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BOOK REVIEW

Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide

Melanie Birks and Jane Mills
Sage LA 2011.

Melanie Birks and Jane Mills are to be congratulated on compiling a book on grounded theory that reviews the field and provides excellent advice to the researcher. *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* provides the reader with an analysis and evaluation of approaches to grounded theory, over the decades, without getting stuck in the politics of one researcher's approach over another's. Qualitative research techniques, of which grounded theory is one, are often used as a means of engaging in research that seeks to drive social change. Birks and Mills provide a framework for researchers who wish to undertake research that follows a principled approach to making choices about important issues for researchers from diverse backgrounds and with varying levels of experience and or expertise.

As is often the case in qualitative research publications, the authors are academics in the health domain, both in Australian universities. They argue that there is a need for their book on grounded theory as they traverse the magnitude of publications in the field without complicating it further. In contrast, they clarify and simplify the domain, uncovering the general principles of grounded theory in the context of debate which is part of the tradition of qualitative research. The field is dominated by rivalries between different research paradigms, philosophical positions and methodological approaches. Birks and Mills manage to tread lightly around these sensitivities while providing the reader with guidance on how to understand grounded theory. The approach allows the reader to identify their own baseline position by reading about the perspectives on offer by other researchers on grounded theory over the decades.

The book is written for people seeking to undertake a study using grounded theory but who are finding the labyrinth of theories and approaches daunting and confusing. However, it is also valuable for those who are teaching qualitative research techniques to research students.

*Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* has a number of strengths, including the structure and the writing style. The book is split into ten chapters, with a glossary, references, index and appendices. Multiple levels of detail are provided by experts who have written the boxed case studies and examples from various disciplines, providing a examples and issues of a practical nature. This provides the book with a richness and completeness that further benefits the reader.

The book is well written, easy to understand and well set out. Each chapter begins with learning objectives and concludes with a summary, critical questions and leads to appendices that suggest that the reader pursue additional examples of grounded theory.
Each chapter also provides boxed activities, short case studies and questions at the end of each chapter, for personal reflection and additional learning. The authors have illustrated their key concepts with useful figures and tables. Additional contributors are profiled in appendix B. The additional contributors work in a variety of departments in universities, from hospitality and retailing to social work and education, in various locations around the world. The spread of contributors and disciplines is no doubt one of the aspects of the book that makes it relevant to readers of different disciplines. They contribute the boxed case studies and examples.

The references are excellent, providing a rich list of options for further reading. I particularly found useful the references on diversity, ethnicity and Indigenous qualitative research approaches. References are current, topical but nonetheless range widely over the field. In summary, Birks and Mills provide a balanced approach to understanding grounded theory that is useful to the beginning researcher as well as the experienced researcher.

While this brief overview might suggest that the book is a text book, it is not. It is firmly based on the authors own research in grounded theory. This gives the book authenticity and authority. It contributes to their depth of knowledge of grounded theory and to their ability to explain the various roads that it has taken over the years.

The collective expertise and insights from the authors and the other contributors give the book its air of completeness and depth. The authors are authorities in their field, which is evident in their bios but also in their approach to the discussions on grounded theory. The collective expertise ensures that the book demonstrates an analytic grasp of the topic that is diverse, detailed and demonstrably authoritative without being didactic. Issues are brought to life by clear writing and good editing, accompanied by black and white illustrations.

Overall, the book is a valuable addition to a researcher's book shelf. At 210 pages, it is a suitable length without being overwhelming for the reader. The international relevance of the book is reinforced by the examples from more than one discipline, figures, models and illustrations conveying aspects of grounded theory. The book concludes with a four page glossary and the ten page list of references, providing the reader with useful material up to the end.

The last chapter covers current debate in grounded theory, how the methods have evolved over 50 years, and potential frontiers for future theory development. Qualitative research itself is on far stronger foundations than was the case 50 years ago, with many articles and books covering what it is and how to engage in qualitative research. Grounded theory is one of those methods. Birks and Mills envisage readers at various stages in their research careers reading the book, and provide them with opportunities to position themselves in the agenda for social change, that is the underpinning of much grounded theory research.

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