



Grounded theory and its use in communication disorders research

Title	Grounded theory and its use in communication disorders research
Author(s)	Carroll, Clare;Harding, Deborah
Publication Date	2019
Publisher	J&R Press

Carroll, C. & Harding, D. (2019) Grounded Theory and its use in Communication Disorders Research. In Rena Lyons and Lindy McAllister (Eds) Qualitative Research in Communication Disorders, J&R Press, Guildford, pp. 119-140.

Chapter 6 Grounded Theory and its use in Communication Disorders Research

Clare Carroll and Deborah Harding

H1 Overview of Grounded Theory

We acknowledge that grounded theory (GT) is a complicated landscape. Therefore, this chapter aims to outline the current context for this methodology and the key sources of disagreement which readers might encounter in the wider qualitative research literature. GT research is research that facilitates theory building that is “faithful to and illuminates the area under study” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.24). GT has evolved over time and there is a lot of debate involving purist GT perspectives and evolved GT perspectives. Glaser and Strauss published their seminal book ‘The Discovery of Grounded Theory’ in 1967 which posited the idea that theory needs to be grounded in data. They developed the constant comparative method which later became known as the Grounded Theory Method. Since this first description (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a variety of perspectives have emerged in the research literature, building on the original ideas but also varying in important ways. A variety of versions of GT will be encountered in the research literature. The focus in this chapter is on the three versions which were most often described at the time of writing, although the reader will also undoubtedly encounter other iterations of GT. As you explore the GT literature you will encounter Classic GT (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Holton, 2004, 2005, 2007; Holton, 2007; Gibson & Hartman, 2014; Holton & Walsh, 2007), Straussian GT (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2008, 2014) most often, though Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005) and Critical Grounded Theory (Kempster & Parry, 2011) are further distinguishable versions of GT. Birks and Mills (2015) and Urquhart (2013) are useful texts that provide overviews and practical guidance. By the end of this

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chapter you will be able to differentiate between the frequently encountered GT versions and explain the terminology, concepts and methods in relation to each. We present the common ground and help you provide a critique as to why you would pick one version over another.

Urquhart (2013) states that the core features of GT are theory building, constant comparison and theoretical sampling. All versions of GT share these features and they all also adopt data saturation and memo writing. While the versions have common features, there are divergent perspectives about research philosophy, use of the literature and the approach to coding, as discussed later. Importantly all versions of GT have theory building at their core. Developing a theory can “provide the best comprehensive, coherent and simplest model ... to reveal the obvious, the implicit, the unrecognised and the unknown” (Morse, 1994, pp.25-26). Theory can be either substantive or formal. In GT, substantive theory is developed from a focus on a particular area whereas formal theory has wider explanatory power (Goulding, 2002). For the three most frequently encountered GT versions or traditions as noted by Kenny and Fourie (2015), a theoretical perspective in a focused substantive area is a precursor to the development of formal theory. In other words, a theory developed about supervision for allied health professionals as in Case study 1 will be substantive and could not be assumed to apply ‘formally’ to other healthcare professionals without further research. Currently the research literature defines related but distinct versions of GT. Urquhart (2013) acknowledged that Strauss and Corbin’s version of GT is very popular even though it is often criticized as being systematic with clear procedures for analysis, ‘forcing data’ rather than allowing the theory to be ‘discovered’ (Glaser, 1992). Glaser argued that by researchers reading literature and being aware of the contextual concepts allows the researcher to interpret the data and ‘force’ it. However, Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that their version of GT sets a clear context for readers and adds coherence to studies. Combinations of approaches are emerging in the

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literature e.g. Lindsay and Langevin (2017). Kenny and Fourie (2015) indicate that this is acceptable as long as the researcher knows why they are conducting the research in that particular way. Charmaz (2014) too would view GT as a flexible set of tools. There is agreement across versions that the quality of GT research lies in the research process (Birks & Mills, 2015). In terms of chronology, Charmaz's version of GT is now gaining credibility and more contemporary Classic GT publications, (Holton & Walsh 2017) have been published more recently.

H1 Common Ground in GT

The reader will find the common ground between GT versions referred to variously, including describing them as core terms/characteristics/principles of GT. Such features, common to all versions include: coding constant comparison, simultaneous data collection and data analysis, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, theoretical sensitivity and theoretical memos. In all GT versions data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. Data can be recorded by the researcher through the use of field notes, audio and/or video recordings and memos. During the data collection process all GT researchers write memos which are often referred to as the researcher's dialogue with the data (McCann & Clark, 2003). Birks and Mills (2015, p.178) go further stressing that memos are a "fundamental analytical process in grounded theory research that involves the recording of processes, thoughts, feelings, analytical insights, decisions and ideas in relation to the research project". Glaser (1978) first proposed the practice of writing theoretical memos and Urquhart (2013, p.194) stated that they are a "key tool for theorising". It is seen as a crucial method in GT to prompt "analysis of data and codes early in the research process" (Charmaz, 2014, p.162) to develop "conceptual connections between

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categories” (Holton, 2007, p.281). For all GT researchers sorting and writing of memos leads to writing further memos and it is this process that allows categories to emerge and integrate.

The researcher starts with the data and is guided by the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that GT is not a meaning-making exercise but one that is nondirective where the researcher must trust the data and trust in the emergence of patterns to form a theory. For the classic GT researcher, the starting point is the coding of field notes as there is no need for taping and transcribing of data (Holton, 2007). For other versions of GT initial open coding occurs with transcripts and field notes. In all GT versions the first step is initial open coding where the researcher fractures the data into small fragments looking for what is happening in the data. Coding is also where the researcher looks for patterns in the data and compares incidents in the data. This process is challenging for a novice researcher as there can be a lot of uncertainty particularly in relation to naming the codes. Throughout the process of coding and memoing, the underlying categories become clearer as do the patterns in the data. Identifying and naming the categories is the start of conceptualising the data. The different versions of GT use different terminology to describe their coding process which are highlighted in Table 6.1. Depending on which version you are using it is important to follow the coding framework set out by the key authors (key texts are highlighted in Table 6.3). For coding, the researcher focuses on patterns line by line, then names these patterns (codes). Next the researcher writes a memo(s) about these codes, which are reflections on decisions and assumptions, thereby helping the researcher to focus on conceptual labelling (i.e., name of a category). The researcher continues coding with previous codes in mind. The researcher can go back to previous coded data and review the codes. The researcher is coding and categorising and memoing to progress to more conceptual coding in the final stages of the coding process.

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Therefore, the process moves from raw data to memos back to data and on to conceptual/theoretical memos to progress towards developing a theory.

Constant comparison is also common to other qualitative approaches which involves comparing the data (e.g., from interviews with different participants) to seek out similarities and differences. However in GT, conceptualisation of codes is the key feature where the analysis becomes conceptual. The processes of theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation and theoretical sensitivity lead to this conceptual labelling. For theoretical sampling, the data provide the researcher with prompts about where to sample next which in turn advances his/her theoretical insights of the substantive area. Timonen, Foley and Conlon (2018) caution that theoretical sampling may not be possible due to practical restraints such as time but they stress that theoretical sampling is necessary in GT to build and expand on the analysis so that the relationships between the central concepts are explained in full. When this is the case theoretical saturation will occur as no new patterns in the data will emerge. Theoretical saturation is the point where no new insights emerge or when all the categories are well described in terms of properties and dimensions (Hersh & Armstrong, 2014). The GT process involves sampling literature to integrate into the developing theory. Integrating and sorting the relevant literature with theoretical memos is a mechanism to develop theoretical sensitivity and to identify the relationships between codes. The final GT is conceptual not descriptive and will lead the researcher to situate the emerging theory within current literature in due course.

H1 Contrasting Principles

As Kenny and Fourie (2015) illustrated the differentiating principles between Classic GT (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998), Straussian GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998), and Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2014) according to: 1. underlying

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philosophy; 2. use of literature; and 3. framework for coding. Table 6.1 below displays an overview of the differences between the three versions of GT and the following sections will help you to decipher and understand the similarities and differences in relation to these three principles.

Table 6.1 about here

H2 1. Philosophical Assumptions

Those new to GT will encounter debate about whether there is an ‘identifiable inherent philosophy’ to GT (Urquhart, 2013, p.59). However, in Chapter 1, McAllister and Lyons stress that when researchers are writing their study they need to make their ‘philosophical assumptions explicit’. They acknowledge that these assumptions about ontology and epistemology guide the researcher in their choice of methodology. Furthermore, it is these philosophical underpinnings to the research design that will dictate which GT version a researcher will follow. What this means in practice is that you as a researcher are confident about your own philosophical assumptions and then explore how this fits within GT. This explicitness is key to add coherence to your research design (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Without this explicitness readers can become confused as to which GT version is being used within a research study. When you explore the literature, you will encounter a variety of philosophical alignments with the GT tradition. GT is “the systematic generation of theory from data that has itself been systematically obtained” (Glaser, 1978, p.2). The underpinning assumptions of Glaser’s Classic GT is one where there is “some objective truth waiting to be discovered” (Urquhart, 2014, p.60). An exploratory approach in GT may be adopted irrespective of the researcher’s philosophical positioning. It may include qualitative and quantitative data, or both (Holton & Walsh 2017, p.xv). In Strauss and Corbin’s GT (1994, p.279) theories are viewed as “interpretations made from given perspectives”. This view sits within the post-positivist

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paradigm and takes a symbolic interactionist perspective and an interpretive perspective to meaning-making, traditions aligned to Mead (1934) and later Blumer (1969), in which people are regarded as constructing selves through societal realities and interactions. Charmaz (2014) on the other hand is very clear in her constructivist philosophical positioning, recognising that the researcher and the participants co-construct and mutually interpret the meaning of experiences.

H2 2. Use of Literature

H3 Classic GT (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998)

Following this approach to GT, the researcher does not engage with the literature until the end of the study. The researcher starts off a study without any preconceived ideas; ideas are only generated through data collection and analysis. The analysis is a process rather than a set of stages. It is all about 'discovery' of the theory. The process at this stage is inductive as the research should avoid reviewing and examining the literature before the fieldwork commences to avoid forming any prior assumptions and beliefs that unintentionally bias the researchers.

H3 Straussian GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

The fundamental conflict point between this tradition and Classic GT is the role of existing literature. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue researchers need some, not exhaustive nor thorough, knowledge of the literature about the topic or phenomenon in question in order to help the researcher in identifying relevant aspects and dimensions of their research and also in deriving desired questions to be used in their fieldwork. In contrast Glaser (2002) argues by engaging with the literature the researcher forces data into predefined assumptions and

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relationships (i.e., cause, context, consequences, condition) rather than allowing theories to be discovered.

H3 Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2014)

Charmaz would hold a similar view to Strauss and Corbin in relation to the use of the literature through all stages of the research process. She suggested that a specific literature review chapter should be written following the data analysis. New fields of literature will emerge through the data collection process. The researcher is guided to use the literature in a balanced way in order for the researcher to remain open and creative in the research process.

H2 3. Coding Framework

Each version of GT uses its own framework for coding. The ultimate goal of coding is to develop a theory. As previously outlined, coding is a process which happens during data collection. Coding also happens at the same time as more theoretical sampling occurs, as more data is collected and as memos are written. Table 6.2 aims to help demystify the coding differentiations which are encountered in the literature.

Table 6.2 about here

Gibson and Hartman (2014) suggest that researchers using GT should remain critically aware of how any version adopted departs from GT in its original form. Timonen, Foley and Conlon (2018, p.4) state that “all GT work should start with aspirations to theory-building, but researchers should bear in mind that the practicalities of research could stymie their efforts at producing theory”. Nonetheless, readers will find texts which distinguish between using GT as a methodology and those that refer to it as a method. Using GT as a methodology is about theory building (Urquhart, 2013), while using constant comparative analysis in data analysis

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(Litosseliti & Leadbeater, 2013) or simultaneous data collection and analysis (Urquhart, 2013) are examples of the use of GT methods. Suddaby (2006) observed that published research claiming to be GT cannot always be readily identified as such; an enduring problem since Goulding (2017) similarly observed that the version of GT used was not always clearly signalled by researchers. Similarly, if a researcher is only using principles of GT there is a need to be explicit about this (Urquhart, 2013). Timonen et al. (2018) suggest that a researcher may develop a conceptual framework rather than a ‘fully fledged’ theory using GT.

H1 Using Grounded Theory in Communication Disorders Research

Within the field of speech and language therapy, GT is being used in research to develop theories to understand phenomena and to support practice. Skeat and Perry (2008) gave a detailed overview of Glaserian GT and Straussian GT, the two major ‘modes’/views at that time. Although the complexity of learning and applying GT as a theory-building approach was acknowledged, Skeat and Perry (2008, p.108) recommended SLTs to use it in research “particularly in areas where theoretical frameworks are few and far between, and/or where clarity is needed about underlying social processes”. In the years since this publication, GT methodology has evolved and more SLTs are embracing GT in their research. It is interesting to note that Straussian GT was used most frequently in the published papers related to communication disorders in Table 6.3. There are also examples in the speech and language therapy literature of studies using some principles or features of GT to understand a phenomenon but which do not claim to be GT studies. Table 6.3 provides examples of such studies.

Table 6.3 about here

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It is to be expected therefore that differing GT versions will continue to influence research in communication disorders. This chapter aimed to demystify the complex landscape of GT. To further exemplify the practical process of GT the following two case studies below illustrate how GT was used by the authors. The first example shares the process of using GT to explore professionals' supervision practice. The second case study shares an example of how Straussian GT was used to explore processes that support early intervention team practice and it also shows how the criteria for rigour outlined in Chapter 12 were applied in a GT study.

H1 Case Studies

In this section we present case studies that illustrate use of GT. The first case study is not directly related to communication disorders. However, it is written by a speech and language therapist (SLT) and focuses on supervision practices for speech and language therapists and other health and social care professions.

H2 Case study 1 – Using a GT approach to explore professional supervision practices for staff

Deborah Harding

In my PhD studies, I used a GT approach to explore professional supervision practices, (clinical and/or managerial) for physiotherapists, occupational therapists and SLTs working in the National Health Service in England. I had noticed how therapists behave as if we have a common, shared understanding of supervision but in practice my own experiences were remarkably varied. It didn't always feel like supervisor and supervisee had shared expectations of what supervision was for or how it would play out, even though employers'

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policies and the standards of practice set out by our professional and regulatory bodies indicate that we will and should engage in the supervision practice. As I tested out this concern with colleagues, I realized I was not alone and it began to bother me. If supervision is this varied, what is it exactly that we should be engaging in and how do we know what is valuable for us as practitioners in supervision?

Naively, I thought a good definition would sort out this confusion. However, before long I had a collection of contradictory definitions and I noticed how each definition was essentially a representation of each different author's ontology. While some were about practitioner growth, wellbeing and development, others had a governance and performance focus. The research in this area was equally inconclusive and there were very few first-hand accounts of supervision experiences for allied health professionals. Graduate students adopting qualitative methods are expected to address research philosophy in selecting an approach. I was first nudged towards a GT approach in light of a perceived the lack of direction from published definitions and the extant literature. Might looking at supervision as if a blank slate, as Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.37) advocate, prompt new insights? In terms of my own ontological position, the variety of therapists' experiences and associated meanings and values of supervision were consistent with a constructivist, relativist ontology; supervision seemed to be a subjectively experienced, socially constructed event. It seemed that an appropriate way to explore this ontological position might be to hear and interpret what therapists had to say about supervision experiences; so, an approach that was underpinned by subjective, interpretive and inductive epistemological assumptions was appropriate. While ethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenology and GT approaches are all consistent with these philosophical assumptions, only GT offers the potential to generate

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a theory of the underlying value of supervision as opposed to a rich description of widely varying practices.

Interview data are consistent with a constructivist ontological perspective in constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). Interviews offer the opportunity to discover grounded theoretical insights by gathering and constantly comparing therapists' individual accounts of supervision experiences. As GT researchers are guided to set aside a priori assumptions, my interviews with participants had no firm topic guide and commenced with participants being invited to pick and discuss a postcard from an array which would tell the researcher something about the participant's supervision experiences. Not only did this approach offer an engaging icebreaker which supported the development of participant-researcher rapport, it avoided me introducing any of my own assumptions about supervision.

H3 Experiences of coding and theoretical sampling in GT

A hallmark of GT is to analyze interview transcripts line-by-line before proceeding with further data collection. Initially it was not apparent how the analysis of the first few interviews informed the recruitment of the next participant and in effect it was not until the first four interviews had been analyzed that the initial codes arising from the data began to guide sampling, as described in GT. Having gathered accounts from each of the three professions contributing to the research working in a variety of practice settings, it was now possible to begin to ask theoretically motivated questions about where to sample next. These early accounts provided rich descriptions of supervision. However, as a novice researcher I worried that, as Urquhart (2013, p107) described, I would miss the opportunity to move from rich description to something more abstracted and of theoretical significance. However, by

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persisting in asking questions of the data as Glaser (1998) encouraged, I began to notice that each therapist seemed very concerned about how she was doing, something I began to think of conceptually as 'practitioner uncertainties'. As I broke off from analysis to memo about this discovery some more theoretical questions began to occur to me. Firstly, all my participants had been female, so I wondered whether practitioner uncertainties might be a gendered concern. Secondly, I wondered whether this uncertainty would be apparent in the accounts of highly specialist or experienced therapists. Using professional contacts and networks, I now spoke to male therapists and/or those with a good deal of experience and specialist skills.

GT researchers acknowledge how laborious and unsettling this approach to sampling can be and it takes some time to recognize the methodological and ethical integrity which arises because the researcher is purposive in sampling to saturate the emerging theory. Methodologically by purposively sampling based on the research questions arising from earlier data, you focus on speaking to people who you think will help to answer the questions and in turn, you do not engage people in your research unnecessarily.

After seven interviews some tentative selective codes (see Table 6.2) were becoming apparent and these began to influence sampling but also the shape of subsequent interviews. I became increasingly certain that the main concern for therapists was about how they are doing. To understand these practitioner uncertainties more fully I prompted participants to talk about the sorts of concerns taken to supervision. My subsequent theoretical sampling considerations included whether such concerns were confined to therapists working solely in metropolitan settings, whether novice and experienced therapists had similar practice

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uncertainties and what impact lone/solo working might have. Of course, I had not set out to explore practitioner uncertainties but to understand more about supervision. This was disconcerting; it felt like I had lost my way. GT really requires a leap of faith to keep going back and comparing instance with instance until you realize all you are now finding are just further indicators of the same concepts; the point at which you recognize a concept is saturated. It was then that it was possible to integrate the concepts, to theoretically code and to work out the relationship between practitioner uncertainties and role of supervision practices in resolving these concerns.

In the course of the research I had a number of false starts with data management software, like NVivo. The sheer number of codes that can be generated in the early stages of analysis seemed to make the use of such software unwieldy. I was relieved to read that many highly regarded GT researchers (see for example Urquhart, 2013) have also acknowledged that, especially in the early stages of line-by-line coding, such software does not seem facilitative. In common with Urquhart (2013), I used Nvivo as a repository for sources and to make sense of selective codes once identified. However, my paper transcriptions, the notes in the margins and the many scribble memos I had made on train journeys and book covers remained important data sources which I returned to again and again as I refined my theoretical perspective.

H2 Case study 2 - Using a GT Approach to Understand Early Intervention Team Practice for Children with Developmental Disabilities

Clare Carroll

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In my PhD wanted to understand an Early Intervention (EI) team from the stakeholders' perspectives and to build a model to facilitate EI service provision in Ireland. Because I wanted to know more about how a team worked and to identify the processes that supported and hindered it, I knew that I would use a qualitative methodology. Considering that I wanted to build a model to support practice, I knew that GT would support me in doing so. I had previously used GT as a method in my MSc research and thought I had a good grasp of it. As I embarked on a journey to understand this complex methodology, I learned that I understood GT only as a method and that in fact this methodology had different versions with differing terminologies. Because I approached my PhD with an interpretivist position, acknowledging the interactions between a researcher and the participants, I decided on Strauss and Corbin's version of GT. I wanted to uncover contextual conditions and understand their possible impact on an early intervention team and to generate theory. Strauss and Corbin acknowledged the importance of a multiplicity of perspectives and 'truths' (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998) and they acknowledged that "interpretations must include the perspectives and voice of the people who we study" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.274). Therefore, multiple sources of evidence were used including interviews with parents, team members and young children with disabilities. Through the initial stages of data collection, theoretical sampling led me to conduct observations of a team assessment and a team meeting.

GT analysis using Strauss and Corbin's version, added coherence to the study as I used their method to data analysis: open, axial and selective coding, the conditional/consequential matrix and diagramming as outlined in Table 6.2. This added structure to guide my data collection. In line with Strauss and Corbin's version of GT, I actively engaged with the literature throughout the research process. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.41) described theoretical sensitivity as the

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“awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data” and elaborated that “one can come to a research situation with varying degrees of sensitivity depending upon previous reading and experience with or relevant to that area”. I had engaged with the literature before the study began as I had conducted research already in the field of disability. Through the data collection phase I used memoing after each interview and began interpreting the data. From 31 interviews, two sets of field notes, and observations, I created 285 codes. This process gave units of meaning to words and lines of transcripts. I will share two examples with you about how I applied the coding framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to the data.

H3 Example of Coding

One parent said:

‘If you are aware of roles and what somebody’s job is then you won’t be confused, you can engage and question appropriately’

Open Code: awareness of roles, awkwardness in interaction

Axial Code: Experimenting Stage of the Category ‘Relationship Stages’

Selective Code: Restraining Factor of the Core Category

Reading this you might be wondering how these codes link together. The answer is memoing. The process of memoing is crucial because memos helped me develop my theoretical ideas; they helped me link the data with the theories and concepts in existing literature.

Underpinning my coding process of the open codes of ‘awareness’ and ‘awkwardness’ was my realisation that there was a temporal process emerging as participants shared their

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experiences. As I explored literature I realized that theories underpinning personal relationships were now linking with my data. The following is an example of a memo related to the category: Relationship Stages.

Frequency of contact helps build closer relationships and subsequently professionals know their (child and parents) needs better. Linked to prioritising between parents and professional goals and expectations. Link possible to negotiating and finding the balance. Is knowing dependent on relationship? Is relationship dependent on frequency of contact? Link with lack of continuity and impact on meeting needs. One of the professionals said that 'If I was seeing her once every 3 or 6 months we would not have been able to tease out some of those things along the way'. Relationships between professionals and working together for long periods has developed familiarity with therapy activities and goals and facilitates the link between therapies and home. The professionals feel confident that the home support will provide the opportunities for parents to carry out the therapy goals and that the trust is there that the therapist feels confident about how the home support monitor the child's performance.

This memo also linked other codes 'frequency of contact' with 'familiarity' which in turn supported the development of the codes 'trust' and 'confidence'.

H3 Rigour

As described in Chapter 12, I aimed to ensure that the research was done in a rigorous way. Table 6.4 is adapted from my thesis (O'Shaughnessy Carroll, 2016). It outlines the techniques noted by (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Yin, 2011) that I used during the research process. The use of these techniques helped me to show that the theory which emerged from the study was

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one that was rigorous and trustworthy.

Insert Table 6.4 about here

H1 Top Tips

- Keep your research question broad because you are looking for a main concern from the data.
- Be clear about your philosophical position because this will underpin the version of GT that you will choose.
- Be clear and consistent about your coding framework.
- Be open to the different versions of GT.
- Consider the many types of data: raw data, field notes, memos, and literature.
- Read and navigate the literature outlined in Table 6.2 to find/understand the version of GT that you are following or to identify the GT principles you will follow in your research.

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