Grounded Theory	Constructivist Grounded Theory
Philosophical roots	None (although later researchers placed this in post-positivism/critical realism)	Interpretivism	Constructivism
Researcher	Distant, detached, neutral observer	Engaged, actively interprets	Co-constructs with participant
<i>A priori</i> knowledge	Initially not allowed, although later recognised that the researcher is not a <i>tabula rasa</i> .	Can be used to strengthen the overall research, termed <i>sensitivity</i> and demonstrates insight into issues relevant to	Cannot be escaped, must be examined and understood.

		the research.	
Literature review	Done after data analysis	Done prior to and during data collection process, used to enhance sensitivity.	No prescribed location.
Research question	None or only vague. Questions arise during analysis.	Partially vague, but clarified during research	Influences data collection method, can be altered if needed
Coding and analysis	Substantive coding Theoretical coding Focus on patterns in data. Includes <i>constant comparison</i> and use of <i>core category</i> . Theoretical codes merge into <i>substantive theory</i>	Open coding Axial coding Selective coding Allows for single occurrences in the data to be analysed for significance. Includes <i>constant comparison</i> and use of <i>core category</i>	Code everything Group all data around the most predominant codes (includes <i>focused coding</i>) Flexible guidelines rather than strict rules. Allows more than one <i>core category</i>
Theory development and verification	Distinction between theory generation and theory verification. Development of <i>substantive</i> or <i>formal theory</i> is the endpoint of a study. Verification to occur afterwards by means of quantitative study.	Development of <i>substantive</i> or <i>formal theory</i> is the endpoint of a study. Verification to occur afterwards by means through multiple perspectives confirming data.	Constructed theory is an interpretation rather than exact representation. The generated theory is dependent of researcher's position and cannot exist without this.
Final product	Theory grounded in data which explains a social phenomenon		

Philosophically, Glaserian grounded theory is a slightly odd beast. One of the main criticisms of the methods is that it suffers from internal misalignment because it stems from a positivist and objectivist approach whilst using interpretivist and constructionist tools (Bryant, 2002; Jones & Alony, 2011; Kenny & Fourie, 2014). These authors' interpretations are similar to Charmaz (2000) who, based on Glaser's arguments for data emerging without the researcher doing anything (Glaser, 2002), argues that classic grounded theory is positivist by nature because it assumes an objective reality and a neutral observer.

By contrast, not all researchers agree with the above mentioned critiques: Urquhart (2002), Hallberg (2006), Moore (2009) and Levers (2013) all attribute a critical realist ontology to classic grounded theory whilst retaining the objectivist epistemology, thereby placing classic grounded theory in the post-positivist paradigm. However, it is important to note that Glaser vigorously argued that grounded theory is a research method separate from philosophical constraints (Hallberg, 2006; Urquhart, 2002) and that it is intended as an alternative to all paradigms (Glaser, 2005). Specifically, he describes grounded theory as a "general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (Glaser, 1992, p. 16). Glaser's arguments for classic grounded theory to be epistemologically and ontologically neutral have been described as naïve, non-committal and an "epistemological fairy tale" (Bryant, 2009, p. 6), but Holton (2009) deflected this criticism by arguing that classic grounded theory as a general methodology can adopt whichever philosophical perspective is appropriate to the research and the researcher. Indeed, this philosophical flexibility is demonstrated by the sustained successful use of the grounded theory method by post-positivist, interpretivist and constructivist researchers alike over many decades

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since Glaser and Strauss first developed grounded theory. After all, the end-product of any grounded theory approach is a theory grounded in data that explains a social phenomenon.

On a more practical level, one of the main features that sets classic grounded theory apart from other qualitative methodologies and methods of inquiry is the use of the constant comparison of data. Constant comparison means that data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously: Data is collected and coded, after which new data is collected and coded, and these codes are compared to the previous codes to find patterns. Codes are then compared to emerging categories (which are groups of codes), and categories to categories. Finally, the emerging theory is compared to the literature (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Holton, 2010). Throughout the research process the researcher produces memos, which become an integral part of the research in the latter stages (Engward, 2013). Memos allow the researcher to reflect on their decision-making and on findings, and help develop ideas and codes (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). Eventually, a substantive theory will emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Substantive theories, as opposed to formal theories, are local, narrow and limited in nature and seek to explain only the situation under investigation. Formal theories are all-inclusive broader applications consisting of multiple substantive theories (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). The end-product of the doctoral research project presented in this paper will therefore more likely be a substantive theory rather than a formal theory (Gasson, 2004). However, this substantive theory will undoubtedly lay the foundations for further research, as is common for grounded theory research more generally.

One of the key methodological features in grounded theory is coding of data in multiple concurrent stages. Coding in grounded theory has multiple stages. One of the distinguishing features between the various forms of grounded theory is the differentiation of the coding stages. A critical and comprehensive comparison of the coding stages in the various forms of grounded theory is outside of the scope of this paper, but can be found in Kenny and Fourie (2015). For the purpose of this paper, a brief summary can be found in

Table 1. As mentioned previously, the differences are mostly based on differences in terminology: all GTM versions use multiple coding stages, where initially codes are more broad and free, and as the research progresses become more conceptual and start working towards synthesis. Finally, the extant literature is integrated.

Although there are some minor discrepancies in the literature as to the exact division of the number of coding stages in classic grounded theory (see Figure 1), the majority of literature describes three stages: open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding (Chametzky, 2016; Engward, 2013; Glaser, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holton, 2010; Jones & Alony, 2011; Kenny & Fourie, 2015). During the open coding stage, data is analysed line-by-line, and a key word is attributed to each incident. Through constant comparison, these codes are then grouped into conceptual categories after which constant comparison will result in the emergence of a core category. The emergence of the core category will allow the researcher to progress to the selective coding stage. The researcher now reduces their focus to the core category and refines the interview questions to reflect this focus. This process, called theoretical sampling, will facilitate the integration of categories into higher-level substantive concepts. At this point, the researcher engages in theoretical sampling, where the analysis of the substantive concepts will highlight relationships between them, allowing for a theory explaining the basic social process to emerge. Glaser (1992) points out that at this stage the literature should be consulted to facilitate emergence.**

** Part of this report builds on Open Access teaching material (<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19372277.v1>). Anglia Ruskin University and the authors confirm there are no objections to this use.

At its core, Grounded Theory is about generating theory from data, rather than testing existing theories. This approach is highly beneficial in the context of higher education leadership for several reasons. It allows for the discovery of new insights into leadership styles, strategies, and challenges specific to the higher education sector.

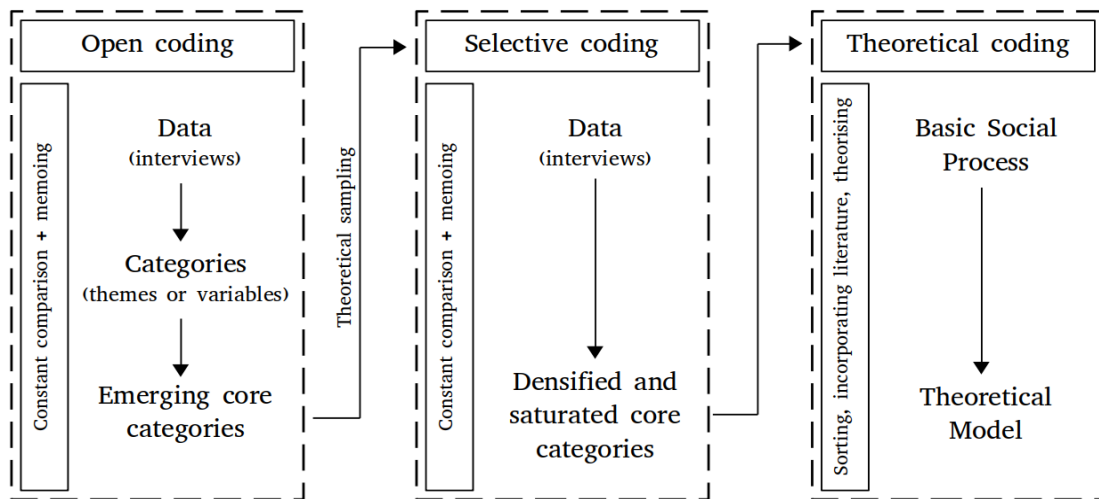


Figure 1: The coding process in classic grounded theory (Jones & Alony, 2011)

Unlike other sectors, higher education has its unique set of complexities, including diverse stakeholder groups (students, faculty, staff, government, and the public), academic freedom, and shared governance structures. Grounded Theory's inductive approach helps in uncovering these nuances.

Furthermore, the iterative nature of Grounded Theory—where data collection and analysis occur simultaneously—enables researchers to delve deeper into the subject matter. This is particularly valuable in understanding leadership in higher education, as it evolves over time and is influenced by various internal and external factors (Hassan et al., 2018). For instance, changes in government policy, student demographics (Eich, 2008), and technological advancements continually shape leadership practices in universities and colleges. Moreover, Grounded Theory's emphasis on the perspectives of participants aligns well with the collaborative and inclusive ethos often advocated in educational leadership (Yokuş, 2022). By engaging directly with leaders, faculty, and other stakeholders in the education sector, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of leadership phenomena. This includes the exploration of effective leadership practices, challenges faced by leaders, and the impact of leadership on institutional outcomes such as student success, research excellence, and community engagement.

4. MEASURES OF QUALITY IN CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY

As with all research, grounded theory research needs to be evaluated for its quality in order to establish its contribution to the wider area under review. It is inappropriate to judge qualitative research by quantitative standards. Rather, it should be judged by its degree of trustworthiness and rigour (Gasson, 2004). Although trustworthiness and rigour are not identical (one could argue that the rigour of a study determines the trustworthiness of its findings), a distinct overlap between these concepts exists.

Trustworthiness is described by Bowen (2009) as the conceptual soundness which allows the evaluation of the value of qualitative research and is determined by four factors: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Brown et al., 2002). Credibility refers to how much the data collected accurately reflects the phenomenon (Beck, 1993), how much confidence one

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can have in the truth of the findings (Bowen, 2009) and whether participants recognise the outcome of a study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, as classic grounded theory does not aim to represent participants' practice and experiences, but rather generates an abstract representation that explains them (Cooney, 2011) credibility in grounded theory can also be shown when other researchers and practitioners can recognise the situation from reading the study and whether the theory explains the situation. Furthermore, changes that are made during a grounded theory study show that the methodology was applied correctly, which evidences credibility. After all, the constant comparative methods specifically asks for changes during the study as and when new data becomes available (Hallberg, 2006).

Chiovitti and Piran (2003) argue that the researcher's assumptions, understandings and interpretations should be clearly described and their effect on the research recognised to enhance credibility. Credibility therefore can be enhanced through reflexive practice, which is also discussed by Hall and Callery (2001) who argue that sufficient detail of data collection and a reflexive discussion of the research process enable readers to judge the quality of the research. Contrastingly, Glaser (1992) highlights the emergent nature of grounded theory, but only hinted towards including reflexivity in the constant comparison process as a method of enhancing the quality of a grounded theory study. Transferability indicates to which degree a theory is applicable to another setting or context (Gasson, 2004; Sikolia et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers cannot make the same claims to generalisability as positivist researchers due to the interpretive nature of qualitative research, but transferability of a theory can be demonstrated by identifying similarities or differences in the situation onto which it is projected (Gasson, 2004) or by identifying that findings have meaning to people in similar contexts (Cooney, 2011). Brown et al. (2002) write that dependability is the confirmation that the data represents the changing conditions of the situation being researched. Morrow (2005) adds to this that the data should be considered across time, researchers and analysis. Dependability can be established via an audit trail (Bowen, 2009; Sikolia et al., 2013) through systematically recording and presenting information about the coding process. Confirmability is established when another researcher can confirm the research findings if they are presented with the same set of data (Sikolia et al., 2013).

The trustworthiness of qualitative research, and therefore grounded theory, also depends on the rigour applied by the researcher. Cooney (2011) proposes that rigour can be conceptualised in three broad ways: methodological rigour, interpretive rigour or a combined focus. Although methodological rigour is concerned with best research practice, and interpretive rigour focuses on the trustworthiness of the interpretations made, it is hard to argue one is more important than the other. Therefore, the combined focus proposed by Cooney (2011) seems most appropriate.

Various works suggest criteria for determining rigour in grounded theory research: Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasised two criteria for determining the quality of an emerging theory: that it fits the situation and that it works. Glaser (1978, 1992) suggests fit, work, relevance, modifiability, parsimony and scope, and Gasson (2004) presents four interpretive criteria for rigour in grounded theory research: confirmability, dependability/auditability, authenticity and transferability. Charmaz (2014) poses that quality of a grounded theory study is based on credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness, and Birks and Mills (2015) argue that the quality of a grounded theory study is determined by researcher expertise, methodological congruence and procedural precision.

Cooney (2011), using Beck (1993) as a foundation, argues that rigour in grounded theory is demonstrated through three criteria: credibility, auditability and fittingness. Gasson (2004) further argues that the concepts of credibility and authenticity may be used to demonstrate internal consistency. Furthermore, Cooney (2011) argues that fittingness, which is concerned with demonstrating that outcomes have meaning to others in similar situations, could also be termed transferability. In addition, Glaser and Strauss (1967) pose that grounded theory must be applicable in daily situations and link fit with generality so that a theory is relevant to various

situations. This argument brings fittingness, transferability and fit on the same level. Therefore, following this argument, amalgamating the various proposed criteria into one framework of questions (see Table 2) to determine rigour for grounded theory seems appropriate, and presents my position on determining quality in grounded theory.

In order to enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of a grounded theory study, Bowen (2009) suggested the use of an audit trial. Audit trials involve the systematic documentation of data gathered and decisions made. Audit trials allow for a grounded theory to be verified independently to the researcher so that the rigour of the process can be evaluated. Although the creation of an audit trial sounds like an additional task to the grounded theory process, in practice most if not all of the requirements for an audit trial are met by the memos which are an integral part of the method. Additionally, by making sure memos contain rich description, an extra dimension to rigour can be established.

Table 2: Questions about rigour that can be used to establish trustworthiness of a grounded theory through trustworthiness criteria.

Criterion	Question
Fit/transferability/modifiability	Does the theory explain the situation, can it be used elsewhere, and can it be adapted for future use?
Work/relevance	Does the theory help explain the situation to the people involved?
Credibility/authenticity	Does the data accurately reflect the situation?
Auditability	Can another researcher confirm the findings when presented with the same data?
Parsimony	Is the theory unnecessarily complicated?
Scope	Does the theory account for as much variation in the data as possible?

5. POTENTIAL SHORTCOMINGS IN USING GTM

Jones and Alony (2011) argue that grounded theory presents several risks when selected for doctorate research: firstly, there is the risk that no substantial or significant theory may be uncovered. Secondly, the nature of grounded theory may be misunderstood by other researchers and practitioners. However, from a more practical perspective, the third risk is the researcher's inexperience with the classic grounded theory method. The terminology used is different from all other qualitative methodologies, which can be a hurdle for novice researchers (Deady, 2011). Moreover, the general consensus appears to be that the best way to understand *doing* classic GTM is by doing it, rather than reading about it (Breckenridge, 2013; Chametzky, 2016; Deady, 2011; Gasson, 2004; Giske & Artinian, 2007; Glaser, 1998). Although in theory this sounds relatively straightforward, from the perspective of a doctoral researcher new to grounded theory the idea of only having a partial understanding is daunting. This becomes especially prevalent when trying to fit classic grounded theory into a doctoral programme where institutional processes require certain information in advance, such as a comprehensive literature review, a complete

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research design and a thorough ethical consideration (Ahmed & Haag, 2016; Xie, 2009). However, Glaser argued for the development of a “compromised” research approach (Glaser, 2014, p. 10) to meet the requirements of a standardised qualitative research proposal without disregarding the GTM principles. This position was also taken by Xie (2009) to meet institutional requirements for doctoral programmes. Finally, Glaser (1999) describes grounded theory as a total package that fits in the scheduled time of postgraduate research study. Although Thurlow (2020) disagrees with this position, they do encourage doctoral researchers to embrace the compromise required to undertake a grounded theory study within institution requirements for doctoral programmes.

Finally, one of the main criticisms of grounded theory methodology is linked to the emergence of a grounded theory, and with that the limited transparency around the influence of the researcher on the research and the researched and how the data came to be. The appropriateness of the term *emergence* is debated widely within the wider social circles of social sciences (see e.g. a Twitter discussion on emerging of themes in Thematic Analysis [here](#)), and consensus around it appears limited to the methodology level. Emergence refers to “an entity or phenomena that is more than the sum of its parts” (Levers, 2013, p. 4). As argued by De Haan (2006), emergence can be classified by considering the positionality of the observer in relation to the research (external or internal), and by the conjugate, which is the direction of influence between the observer and the observed (unidirectional or bidirectional). De Haan labels emergence as either discovery, mechanistic or reflective (see Table 3 for an outline of these labels) based on the combination of these two parameters. Following arguments by Levers (2013), the basis of the labels for emergence is similar to the basis of distinguishing research paradigms. For example, the post-positivist paradigm is linked to discovery emergence, as the researcher is external to the process and observes rather than creates, and perspectives come from participants only, rather than from participant and researcher. In both reflective emergence and the interpretivist paradigm, the observer and the observed are intimately linked because the researcher participates actively in the creation of knowledge (bidirectional conjugate) and is internal to the process.

Table 3: Typology of emergence (de Haan, 2006) and their relation with research paradigms (Levers, 2013)

Paradigm	Emergence	Observer	Conjugate
Postpositivist	Discovery	External	Unidirectional
Constructivist	Mechanistic	External	Bidirectional
Interpretivist	Reflective	Internal	Bidirectional

Based on the previous arguments by De Haan and Levers, those who challenge emergence in grounded theory research appear to have too narrow a view of emergence. In the context of this paper, it was through transparent practice and clear justification that patterns in the data were brought into existence by the researcher. These patterns describe and explain the issue under investigation. Ultimately then, emergence relates to the origin of patterns (codes and categories) in the data that ultimately lead to a substantive theory and is linked to credibility. Rather than focussing on the existence of emergence or the label that is put on how patterns are found, researchers should focus on the transparency and justification of decisions and choices made during the research process, because it is transparency and justification which allows the end-user of research to determine it’s worth and usefulness.

6. REFLEXIVITY IN A GROUNDED THEORY CONTEXT

Reflexivity has been described as the “analytical self-awareness of the researcher’s experiences, reasoning and overall impact throughout the research process” (Råheim et al., 2016). It is a process which identifies and acknowledges the beliefs, perceptions, biases, and constructs within a researcher that both consciously and unconsciously impact on the research process (Engward & Davis, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Bolton and Delderfield (2018) view reflexivity as a way of establishing congruence between the researcher’s behaviour and their conscious values. Attention is needed to examine why researchers make the choices they do and how their actions and interpretations connect with their social and cultural context. In stating the importance of introspective elements of reflexivity, Finlay (2002) highlights the value of a researcher becoming self-aware of their own passions and drivers, where they come from and how they potentially impact the research process. It should not stop there however, as Hibbert et al. (2019) particularly emphasise, for reflexivity to have meaning, it needs to impact on practice, as in what we do that is different in light of insights gained. If insights arise but no change in practice occurs, it must be questioned if there is any purpose in the exercise.

The concept and practice of reflexivity can be challenging because it involves turning critical thinking and appraisal towards the self. In essence, it is about making things that are unknown, known to us, which can prove difficult and personally troublesome, especially when we shake our unquestioned assumptions. The commonly used method of keeping a reflective diary, though useful, can only go so far, as identified by Barrett-Rodger: “I became aware my solitary reflections were skirting around the edges of my assumptions” (Barrett-Rodger et al., 2022, p. 7). For reflexivity to be useful, there is a need to dig deeper and demands a level of preparedness to explore our closely held values, and beliefs. One method to gain insight into these concealed influences is the presuppositional interview. An explanation of this novel tool for reflexive practice and its application to grounded theory methodology is outlined in a contribution by van Veggel (2023) to the recent new edition of the seminal grounded theory handbook by Birks and Mills, and is similar to the presuppositional interview used by Barrett-Rodger et al. (2022) in their hermeneutic phenomenological research. However, in brief a presuppositional interview is a structured conversation to discover and understand one’s unseen presumptions about oneself in relation to the research.

Undertaking a presuppositional interview provides a means of a researcher increasing insight into their individual axiological positions which in turn can overtly increase transparency within reflexive practice, and therefore enhance the quality of a GTM study. Such enhanced transparency leads to more robust research as it allows researchers to address inevitable presuppositions both through mitigation within research practice as required and by openness and illumination in praxis when mitigation is not possible. By providing a tool for questioning the axiological underpinnings of research practice, the presuppositional interview promotes the development of the reflexive researcher and propels them forward with a heightened awareness of their position in and influence upon the research process.

7. CONCLUSION

Grounded theory has been used in various areas strongly related to the current research area. It is the only methodology that aims to generate an explanatory theory instead of using a pre-existing one. As course leadership practice is an area with a very limited knowledge grounded theory is an appropriate methodology. Additionally, course leadership is a social process, therefore again confirming that grounded theory is an appropriate approach for research in this area. Grounded Theory’s flexibility is crucial for exploring the diverse and dynamic nature of leadership in higher

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education. Leadership styles and strategies may vary significantly across different institutions, cultures, and disciplines. Grounded Theory allows researchers to capture this diversity and complexity without being constrained by preconceived frameworks or theories. This means that the findings from Grounded Theory research can inform leadership development programs in higher education. Insights into effective leadership practices, challenges, and the impact of different leadership styles can be directly applied to training and development initiatives for current and aspiring leaders in the sector, including for those in a course leadership role.

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