

---

7-4-2011

## Philosophical Roots of Classical Grounded Theory: Its Foundations in Symbolic Interactionism

Khaldoun M. Aldiabat

University of Northern British Columbia, [k.aldiabat@squ.edu.om](mailto:k.aldiabat@squ.edu.om)

Carole-Lynne Le Navenec

University of Calgary, [cllenave@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cllenave@ucalgary.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Aldiabat, K. M., & Le Navenec, C. (2011). Philosophical Roots of Classical Grounded Theory: Its Foundations in Symbolic Interactionism. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(4), 1063-1080. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1121>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits  
**LEARN MORE**

NSU  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## Philosophical Roots of Classical Grounded Theory: Its Foundations in Symbolic Interactionism

### Abstract

Although many researchers have discussed the historical relationship between the Grounded Theory methodology and Symbolic Interactionism, they have not clearly articulated the congruency of their salient concepts and assumptions. The purpose of this paper is to provide a thorough discussion of this congruency. A hypothetical example about smoking among college students is included in this paper to illustrate this relationship. This paper will be useful for qualitative researchers who seek a fuller understanding of how the assumptions and concepts provided by Symbolic Interactionism can inform the researcher who adopts a Grounded Theory methodology to investigate human behaviour. The relevance of this congruency for nursing researchers is discussed.

### Keywords

Symbolic Interactionism, Grounded Theory, Philosophical Congruency, and Nursing Research

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## **Philosophical Roots of Classical Grounded Theory: Its Foundations in Symbolic Interactionism**

Khaldoun M. Aldiabat

University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Carole-Lynne Le Navenec

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

---

*Although many researchers have discussed the historical relationship between the Grounded Theory methodology and Symbolic Interactionism, they have not clearly articulated the congruency of their salient concepts and assumptions. The purpose of this paper is to provide a thorough discussion of this congruency. A hypothetical example about smoking among college students is included in this paper to illustrate this relationship. This paper will be useful for qualitative researchers who seek a fuller understanding of how the assumptions and concepts provided by Symbolic Interactionism can inform the researcher who adopts a Grounded Theory methodology to investigate human behaviour. The relevance of this congruency for nursing researchers is discussed.*

*Key Words: Symbolic Interactionism, Grounded Theory, Philosophical Congruency, and Nursing Research*

---

The relationship between classical Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the interpretive tradition of Symbolic Interactionism is strong and historical. Although this relationship has been discussed in previous publications as a “given,” limited literature has explained the connections between their salient assumptions and concepts precisely and thoroughly (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Crotty, 1998; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Hence, the purpose of this paper is to provide a thorough and precise discussion about the congruency between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism. Furthermore, a hypothetical example about smoking among college students that can be addressed from a Symbolic Interactionist/Grounded Theorist perspective is included in this paper to illustrate this relationship.

This paper will be useful for qualitative researchers who seek a fuller understanding of how the assumptions and concepts provided by Symbolic Interactionism can inform the researcher who adopts a Grounded Theory methodology to investigate human behaviour. In other words, grounded theorists who adopt Symbolic Interactionism as a philosophical underpinning for their studies need to understand how the participants’ behaviours have been shaped through social interaction in a particular context. That is, the researcher’s goal is to understand the behaviour and the meanings people give to their experience in a natural setting in order to discover the basic psychosocial process (Glaser, 1978). According to Chenitz and Swanson (1986), conceptualizing human behaviour in its context helps researchers to examine the

behaviour in relation to the social circumstances, rules, laws, and conditions that govern the shared meanings of objects and affect human behaviour.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section sheds light on the concepts of Symbolic Interactionism that help the reader to fully understand this comparison from a philosophical angle. Thus, in the first section the authors address the salient concepts of Symbolic Interactionism. In the second section we discuss the compatibility between the main goal of both Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism in a manner that differs from the account by Milliken and Schreiber (2001). The focus of the third section pertains to the relationship between the assumptions of Grounded Theory and the assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism followed by a conclusion.

### **Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism**

This first section addresses the salient concepts of Symbolic Interactionism. These concepts include: the self-concept (the “I” and “Me”), the object (e.g., self as an object), “role-taking,” “looking-glass self,” and definition of the situation.

#### **The Self-Concept**

The purpose of this section is to give a thorough discussion about the self-concept and the communication process of its components (“I” and “Me”). The self is defined from the Symbolic Interactionism perspective as a complex interpretive process that involves a continuous communication between the “I” and the “Me;” that is, the “I” acts and the “Me” defends, evaluates, and interprets the self as reflected by others (Mead, 1934). The discussion that follows illustrates this process of the internal self communication.

According to Mead (1934), the “I” is a reaction of humans to the attitudes of the others. It is the impulsive, spontaneous, unorganized, and never fully socialized and therefore uncontrolled part of the human self. Because of the “I,” humans always surprise themselves by their actions, but their actions never get into experience until the internal communication between “I” and “Me” finishes. Thus, “I” gives humans a sense of freedom and initiatives for their behaviours.

Mead (1934) considered the “I” as a human subject, and the “Me” as the social self and human object that arises through interactions with others. “Me” is the organized set of attitudes, definitions, understandings, and expectations of others. From the viewpoint of Symbolic Interactionism, the “Me” represents the generalized other that controls or directs human behaviours.

Generalized others are those who influence perceptions of human beings regarding their attitudes and behaviours (Cardwell, 1971). According to Mead (1934), “a generalized other could be individuals, social groups or sub-groups, the organized community, or social class” (p. 154). Generalized others arise out of social interaction; hence, it is expected to be complex because a human being has more than one single generalized other (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Mead indicated that the attitudes of generalized others are similar to the attitudes of the community. Therefore, the

generalized other is considered Mead's "Me" because human beings can control their behaviours from the standpoint of the generalized others.

In conclusion, human beings can be distinguished from other creatures because they have a self that enables them to think and to interact with themselves in the form of internal conversation. This interaction between humans and their selves takes many forms. Sometimes humans talk to themselves silently, loudly, or in whispery form. Sometimes humans evaluate themselves, plan for future action, and punish or reward themselves. Based on this internal interaction, humans act in relation to others as well as toward themselves. In other words, if one is to understand human interaction/interactions of others, one must first gain an understanding of the meaning of the self-concept.

### **The Object and Meaning**

According to Blumer (1969), an object is anything that can be "indicated... pointed to, or referred to..." (p. 10). He categorized objects into three groups: physical objects, such as a chair and a house; social objects, such as friends and co-workers; and abstract objects, such as moral principles or ideas. The world of human beings consists not only of objects, but also human beings who interact with the generalized other on the basis of their own social meanings of these objects. The social meanings of these objects are the most important predictors for human behaviours (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). These meanings of objects are products of social interactions between human beings. In the other words, human beings interact socially with each other based on the social meanings of these objects.

Social interaction can be defined as a method that forms and expresses human behaviour. According to Symbolic Interactionism, human beings actively interpret each other's gestures in social interaction and act based on their interpretations (Shibutani, 1955). Through social interactions, human beings become aware of what others are doing or about what they are willing to do. In turn, we fashion our behaviour taking into account the behaviour of others with whom we interact through a process called "joint action" (Blumer, 1969, p. 17).

Furthermore, social interaction contributes to the development of a healthy self-concept, encourages human beings to resist behaviour that violates personal values, and promotes self-confirming lines of action (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). However, this does not mean that social interaction always has a positive impact on human well-being. According to social exchange theory, social interaction entails both rewards and costs, which means that social interaction may influence human well-being positively or negatively (Homans, 1958).

There are no permanent meanings to social objects; instead, these meanings are constantly changing because they are being defined and redefined through human interaction (Charon, 1979). The definition of an object varies from one human social group to another depending on their use of the object. Blumer (1969) contends that the meaning of an object arises from the way that human beings prepare themselves to act toward the symbol. Moreover, human beings define objects based on the type of action they are about to take toward themselves to accomplish goals in particular situations, and they may change the objects according to their changing goals (Charon). Therefore, meaning is not inherent in the object (Blumer) and each object changes for the individual,

not because the object changes, but because individuals change their definition of the former (Charon).

Human beings use objects in their interactions after they develop the meanings of these objects. Mead (1934) contended that there is no symbolization of objects outside of human social relationships. That is, it is the agreement on meaning among a group of humans that gives objects their designation, which is necessary for human communications to make sense (Cardwell, 1971). Human beings also have the ability to deal with themselves as objects in ways that are discussed next.

**Self as an object.** Because human beings are endowed with the capacity for thought, they look to themselves as objects. Charon (1979) maintained that the self is a social object like other objects shared in interaction. In his elaboration, Charon asserted that human beings can use imagination to get outside of themselves, and to look back at themselves as others do. According to Blumer (1969), the importance of the self as an object cannot be understated: “it means merely that a human being can be an object of his own action...and he acts toward himself and guides himself in his actions toward others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself... through the process of role-taking” (pp. 12-13).

Taking the self as an object depends on taking the role of others (Mead, 1934) and involves a process referred to as the “looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1902; see further discussion on this concept later in this paper). Taking the self as an object means seeing oneself from the subjective perspective of others. The “looking-glass self” clarifies this self-reference by invoking the idea of the person seeing the self in the perceptions of others, rather like a person sees his or her reflection in a mirror. According to Michener and DeLamater (1999), the human self is viewed as both the source and the object of reflexive human behaviour. That is, the human self is both active and passive in the process of taking oneself as an object. The active aspect of the process is that which Mead refers to as the “I,” the active part of the self that initiates thought and action, which is the source that generates, or gives rise to, reflexive human behaviour. The passive aspect is the object toward which human reflexive behaviour is directed, or what Mead called the “Me” (Michener & Delamater). Thus, depending on the internal conversation between the “I” and “Me,” human beings can determine their behaviours.

**Role-taking.** For Symbolic Interactionists, the process of interaction in which a human becomes an object himself or herself is called “role-taking.” As Mead (1934) indicated, role-taking involves imagining oneself as one is seen by others; therefore, role-taking involves seeing one’s self from the standpoint(s) of the generalized other. As previously indicated, the generalized other is understood as “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self” (Mead, p. 154).

**Looking-glass self.** The Symbolic Interactionist, Charles Horton Cooley (1902), was interested and concerned with the development of the human self (like Mead, 1934), but his views differed significantly from those of Mead. Whereas Mead viewed the human self as the result of objective factors of interaction in a symbolic world, Cooley viewed the human self from another angle. That is, the self was considered to be the result of the subjective process of a human being (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Cooley

defined the self as “any idea or system of ideas with which is associated the appropriate attitude we call self feeling” (p. 244). Cooley suggested that human beings define and develop themselves in every situation as a result of imaginative processes and emotions to reflect attitudes of others through what Cooley called the looking-glass self.

### **Definition of the Situation**

Thomas (1978), who developed the concept “the definition of the situation,” elaborated on it in this way: “preliminary to any self-determined pattern of behaviour there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual him (her) self follow from a series of such definitions” (pp. 58-59). Thomas pointed out that through development, humans have acquired an ability to define and construct situations through the symbols of their environment. However, the process of defining a situation is a powerful process because to define the situation is to represent the environment symbolically to the self so that a response can be formulated (Lauer & Handel, 1977). In other words, human beings respond to a particular situation through how they define that situation, rather than how the situation is objectively presented to them. Therefore, an understanding about how humans define the situation can assist us to more fully comprehend why they behave as they do in the situation.

Having discussed the key concepts of Symbolic Interactionism, let us now turn to a brief discussion about Grounded Theory methodology, followed by a discussion regarding the compatibility between the main goal of Grounded Theory and the main goal of Symbolic Interactionism.

### **Background of Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is a systematic qualitative research approach emphasizing the generation of middle range theory from data at a substantive or formal level (Glaser, 1978) was developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). However, Grounded Theory has undergone considerable development during the past four decades. The first one (1960-1970) was called the discovery decade, the second one (1970-1980) was called the development decade, the third one (1980-1990) was called the diffusion decade, and the fourth one (1990-1996) is called the diversification decade (Benoliel, 1996). Researchers who use the Grounded Theory method try to integrate the strengths inherent in the quantitative method with the qualitative method (Walker & Myrick, 2006). This is because of the different backgrounds of the original authors of the Grounded Theory method. Glaser’s background was in quantitative research from Columbia University and Strauss’s background was in qualitative research from the University of Chicago. For example, whereas Strauss identified the depth and richness of qualitative research regarding social processes and the complexity of social life, Glaser identified the systematic analysis inherent in quantitative research through line by line examination, followed by the generation of codes, categories, and properties (Hallberg, 2006; Walker & Myrick).

## **Compatibility between the Main Goal of Grounded Theory and of Symbolic Interactionism**

Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism are compatible in their goals. According to Glaser (1978), the main goal of Grounded Theory method is to discover the basic social process(es); that is, “the theoretical reflections and summarizations of the patterned, systematic uniformity flows of social life which people go through, and which can be conceptually ‘captured’ and further understood through the construction of basic social process theories” (p. 100). This main goal of Grounded Theory is compatible with the general goal of Symbolic Interactionism; that is, to provide a theory that explores human behaviour, or stated somewhat differently, an approach to study human conduct and human group life (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). We believe that the use of Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory methodology for investigating human behaviour by qualitative researchers will be effective because: (a) Symbolic Interactionism provides a guiding framework to collect data about the meaning of a particular type of behaviour and the contextual sources of such meanings, and how they change in and through social and physical time and space; and (b) Grounded Theory methodology affords a systematic approach to generate a theory that illuminates human behaviour as a social process among actors in their interactional context. The relevance of this compatibility of goals will be further discussed next.

## **Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism and Assumptions of Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory methodology and Symbolic Interactionism philosophy are not only compatible in their goals, but also in their assumptions. Although traditional Grounded Theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not give an explicit account of the key assumptions, Strauss and Corbin (1998) subsequently addressed this. Their key assumptions can be classified as ontological, epistemological, and methodological.

First, ontological assumptions refer to the nature of reality and what human beings can know about it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For researchers who use Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory, the realities are considered to exist for human beings in a world of shared symbolic meanings. Second, epistemological assumptions refer to the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known (Guba & Lincoln). For Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory, the researcher and research participants are assumed to be interactively linked in a mutual relationship in the natural field to investigate their behaviour. Third, methodological assumptions refer to how the researcher can go about discovering the social experience, how it is created, and how it gives meaning to human life (Guba & Lincoln). For Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory, human beings and shared meanings of reality can be defined only through interaction between and among the researcher and participants in the context of the phenomena of interest. The following paragraphs provide an in-depth discussion about the fit between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory.

For the purposes of this paper, the authors chose seven basic assumptions from Symbolic Interactionism to be compared with seven basic assumptions of Grounded



Theory (see Table 1). The first assumption of Symbolic Interactionism indicates that human beings live in a symbolic world of learned meanings (Herman & Reynolds, 1994). To illustrate further, human beings are distinguished from other creatures by their ability to function in a symbolic world (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Moreover, through the symbolic world, human beings can act and behave based on shared meanings (Charon, 1979). Furthermore, as Lauer and Handel have emphasized, the meaning of each learned symbol can be investigated only in the context of a symbolic world (this aspect was previously discussed in the section on object and meaning). For example, although the behaviour and meanings of smoking are variable, and depend on an interpretive process that refers to the role-taking (see section on role-taking), let us assume that smoking among college students is a symbol that has gained its meaning through the agreement of these individuals. A positive definition of smoking would be expressed explicitly or implicitly by those individuals who define this practice as enjoyment or as a way of relieving anxiety. By contrast, those individuals with a negative definition of smoking would define it as harmful of one's health, or financially very costly, etc. Hence, the learned meaning of symbols cannot exist alone outside the symbolic world.

Related to the above discussion, one might note that this first assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is compatible with the first assumption of Grounded Theory: The researcher needs to do field work (i.e., a research approach that is based on observation, recording or documenting what the researcher observes and hears in a particular setting) to discover what is actually happening in the symbolic world of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded Theory that is generated from field work makes it especially suitable for nursing and related health professionals (Nathaniel & Andrews, 2007) because it provides explanations of events as they occur in the reality of the participants (Field & Morse, 1985). More specifically, "Grounded Theory is a useful methodology for the study of interpersonal activities between nurses and patients and others because social interaction is at the heart of caring process in nursing" (McCann & Clark, 2003, p. 16).

To further illustrate, Grounded Theory in the human sciences is a method that aims to collect and analyze data to generate theory that furthers the understanding of the world of those under study (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). For example, a Grounded Theory regarding smoking among college students cannot be generated without visiting those individuals in their natural settings (e.g., students' housing, college buildings, or smoking areas at the college), collecting the data regarding their smoking behaviour through interviews and/or observations, identifying their interaction with themselves, with others, and with the environment around them, and finally, discovering how these interactions contribute to the development of smoking among them.

Davis (1986) indicated that collecting data through interviews and observations in natural settings gives an opportunity for the researcher to understand both the behaviour and the context that gives the behaviour background and meaning. Grounded Theory is used in introductory, exploratory, and descriptive studies for phenomena where little research has been done (Glaser & Strauss, 1966). Grounded Theory is considered a highly systematic method for managing qualitative data gathered in the natural field and the daily world of participants (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986) and therefore can be used to understand the contextual factors that may affect smoking among college students in and through social and physical time and space (Benoliel, 1983).

Table 1. *Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism and Assumptions of Grounded Theory*

Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism	Assumptions of Grounded Theory
1-Humans live in a symbolic world of learned meanings (Herman & Reynolds, 1994).	1- The need to get into the field to discover what is “really going on” in the symbolic world of participants (i.e., to obtain first-hand data taken from its original source).  2- Theory about symbolic world (meanings) is generated from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
2-Human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that things have for them (Blumer, 1969).	3- Grounded Theory assumes that persons act on the basis of meanings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
3-Meanings arise in the process of interaction between people (Blumer, 1969).  4-Humans and society have a relationship of freedom and constraints (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).	4- Perspectives and social perceptions are defined, developed, negotiated, and contested through interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
5-Meanings are handled and modified through the interpretive process used by the person dealing with things he or she encounters (Blumer, 1969).	5-Grounded Theory reflects the complexity and variability of phenomena and of human action.  6- Grounded Theory involves understanding and explaining how participants develop meanings and how those meanings are influenced by among other things such as organizational, psychological, social factors, and events (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
6-The self is a social construct develops through the social interaction with others (Blumer, 1969).  7- Self-concept provides a motive for behaviour (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).	7- Grounded Theory assumes that persons are actors who take an active role in responding to problematic situations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The first assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is not only compatible with the first assumption of Grounded Theory, but also with its second assumption. That is, it considers that the theory about the symbolic world (meanings) is generated from the data collected in the natural field (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, Glaser (1978) identifies Grounded Theory as theory generated from data systemically collected through social research. The primary purpose of Grounded Theory is to generate explanatory theories of human social behaviour that are grounded in the data (Morse & Field, 1995). Moreover,

the second assumption of Grounded Theory is essential and central, and this is why Glaser included it in his definition of Grounded Theory. In addition, the second assumption distinguishes Grounded Theory from other qualitative methodologies because the substantive theory (the end product of Grounded Theory method) is generated from the data that has been collected in the natural field rather than from previous research (Stern, 1980).

The relationship between collecting data, analyzing data, and generating theory is reciprocal (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, it is assumed that the researcher needs to stay in the natural field to collect and analyze data from participants through one or more different data collection methods until theory is generated. In addition, Grounded Theory depends on a “discovery model” of theory generation (Glaser, 1978) that focuses on discovering patterns that identify problems and connections between these patterns (Artenian, 1986) and motivates the researcher to raise questions about the phenomenon in the natural field (Chenitz, 1986).

Therefore, the researcher needs to collect and analyze the data regarding the phenomenon from the participants and their context because the meaning of the phenomenon cannot be understood except from the points-of-view of the participants (Chenitz, 1986). Collecting data in the natural field gives an opportunity for the researcher to understand experiences and behaviours of human beings as *they* understand them, to learn more about *their* world, discover *their* interpretation of self in interactions, and share *their* definitions of their worlds (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992). For example, collecting data from college students who smoke by using interviews and observations is the first step to enter the symbolic world of those people, to know how they act depending on the meaning, and how their interpretations of meanings affect their smoking behaviour. Furthermore, collecting the data from participants in the natural field permits the researcher to immerse himself/herself in the phenomenon and understand the meaning of the phenomenon from the perspective of those participants, how they live the phenomenon, and perceive the phenomenon in the way they act (Chenitz). Therefore, Grounded Theory gives deep insight, understanding, and a meaningful guide to human behaviours because it is based on data from the natural field (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The second assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is that human beings behave toward symbols based on the meanings that the symbols have for them (Blumer, 1969). These symbols could be objects, other people, settings, or standards (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Lauer & Handel, 1977), as well as psychological, social, cultural, and organizational contextual factors. For example, the behaviour of college students as smokers or non-smokers depends upon the meaning of smoking they hold and upon the meaning of related contextual factors (e.g., stressful academic environment, smoking prohibition laws at the college, existence of other colleagues who smoke, availability of cigarettes, etc.). Therefore, human beings are distinguished from other creatures because their behaviour is dependent on the meaning of symbols for them (Lauer & Handel).

The third assumption of Grounded Theory, which closely resembles the above-mentioned assumption [second] of Symbolic Interactionism, considers that human beings act on the basis of shared meanings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This assumption was discussed in the literature as one of the major premises of Symbolic Interactionism; therefore, discussion of this assumption from a Symbolic Interactionism perspective is the best approach to understand it. Blumer (1969) indicated that human beings behave,

interact, and respond to others on the basis of the meaning(s) of specific symbols in their lives. Moreover, human beings are distinguished from other creatures by responding to stimuli and behaving through interpretation of the meanings of objects, situations, and the predictable consequences of behaviour (Lauer & Handel, 1977). For example, based on this assumption, Grounded Theory would help the researcher to formulate research questions that seek to understand the meaning of smoking and the influence of contextual factors from the perspectives of college students who smoke: How do college students behave and interact based on their meanings of smoking? How do contextual factors (e.g., social, cultural, psychological, and organizational) influence those meanings in and through time and space?

According to Glaser (1992), the strategy of Grounded Theory is to take the interpretation of meaning in social interaction on board and study “the interrelationship between meaning in the perception of the subjects and their action” (p. 16). Therefore, through the meaning of symbols, human beings interpret their world and the actors who interact with them (Stern, Allen, & Moxley, 1982), while Grounded Theory translates and discovers new understandings of human beings’ behaviours that are generated from the meaning of symbols.

The third assumption of Symbolic Interactionism indicates that meanings of objects or situations arise out of interaction between people (Blumer, 1969; see further discussion in the previous sections: “The Object” and “Definition of the Situation”). That is, the meanings of objects or situations are not inherent in nature, but are instead external events resulting from interaction processes and heavily influencing human beings (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Although smoking is a very complex process that is based upon multiple factors, one aspect of this process can be explained by the third assumption of Symbolic Interactionism. That is, college students may behave as smokers or non-smokers depending on a complex interpretive and interaction process with self, others, and smoking [as an object] to define smoking, events, and situation they encounter.

The fourth assumption of Symbolic Interactionism indicates that humans and society have relationships of freedom and constraints (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). From this perspective, human beings have neither complete freedom nor complete constraint upon their behaviours. Charon (1979) provided four assumptions pertaining to the freedom of behaviour from a Symbolic Interactionism perspective. First, human beings are free through their creative, impulsive, and spontaneous “I” where human beings think in behaviours not thought out. Second, human beings are free because of their flexible “Me” which gives them the chance to observe, interpret, evaluate, recall the past and plan for future, analyze the situation, and direct the self to act in a certain behaviour in the situation (see the previous section on self-concept). Third, human beings have freedom because they use symbols that give them flexibility for new ideas, new thoughts, and new syntheses, and these aspects may lead to new behaviours. Fourth, human beings are not static creatures; instead, they are dynamic and constantly changing, shifting their directions, actions, and definitions about self and world. To further illustrate, college students have an internal individualistic freedom to think of smoking as not-thought-out behaviour through their self-concept of “I”. They have the freedom to imagine the responses and evaluations of others toward their smoking behaviour through their self-concept of “Me.” They have the freedom to identify new concepts and new events that may lead to smoking behaviour such as social, organizational, legal, and psychological

factors in their settings. In addition, they have the freedom and the flexibility to define and redefine smoking behaviour, and their living situation in ways that could increase or decrease their smoking behaviours and / or enhance or negatively alter their self-concept. However, in the real life situation, college students have to carve out a line between their impulses to be smokers and the expectations of others in their context, observing and responding to their own smoking behaviour and others' behaviour, adjusting and directing their smoking behaviour on this basis. To paraphrase, college students, from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, must take into account both the way their smoking impulses accord with community norms and values, and also the meanings that emerge in a specific situation of interaction.

By contrast, Charon (1979) believed that human behavior cannot be always governed by a determinism philosophy; therefore, he explained four assumptions that constrain human behaviours. First, the situation and the definition of the situation make some constraints on our behaviours. Second, not all human behaviours can be explained from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism because emotions and habits play roles in generating behaviour for some human beings, or because some individuals cannot communicate effectively and deal with the situation and this limits their freedom. LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) concurred with Charon's perspective. They avoid a deterministic approach and criticized Symbolic Interactionism because it failed to deal effectively with the human emotional aspect role in the forming of human behaviours.

Third, society is a behavioural constraint because society determines human action, and shapes behaviour through the "generalized other" (e.g., culture) that decreases freedom. Fourth, language and symbols limit the freedom of human beings because humans are free only in their symbolic world. If humans move from their symbolic world to another symbolic world, they need to learn new symbols and language to have the freedom to behave without constraint. Thus, according to Charon (1979), from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, humans have the freedom and constraints to act in their symbolic worlds.

Having discussed the third and fourth assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism, let us turn now to compare those with the fourth assumption of Grounded Theory. The fourth assumption of Grounded Theory indicates that perspectives and social perceptions are defined, developed, negotiated, and contested through interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Humans develop their perspectives through interaction with the "generalized other" (Mead, 1934). Humans interact with the "generalized other" through "role-taking" (Mead) or through the "looking-glass self" (Cooley, 1902). Interaction with the "generalized other" develops human beings' perspectives and guides them in all their social behaviours. For example, college students interact with smokers and non-smokers. Through this interaction, they may develop their perspectives regarding smoking. That is, they incorporate the generalized others (smokers and non-smokers) in their self-concept to behave the same or different. This complex relationship between self-concept and the generalized others has been elaborated as:

The self takes that attitude of the generalized other toward itself, interprets it, understands it, and then incorporates it into his own self conceptions and universes of meaning; the self and other, generalized though it may

be, participate in the construction of self, meaning, and world.  
(Perinbanayagam, 1975, p. 509)

In other words, because the “generalized other” arises out of social interaction and connects human beings with their social structure, it is expected that the “generalized other” affects human behaviour through social process and community control (Lauer & Handel, 1977).

According to Charon (1979), human perspectives and interaction are very important factors that shape human behaviours, whereas human attitudes are not. To elaborate, attitude as a concept “lacks clear and fixed empirical reference, its class of objects cannot be distinguished effectively from related classes of objects, and it does not enable the enlargement of knowledge of the class of the objects to which it presumably refers” (Blumer, 1955, as cited in Lauer & Handel, 1977, p. 312). However, human perspectives are distinguished from attitudes by three characteristics that were defined by Charon. First, each human being has more than one perspective and each perspective associates with a reference group or society. Second, the function of these perspectives is to guide human beings to understand a situation rather than to determine the influences. Third, these perspectives are generated through interaction, and humans can accept or change these perspectives according to the situation.

Charon’s (1979) assumptions are similar to the main assumption of the social constructivist theory, which contends that the personal meanings of an object in a certain context are primarily constructed individually then mediated socially (Prawat, 1996). Hence, human beings play an active role in constructing and reconstructing their perspectives. For example, college students may construct and reconstruct different perspectives regarding smoking because they have more than one reference group in their living situation. Hence, different perspectives about smoking may guide them to define the situation in a selected manner. Thus, they behave as smokers or non-smokers depending on their constructed perspectives and definitions of the situation, in addition to other bio-psychosocial factors. In summary, as mentioned above, the fourth assumption of Grounded Theory, which attempts to explain how human perspectives serve as a guide for social behaviour, is the equivalent of the assumption of Symbolic Interactionism pertaining to the development of processes present within human interaction.

The fifth assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is that the meanings of things that direct human behaviour occur through the interpretive process used by the person dealing with things he or she encounters (Blumer, 1969). Human action is a complex process because it is not a direct response to stimuli, but instead depends on an interpretive process to generate meanings. According to Lauer and Handel (1977), the interpretive process consists of two steps. The first occurs when humans interpret to themselves the actions of others; the second occurs when humans select and revise the meaning. For example, college students do not behave as smokers or non-smokers without interpreting the meanings of smoking that result from interaction with smokers or non-smokers. In addition, college students interpret to themselves ideas regarding the smoking of others, then select creatively and revise the most suitable meaning of smoking and behave based on this meaning. However, there is a gap in the symbolic interactionism literature that would assist us to more fully understand the role of unconscious process and one’s interaction style. Meltzer (1978) criticized Symbolic

Interactionism because of its focus only on the self-conscious level (versus unconscious level) to illuminate human behaviours; that is, the internal interaction between the “I” and the “Me,” the role-taking process, definitions of meanings, and interactions and interpretation of these interactions with others portray self-conscious processes. Hence, from our perspective, the habitual and unconscious human behaviours still need to be illustrated from symbolic interactions.

This fifth assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is most compatible with the fifth and sixth assumptions of Grounded Theory. The fifth assumption of Grounded Theory is that it reflects the complexity and variability of phenomena and of human action. This is because Grounded Theory is qualitative research that aims to generate theory around complicated issues about “persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). Moreover, the Grounded Theory method includes many variables and concepts connected to each other to explain basic social processes or human behaviour. Grounded Theory consists of categories that are generated from data analysis and connections about the relationships between categories. These categories represent abstract phenomena and serve to connect the empirical and abstract levels of phenomena at the theoretical level (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986).

In addition, Grounded Theory reflects the complexity and variability of the phenomenon because (a) it is used to investigate substantive areas where little is known about the phenomenon; and (b) it involves the most salient contextual factors that may influence human behaviour and thereby develop substantive theory (Stern, 1980). Chenitz (1986) following Glaser (1978) identified the “6 Cs” that should be included in the Grounded Theory question to reflect the complexity and variability of phenomenon under study. These “6 Cs” are cause, consequences, covariance, contingences, context, and conditions. From the perspective of Chenitz the definition of these “Cs” are as follows: (a) cause: refers to the salient factors that generate the phenomenon; (b) consequences: refer to the results or outcomes; (c) covariance: refers to “the nature and extent of the relationship between the variables” (p. 42); (d) contingencies: refer to “the direction of variance” (p. 42); (e) context: refers to the symbolic social world of the participants; and (f) conditions: refer to circumstances under which the phenomenon occurs.

To illustrate the above 6 Cs, let us return to the example we have used throughout this paper. That is, smoking among college student is a complex and variable phenomenon because little is known about their experiences as college students who smoke, and because it reflects a human behaviour that is by nature non-static and depends on many causes, different conditions, and variable contexts (e.g., social, cultural, organizational, psychological, and physical environmental contextual factors). In summary, the desired outcome of a Grounded Theory study about smoking among college students would be a middle range theory that would capture the diverse meanings of smoking of this population and how those meanings and behaviours change in and through time and space.

The sixth assumption of Grounded Theory is that it involves understanding and explaining how participants develop meanings and how those meanings are influenced by organizational, psychological, and social contextual factors, and events. According to

Blumer (1969), the meaning of objects or situations arises out of the human interaction process. Moreover, humans behave based on the meanings of things through interpretive process for those meanings (Blumer). Furthermore, consensus and general agreement among members of a group on the definition of events, objects, and situations leads to shared meanings in the group and these shared meanings form the group behaviour (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986).

Although the Grounded Theory method provides a way to study human behaviour and interaction, it must be studied in the context of interaction, situation, situational effects and factors, social forces, ideologies, and events (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). The natural situation includes events, social regulations, and ideologies that influence shared meaning between human beings in the interaction and affect their behaviour (Denzin, 1970). For example, Grounded Theory could be used to investigate smoking as a social behaviour among college students, and how they developed this behaviour based on interpreting the shared meaning of smoking. However, investigating the shared meaning of smoking among them is not enough to understand their smoking behaviour. That is, we also need to consider investigating other factors such as physical condition, social, psychological, and organizational factors in their social contexts. In summary, Grounded Theory presents a method to study how human behaviours are generated through social interaction and influenced by physical, situational or related contextual factors.

The sixth assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is that self is a social construct that develops through social interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, self is a “social object” that does not differentiate from other social objects that are used by human beings through their interaction (Charon, 1979). However, like other objects, human beings can constantly change themselves through their interaction with others. Mead (1934) explained the self as a social construct through imaginative process depends on taking the role of others where human beings through interaction with others become objects to themselves by looking at themselves from particular standpoints of others. For example, before college students behave as smokers or non-smokers, they look and evaluate themselves from the points-of-view of other smokers and non-smokers. Depending on this imaginary process, they may behave as smokers or non-smokers.

The seventh assumption of Symbolic Interactionism indicates that self-concept provides a strong motive for behaviour (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). This self-concept gives humans their ability to think, interpret things to themselves, define the situation, and communicate with themselves as they communicate with other people (Charon, 1979). These criteria of self-concept that focus on self interaction, guide and motivate human beings in their behaviours (Blumer, 1966). Moreover, self can be described as a process and reflexive (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Self as a process means that human beings coordinate their behaviours by decreasing the gap between their impulses (“I”) and expectations of others (“Me”), whereas self as reflexive means that human beings can direct their behaviours through observation, interpretation, and evaluation (Lauer & Handel). In summary, self-concept plays a significant role in guiding human beings to generate their behaviours in their symbolic world.

The sixth and seventh assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism are most compatible with the seventh assumption of Grounded Theory that represents the latter as an approach for understanding and explaining the symbolic world and assumes that



persons are actors who take an active role in responding to problematic situations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This assumption can be explained only from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism considers individuals as dynamic persons who can respond to and create their symbolic social world through continually adjusting their behaviours to the actions of others. Self-concept is a very important factor in shaping human behaviour because we behave in a manner that is consistent with our self-concept (Lauer & Handel, 1977). In other words, human beings are actors because they have an ability to interpret situations and, as a result, adjust their behaviours to their self-concepts.

Furthermore, humans behave differently from one situation to another because their self-concept changes through ongoing interaction (Kinch, 1967; Lauer & Handel, 1977). To illustrate, the adjustment process of human beings as actors depends on two central concepts of Symbolic Interactionism. The first one is the “looking-glass self” whereby human beings behave as a result of looking at one’s self from the perspective of others before initiating a particular behaviour (Cooley, 1902; see the previous section on “looking-glass self”). The second concept, “role-taking” involves those behaviours that result from the interaction between “I” and “Me” (Mead, 1934; for more discussion, see the previous sections on self-concept and “role-taking”). For example, college students who smoke can be considered actors who can change their smoking behaviour constantly by changing their self-concepts and by the changing of social, psychological, and organizational contextual factors in their living settings. In summary, Grounded Theory assumes that human beings are actors who respond to different situations and adjust their behaviours accordingly. It aims to discover human behaviour as a social process and the underlying contextual factors that shape human behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

Grounded Theory as a qualitative research approach has been used by nurses and other researchers for decades, to generate substantive theories that conceptually explain the basic psychosocial process to understand human phenomena such as human behaviours. In order to understand these behaviours, grounded theorists in the field of nursing who use Symbolic Interactionism as a theoretical guideline to conduct their studies need to understand how to use Symbolic Interactionism assumptions and concepts to guide them in data collection and analysis. Discussion of the compatibility between Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism in a manner that explains the fitness between their assumptions and concepts helps researchers in nursing and other fields know how to collect and analyze data regarding human behaviour. These researchers need to understand how human beings develop their behaviours in order to develop, for example, health programs that promote, maintain, or restore health for individuals, groups, or communities. To study human behaviour, researchers need to collect data in order to discover, generate, and understand (a) the pattern and consequence of the interaction between individuals; (b) their self-definition and shared meaning about certain behaviour and the influence of the contextual factors on that behaviour; and (c) their interpretive process (i.e., how those individuals illustrate the shared meaning of their behaviour and the contextual factors that are held by themselves that may influence their decision to adopt that behaviour or not).

## References

- Artenian, B. (1986). The research process in grounded theory. In W. C. Chenitz & J. M. Swanson (Eds.), *From practice to grounded theory* (pp. 16-37). Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Baker, C., Wuest, J., & Noerager Stern, P. (1992). Method slurring: The grounded theory/phenomenological example. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(11), 1355-1360.
- Benoliel, J. Q. (1983). *Grounded theory and qualitative data: The socializing influences of life-threatening disease on identity development*. St. Louis, MO: CV Mosby.
- Benoliel, J. Q. (1996). Grounded theory and nursing knowledge. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6(3), 406-428.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: University of California Press.
- Cardwell, J. D. (1971). *Social psychology: A symbolic interaction perspective*. Philadelphia, PA: F. A. Davis.
- Charon, J. (1979). *Symbolic interactionism: An introduction, an interpretation, an integration*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Chenitz, W. C. (1986). Getting started: The proposal for a grounded theory study. In W. C. Chenitz & J. M. Swanson (Eds.), *From practice to grounded theory* (pp. 39-47). Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Chenitz, W. C., & Swanson, J. M. (1986). Qualitative research using grounded theory. In W. C. Chenitz & J. M. Swanson (Eds.), *From practice to grounded theory* (pp. 3-15). Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Davis, M. (1986). Observation in natural settings. In W. C. Chenitz & J. M. Swanson (Eds.), *From practice to grounded theory* (pp. 48-65). Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Field, P., & Morse, J. (1985). *Nursing research: The application of qualitative approaches*. London, UK: Croom Helm.
- Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence vs. forcing*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1966). The purpose and credibility of qualitative research. *Nursing Research*, 15(1), 56-61.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine Transaction.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Hallberg, L. (2006). The “core category” of grounded theory: Making constant comparisons. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 1*, 141-148. doi:10.1080/17482620600858399
- Herman, N. J., & Reynolds, L. T. (1994). *Symbolic interaction: An introduction to social psychology*. Dix Hills, NY: General Hall.
- Homans, G. C. (1958). Social behaviour as exchange. *American Journal of Sociology, 63*(6), 597-606.
- Kinch, J. W. (1967). A formalized theory of the self-concept. In J. G. Manis & B. N. Meltzer (Eds.), *Symbolic interaction: A reader in social psychology* (pp. 232–240). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- LaRossa, R., & Reitzes, D. C. (1993). Symbolic interactionism and family studies. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 135-163). New York, NY: Springer Science.
- Lauer, R. H., & Handel, W. H. (1977). *Social psychology: The theory and application of symbolic interactionism*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- McCann, T., & Clark, E. (2003). Grounded theory in nursing research: Part 1--Methodology. *Nurse Researcher, 11*(2), 7-18.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Meltzer, B. (1978). Mead's social psychology. In J. Manis & B. Meltzer (Eds.), *Symbolic interaction: A reader in social psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 15-27). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Michener, H. A., & DeLamater, J. D. (1999). *Social psychology* (4th ed.). Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace College.
- Milliken, P. J., & Schreiber, R. S. (2001). Can you “do” grounded theory without symbolic interactionism? In R. S. Schreiber & P. N. Stern (Eds.), *Using grounded theory in nursing* (pp. 177-190). New York, NY: Springer.
- Morse, J. M., & Field, P. A. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for health professionals* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nathaniel, A. K., & Andrews, T. (2007). How grounded theory can improve nursing care quality. *Journal of Nursing Care Quality, 22*(4), 350-357.
- Perinbanayagam, R. S. (1975). The significance of others in the thought of Alfred Schutz, G. H. Mead and C. H. Cooley. *Sociological Quarterly, 16*, 500-521.
- Prawat, R. S. (1996). Constructivisms, modern and postmodern. *Educational Psychologist, 31*(3/4), 215-225. doi:10.1207/s15326985ep3103&4\_6
- Shibutani, T. (1955). Reference groups as perspectives. *American Journal of Sociology, 60*, 562-569.
- Speziale, H., & Carpenter, D. (2007). *Qualitative research in nursing* (4th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott.
- Stern, P. (1980). Grounded theory methodology: Its uses and processes. *Image, 1*(12), 20-23.
- Stern, P., Allen, L., & Moxley, P. (1982). The nurse as grounded theorist: History, process, and uses. *Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences, 17*, 200-215.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Thomas, W. I. (1978). The definition of the situation. In J. Hass & W. Shaffir (Eds.), *Shaping identity in Canadian society* (pp. 58-65). Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall.

Walker, D., & Myrick, F. (2006). Grounded theory: An exploration of process and procedure. *Qualitative Health Research, 16*(4), 547-559.

---

### Author's Note

Dr. Khaldoun Aldiabat is a professor of Primary Health Care, Community and Mental Nursing, and Nursing Research at University of northern British Columbia. The focus of his research program is on understanding the influence of contextual factors on addictive behaviors (e.g., smoking, drugs, and alcohol) among those who are experiencing these behaviors. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to: Khaldoun M. Aldiabat, RN, MSN, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9, Canada; E-mail: kmaldiab@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Carole-Lynne Le Navenec has been a Professor of Gerontological Nursing, Prison Health Nursing, Community Mental Health and Family Nursing at the University of Calgary for the past several years. The focus of her research program has been on the identification of Indicators of quality of care and quality of life for families experiencing a chronic illness (e.g., dementia, traumatic brain injury, severe mental illness). Her contact information is E-mail: cllenave@ucalgary.ca

Copyright 2011: Khaldoun M. Aldiabat, Carole-Lynne Le Navenec, and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

Aldiabat, K. M., & Le Navenec, C-L. (2011). Philosophical roots of classical grounded theory: It's foundations in symbolic interactionism. *The Qualitative Report, 16*(4), 1063-1080. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-4/aldiabat.pdf>

---