

# To GT or Not to GT...What's a Girl to Do? A Look into Feminist Grounded Theory

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What is grounded theory really all about? Can using the constant comparative method qualify a study as being a grounded theory study? What is the difference between classical grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory? Is it wrong to identify a theoretical framework prior to the initiation of the study? Is it wrong to review literature prior to collecting and analyzing data when using a grounded theory approach? Is it appropriate to use other coding techniques in addition to open coding, axial coding, and selective coding? These and many other questions may trouble the novice grounded theorist during the design stage of her or his research study. For sure, grounded theory involves a different level of complexity because it is a systematic, but flexible process of collecting and analyzing data with the aim of generating new theory (Birks & Mills, 2012; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002). To add, a grounded theory approach is appropriate to use when exploring a phenomenon wherein little research has been done or little is known about the subjects or phenomenon (Birks & Mills, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative for the researcher to understand what grounded theory is, what grounded theory is not, and what grounded theory can be.

## Grounded Theory

Why is the understanding of grounded theory significant to the field of adult and continuing education? The field is anchored by theories such as Andragogy (Knowles, 1980); self-directed learning (Grow, 1991; Houle, 1961; Tough, 1967, 1971); and transformational learning (Mezirow, 1981). These seminal works are very important in exploring adult learning, adult development and adult education. This is not an attempt to discount their contributions to the field. However, these theories are all more than 20 years old and there have been drastic changes with regard to the demographics of adult learners, the sociopolitical influences of various educational contexts for adults, and evolution of epistemologies and theoretical frameworks. For example consider the following:

- these theorists are all White males whose explorations *may not* have included women and other minorities as participants in adult learning and education; and
- none of these theories took into account the advancement of technology and its affects on adult learning and education;

## Feminist Theory

In the seminal work of Hartmann (1984), patriarchy is defined as the “systemic dominance of men over women,” which derived from a “set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and among men that enable them to dominate women” (p. 197). Not only are men united as they share this relationship of dominance; they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination within this systemic structure. Hartmann further states that “patriarchy is not simply hierarchical organization by hierarchy in which particular people fill particular places” (p. 199). Ontologically and epistemologically, feminist standpoint theory acknowledges this system of dominance and refutes it by uncovering the power relations within

which men's lives and interests circumscribe, or attempt to circumscribe, those of women. "Feminism has been instrumental in exposing the gendered nature of social life..." in that feminist standpoints are an integral part of the individual and collective female epistemologies (Ford, 2011, p. 447).

### **Feminist Grounded Theory**

Wuest (1995) offers three specific epistemological underpinnings that illuminate the harmonizing of feminist theory and grounded theory. First, she considers the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism in that they "reflect an ingrained respect for persons' subjective interpretation of social experience as a source of knowledge...it is not inconsistent for women to be knowers and their experience to be a source of knowledge" (p. 128). Wuest continues to claim that grounded theory supports feminist epistemological underpinnings because participants, women as knowers, are experts about their experiences; therefore, their experiences are valid data. Another congruency of grounded theory and feminist theory is both theories share the characteristic that through social processes within social structures, they discover that the nature of reality is contextual and relational. Lastly, feminist theory parallels with grounded theory in that grounded theorists "accept responsibility for their interpretive roles" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 274), because "the researcher is a social being who also creates and recreates social processes" (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992, p. 1357).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Wuest (1995) tells us, "grounded theory was *not* developed to give women a voice or to facilitate the development of knowledge for women; however, the investigator through theory development interprets the perspectives and voices of the people studied" (p. 128). It is time for the field of adult education to build more theories that are more appropriate and applicable with respect to the diversity that exists in various current day adult educational settings. Moreover, it is problematic to explore the multiple experiences of women as adult learners, which often speak to hegemony and male domination to a degree, while using theories that may not have been developed for *her*, the female adult learner (Collins, 1998; Hayes, 2001; Merriam, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Sandlin, 2005; Tisdell, 1998). To that end, feminist grounded theory and other grounded theory approaches can be most appropriate in the efforts to theoretically advance the field of adult and continuing education.

# The Learning Healthcare System: How an Adult Education Lens Can Be Used to Inform a Paradigm Shift in US Healthcare Landscape

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**Keywords:** Healthcare, learning, patient engagement, communities of practice, andragogy

**Abstract:** Adult education researchers and practitioners have an unprecedented opportunity to inform and learn with the health care system as it embraces learning as a process to provide the best care at lower cost.

## Health Care Paradigm Shift

Contention about health care brought the United States government to a halt in 2013. Despite decades of gains in biomedical knowledge, improvements in prevention, diagnostics and treatment, and a daily explosion of clinical evidence, United States health care is characterized as being extraordinarily expensive and of marginal quality. Paradoxically, the volume of gains in medical knowledge has stressed the health care system to a near brink in part due to a lack of emphasis of incorporating learning into the health care system. Despite the fact that medical journal publications have increased, biomedical knowledge typically takes ten years to be adopted into professional guidelines and another decade to be implemented into clinical practice, (Institute of Medicine, 2012; Eddy, 2005). As such, the health care system is undergoing a paradigm shift that acknowledges shortcomings in the process of health care knowledge development, adoption as evidence, and translation into practice. As such, there is a clear, present, and compelling call for a paradigm shift in health care from one that prioritizes specialized knowledge to one that prioritizes connected and continuous learning.

### Learning Health Care System

The Institute of Medicine (2012) calls for a *learning health care system* that “links personal and population data to researchers and practitioners, dramatically enhancing the knowledge base on effectiveness of interventions and providing real-time guidance for superior care in treating and preventing illness. A health care system that gains from continuous learning is a system that can provide Americans with superior care at lower cost.” The system characteristics could be examined from an adult education lens but our questions for the roundtable relate to leadership-instilled culture of learning and engaged, activated patients.

### Integration of Adult Education Theory

A learning health care system could be stewarded by leadership committed to a culture of teamwork, collaboration, and adaptability in support of continuous learning as a core aim. The adult education lens of communities of practice, a sub-construct of situated learning theory, may offer insight to developing this core aim. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al. 2002). For the purpose of this conference session, we will explore the following questions.