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APPLIED DOCTORAL RESEARCH AND THE PRACTITIONER- RESEARCHER: BRIDGING INDUSTRY

ABSTRACT

Practitioner-researcher positioning within doctoral programmes represents a significant, yet underexplored, dimension of the relationship between academic inquiry and industry relevance. This paper examines how a higher level of student–industry symbiosis can be attained through a particular choice of research methodology and a certain characteristic of doctoral research student: that of the practitioner-researcher. The contextualisation of this argument is grounded in several years of running a professional doctoral programme pursued by practitioner-researchers who apply a predominantly qualitative grounded theory (GT) research methodology. The paper's central objective is to explore how GT, as a processual and data-driven methodology, enables practitioner-researchers to effectively interact with industry and to produce doctoral research outcomes that are recognised as relevant, applicable, and valuable by industry and societal stakeholders. Three guiding arguments frame the discussion: that a theoretically sensitive, applied researcher achieves higher levels of synergy between doctoral research and industry needs; that GT as a methodology is optimally grounded in the realities of daily organisational operations and challenges; and that the processual nature of GT research generates symbiotic gains as the research projects unfold. To safeguard methodological rigour, the authors propose three process-oriented quality expectations that guide the practitioner-researchers throughout the inquiry: theory-building, data-driven, and analytic proficiency. The paper further argues for flexibility in the philosophical stance and the GT toolbox of techniques adopted by GT practitioner-researchers, allowing them to select a position along the objectivist–constructivist spectrum that aligns with their own ontological, axiological, and work-philosophy orientations, while avoiding methodological slurring or drift. Six doctoral studies illustrate this framework, spanning artificial intelligence adoption, female entrepreneurship, soft-skills training, mindfulness in the wellness industry, the digital transformation of accounting, and circular economy models in small island economies. These studies demonstrate how practitioner embedding and GT's iterative nature progressively enhance student–industry collaboration.

Keywords

Practitioner-researcher; Grounded theory; Quality expectations; Reflexivity; Small organisations.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the main attributes that enable doctoral researchers to carry out research projects that are recognised by industry or societal organisations as relevant, applicable, and valuable. The paper looks at how grounded theory (GT), as the particular choice of research methodology, serves to allow practitioner-researchers to more effectively interact with industry and to provide a doctoral research product that is usable and of importance to industry, organisations, and societal entities. The GT methodology uses largely qualitative data grounded in industry, organisational, and societal real-world experiences and challenges, aiming to build practical, parsimonious models and theories that explain what is really going on and why. The objective is to provide the relevant stakeholders with tools and best-practice solutions, reaping tangible benefits from the doctoral journey of these practitioner-researchers who hail from their respective fields of practice. As this methodology incorporates a processual research approach, it gives the doctoral student and the industry stakeholder a stronger opportunity to synergise. This, in turn, allows researchers to steadily build further on their theoretical sensitivity on the theme of research, contributing to more sensitised prompts and interactions with industry, and encouraging the industry stakeholders themselves to provide quality data and commit to the research.

The fact that these practitioner-researcher students hail from industry and still operate within industry, coupled with the use of data grounded in industry reality, further supports the positive student–industry interaction. In the paper, a number of practical examples of doctoral research endeavours that seek to achieve these interactions are provided. These studies have been guided by three quality GT expectations, subsequently described, that act as drivers for the researchers' methodological implementation. The challenge to provide research that is both rigorous and usable is aptly described by Inguanes (2024, p. 16), who observes that “the alignment of expectations and understanding of what good and valid research entails is not always a straightforward one, which if not addressed properly could lead to missed opportunities for further collaboration or employment”. In a systematic review on the facilitators of university–industry collaboration, Rossoni et al. (2024, p. 1870) conclude that “it appears that the longer the life cycle of the collaborative project, the greater are the benefits for both partners”. It is the authors' belief that this processual collaboration forms the nucleus of any well-applied GT research undertaking.

2. Methodological Framework

2.1 The Professional Research Doctorate

The professional doctorate programme in question is titled the *Professional Research Doctorate on the Competitive Behaviour of Small Organisations*.

It is run by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), that is a further and higher education institution in the EU-state of Malta, and is licensed by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA). The doctoral programme is a research-driven European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Level 8 qualification that takes on the remit of understanding and building applied, usable theories of small-organisation competitive behaviour within small island states and small economies. This is carried out using the grounded theory (GT) method of enquiry and adopting qualitative and mixed-methods techniques, allowing for the building of applied, substantive models of small-organisation actions and behaviours as these organisations seek to utilise resources more effectively and remain sustainable within their environments. It is posited that GT is ideally suited for building useful, substantive theories that explain how small organisations function and compete, allowing researchers and practitioners to discover best practices in the decision-making and collaborative behaviours of these small entities, and thus contributing to applied research and professional knowledge within the larger socio-economic context.

2.2 The Practitioner-Researcher and Reflexivity within the Doctoral Programme

In this respect, the programme is inherently aligned with the principles of practitioner research, since it encourages doctoral candidates, who are experienced professionals, to investigate real organisational challenges within their own contexts and to generate practice-informed theory that contributes solutions of direct relevance to small enterprises and policy environments. The doctoral journey therefore extends beyond academic theorisation into a reflective and practice-engaged mode of inquiry in which professional experience becomes a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge creation. Practitioner research represents a rigorous, contextually embedded form of inquiry that bridges the abstract domain of theory and the situated realities of professional practice, enabling knowledge to flow reciprocally between the two. Rooted in the seminal work of Kurt Lewin, widely regarded as the father of action research, practitioner inquiry is premised on the conviction that change and research are inseparable and that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). For Lewin, theory achieves its legitimacy through its capacity to assist real people in real situations; similarly, practitioner research in doctoral contexts seeks not merely to interpret the world but to understand it and enhance it. Reflection becomes a “mirror image” of practice (Hibbert et al., 2010), enabling researchers to observe their own ways of doing and knowing and to transform tacit assumptions into explicit insight. Complementing this reflective positioning, Kolb (1984) proposes an experiential learning cycle — concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation — which offers doctoral practitioner-researchers a structured lens through which to examine the reciprocal effects of inquiry on themselves, their participants, and the broader contextual setting.

Within this paradigm, the practitioner-researcher is positioned as an active, mindful agent who systematically observes, questions, and reflects in pursuit of improved outcomes, resisting professional inertia and fostering transformative and emancipatory theory, practice, and propositions (Stenhouse, 1975). This relates well to the expectations of GT, where “the theory must address real concerns or problems experienced by people within the substantive area” (Vander Linden, 2025, p. 31). Influenced by the critical theory tradition, practitioner research repositions inquiry from a purely technical activity to an engaged endeavour within professional fields. In this regard, reflexivity is not an optional methodological addition but the very engine of practitioner research. Building on this, Falzon (2011) conceptualises reflexivity as an ongoing, active process requiring awareness of bias, influence, and researcher positioning at every stage of inquiry, while McLeod (2001) highlights the development of “reflexive knowledge”, and Wosket (1999) underscores the importance of critical mindfulness in becoming an active agent in research. In doctoral research across diverse fields, such as those exemplified further on, these commitments are especially salient, as candidates frequently navigate the dual role of practitioner and researcher, generating knowledge that is contextually responsive, ethically grounded, theoretically robust, and action-oriented. Such scholarship transforms practice while contributing to emancipatory field development. This is particularly evident in the following grounded theory studies, where researchers draw upon prior professional expertise and close sectoral familiarity to investigate lived organisational challenges.

3. Proposal and Comparison: Six Doctoral GT Studies

Six doctoral GT studies from the programme have been selected to provide practical examples. In each case the principal investigator was a GT practitioner-researcher with significant familiarity with the industry in question. Table 1 outlines these six studies, that range across multiple industries and varying societal settings.

Table 1. Six Doctoral Research Endeavours Applying Diverse GT Philosophies

Study	Focus	GT Approach	Practitioner-Researcher Positioning	Industry Context	Methodological Relevance	Contribution to Practice
1. Circular Business Models (Frendo & Packer, 2026)	How and why small/micro enterprises incorporate circular practices	Strauss & Corbin (1990, 1998) pragmatist GT	Engaged directly with owner-managers, policy-makers, industry associations, and funders	Circular economy; small island economy	Multi-stakeholder engagement supporting a pragmatist GT process (Figure 1)	Informed policy/programme design; enhanced owner-manager understanding of circular opportunities
2. Female Entrepreneurship (Demanuele Montebello et al., 2025)	How female entrepreneurs develop skills to enhance organisational effectiveness	Corbin & Strauss (2008, 2015) pragmatist-constructivist GT	Own background in accounting, taxation, and budgeting; personal commitment to women's empowerment	Female-led small businesses	Insider professional background shaping an interpretive, constructivist lens	Highlighted role of formal/informal education in building self-efficacy and business growth

3. Mindfulness Within Wellness (Falzon & Cauchi, 2025)	Relevance, feasibility, and effects of integrating mindfulness in the wellness sector	Charmaz (2006, 2025) constructivist GT	Practitioner link to vocational education and training in the sector	Wellness industry (beauty salons and spas); small island economy	Constructivist approach yielding a parsimonious explanatory model (Figure 2)	Informs integration of mindfulness within the beauty/wellness curriculum
4. Soft-skills Training Attitudes (Spiteri Axiak, 2025; Spiteri Axiak et al., 2025)	How attitudes towards soft-skills training are formed, sustained, and enacted	Classic Glaserian GT (Glaser, 1965, 2014)	Practitioner within a leading market intelligence firm; dual role as embedded insider and critical analyst	Small and micro enterprises	Insider positioning balanced by systematic reflexivity, bridging theory and practice	Surfaced stakeholder challenges relevant to training design not previously formally articulated
5. Enhancing vocational learning and workplace productivity with creative AI tools. (Scerri, 2024)	Opportunities and challenges of AI learning and adoption within the core value chain of organisations	Classic, objectivist GT (Glaser, 2014); 30 cases	Cross-industry vantage point spanning agriculture, automotive repair, healthcare, retail, accountancy, IT, videography, and i-gaming	Multiple industries; small organisations	Multi-case classic GT design enabling cross-industry comparison	Informs implementation trajectories and employee training plans; value of AI shown to depend on human application
6. Accountants and the Digital Transformation (Muscat et al., 2025)	Evolving accountant role and competencies needed for digital transformation	Corbin & Strauss (2008, 2015) pragmatist-constructivist GT	Dual perspective as practitioner and small business owner	Accounting profession; small business sector	Dual practitioner-owner perspective enabling access and reflective insight	Guidance for accountants to expand advisory capabilities and adapt roles amid digitalisation

Figure 1 relates to the first study and captures four distinct trajectories followed by firms as they seek to adopt circular economic practices.

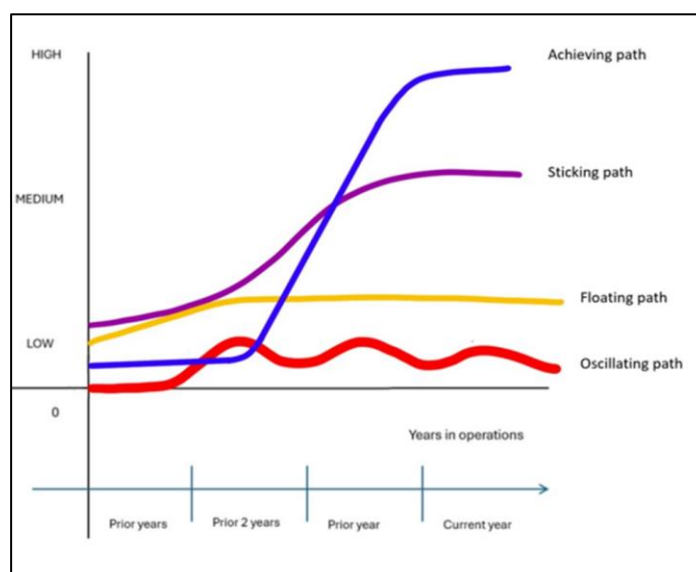


Figure 1. Patterns of circular practice adoption. Adapted from Frendo (2026).

Figure 2 relates to the third study and depicts a parsimonious model identifying five different levels of mindfulness that the industry concerned was found to conform to. As demonstrated by Rizzo et al. (2024a, p. 188), visual modeling is invariably complemented by a set of propositions that provide a theoretical explanation of the model and its application.

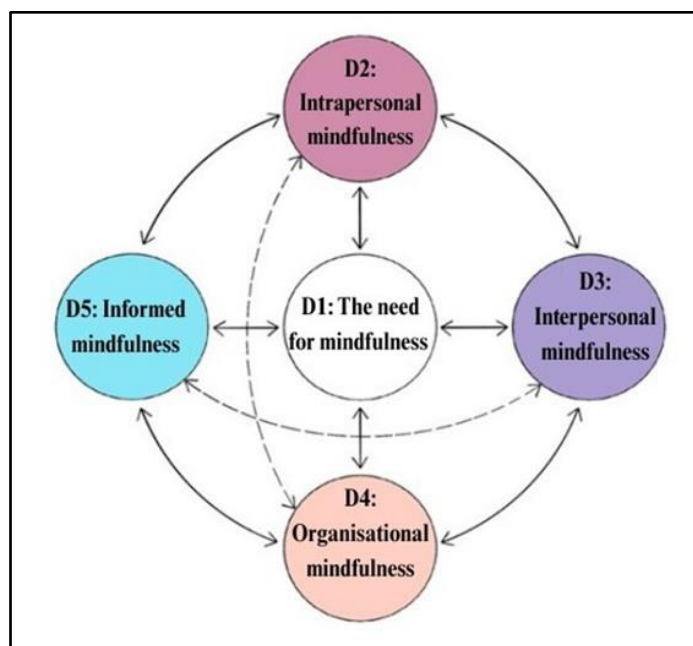


Figure 2. Sustained mindfulness integration within the wellness industry. Adapted from Cauchi (2026).

4. Critical Discussion

An issue that warrants discussion is the choice of philosophical stance adopted by these practitioner-researchers, since this was left to their prerogative, to be aligned with their personal ontological and axiological leanings and work-philosophy orientations (see Rizzo et al., 2024b). This would range from Glaser's (1965, 2014) classic GT stance on one side of the objectivist–constructivist spectrum to Charmaz's (2006, 2025) constructivist GT stance at the other end. This is well summed up by Creamer (2022, p. 9), who describes that “objectivists believe in a singular reality that can be captured objectively, while constructivists highlight that reality is often multiple and everyone experiences it in different ways”. However, an issue that the GT practitioner-researchers inevitably faced early on related to the common criticisms placed by established GT schools on what is deemed to be the correct and acceptable application of GT. This can be seen in the classic GT school, where Glaser “vastly exaggerates the risks of the Straussian approach” (Kelle, 2007, p. 134) and strongly criticises Charmaz's constructivism, claiming that “she is misled in thinking that the constructivist vision is in fact GT” (Glaser, 2014, p. 246).

It is also evident in the constructivist school, which counter-argues that the Glaser/Straussian schools are incorrectly designed to apply “positivist elements that ignore reflexivity, overlook ethical issues, and disregard issues of representation” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 374). The stance taken by the present authors is that what is of real importance is the correct implementation of the GT study as an evolving process, with well-understood quality parameters such as those described further on. The authors have observed many GT studies that have followed Glaser's classic (1965, 2014), Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) pragmatist, Corbin and Strauss's pragmatist-constructivist (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rizzo & Fulford, 2012), Charmaz's (2014, 2025) constructivist, the Gioia method (Corley & Gioia, 2004), mixed GT (Johnson & Walsh, 2019), and hybrid mixed GT (Sal Moslehian et al., 2022; Shim et al., 2021) approaches, and that all resonate in quality and in practical relevance.

Furthermore, the authors argue that the way GT was initially created should encourage, and not limit, its diversity of use. The scripting of grounded theory (GT) as a methodology is credited to an early nursing study by Glaser and Strauss, *Awareness of Dying* (Glaser & Strauss, 1965), and was then developed into their 1967 methodological text titled *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). If one is to dig deeper, however, one will find an earlier text by Glaser (1965), ‘The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis’, that already contains all of the main elements of GT. Going back even further in time, Glaser identifies Lazarsfeld and his mathematical concept of latent structure analysis as a main influencer in the creation of the fundamental GT concepts of constant comparison and category creation. For example, Lazarsfeld and Barton (1955, p. 87) argue that “the purpose of categories is to organize a great many concrete items into a small number of classes, so that the situation studied can be more easily understood”, where these ‘items’ are today's data incidents that drive a GT study.

With such a richness of a qualitative method of enquiry building from quantitative building blocks, it is somewhat surprising that some prominent GT schools refuse to acknowledge alternative GT approaches, or even creativity within a particular approach. The authors firmly believe that “if a researcher needs to invent, or piece together, new tools or techniques, they will do so” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). The authors emphasise, however, that researchers must still work diligently to avoid methodological slurring, a confused mixing of incompatible methodologies due to a lack of understanding (see Baker et al., 1992) or methodological drift, an unintentional deviation from a planned method over the course of a study (see Holton, 2018). Alternatively, the ‘bricolage’ positioning advocated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994) looks towards an intentional and strategic combination of tools to solve a specific research problem. Braun and Clarke (2021) explain how this can be done: Firstly, student researchers need to clearly demarcate which approach they are adopting; this can be done by “critically reflecting on their preconceptions, positions and methodological choices” (Costa & Bem-Haja, 2025, p. 14). Then, when citing authors or techniques from different method orientations, they must clearly specify what they are ‘taking’ from each, and then fully justify any use of divergent criteria and practices.

5. Methodological Contributions

The practitioner-researchers exemplified earlier had adopted a systematic GT methodological approach which was guided by quality parameters established by the institution running the doctoral programme and overseen by its Grounded Theory Research Hub. Commonly in GT studies, the rigour of methodological implementation is expected to abide by output-based quality indicators or input-based quality measures, such as those indicated by the authors in Figure 3. It is argued that these indicators are useful to substantiate the quality of a GT study at the end of the GT process but are somewhat limited in guiding the researcher within the process itself. This is easily seen, for example ‘researcher expertise’ as an input indicator, or ‘originality’ and ‘usefulness’ as output indicators, can only truly be evaluated at the completion of a study.

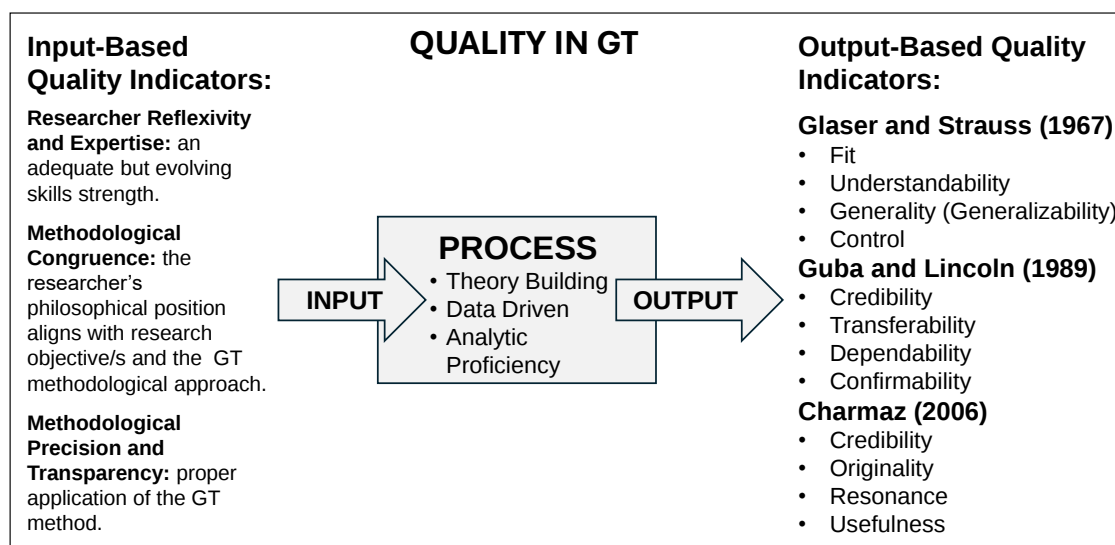


Figure 3. Input, process, and output-based GT quality measures.

To complement these existing input/output measures, a framework of three comprehensive process-oriented ‘expectations’ has been developed by the authors over twenty years of practising grounded theory, as it was felt that these provide more tangible direction to GT practitioner-researchers, laying out the theoretical and practical steps needed. This framework operates at a high heuristic level, independent of any single GT programme, school of thought, or industrial context. As a result, it remains flexible and broadly applicable. It is argued that by keeping these three process expectations clearly in focus at every stage and turn of the GT research, the student will gradually and constantly build towards a quality GT study, allowing them to naturally work towards achieving the input and output-based quality indicators visualised in Figure 3. The previous GT research examples have all been led by this framework of quality process expectations, which is described in more detail as follows.

5.1 Quality Process Expectation 1 — Theory-Building

GT researchers are encouraged to keep in mind that GT is a theory-building methodology that adequately and consistently captures what is happening and why in a substantive area being studied. As Simmons (2022, p. 63) succinctly puts it, “it is a theory because it explains or predicts something”. GT looks for a consensus in the data being observed (Suddaby, 2006). This theory should be multivariate in nature (Glaser, 2014), capture process within its core (Creamer, 2022), while still being parsimonious (Glaser, 1992). To ensure theory-building, cases need to be carefully and individually selected, driven by the data, moving to where the data is richest and most relevant, and where the developing theory takes the researcher. This is visualised in Figure 4. In the authors' experience, between 30 and 70 cases are required to theoretically saturate a GT model with adequate depth and variance and to avoid an overly homogeneous sample (cf. Creamer, 2022), where each subsequent case is carefully chosen to enrich, explore and validate the evolving theory.

The researcher needs to constantly iterate between data gathering and data analysis, diligently applying constant comparison to data incidents, codes, categories, and even cases, applying a ‘scale-up’ of coding techniques (choosing from open, selective, focused, axial, and theoretical coding) to gradually build an emerging process-oriented theory, while avoiding working in a pre-established, mechanistic fashion (Rizzo et al., 2024a). Early GT researchers are reminded that each data incident will add a micro-theory element and a micro-validation stage as it triangulates with other data. Each developing category will be a mini theory in itself, capturing the variance of data incidents of different character within a particular theme, these being positioned as properties within the category. One particular check to ensure abidance to this first expectation is to observe whether each new case being selected is clearly a choice that has been made following the careful analysis of the previous cases, and that prompts being used, whilst being adequately sensitized, are truly allowing for open-ended, in-depth interviews that are free from any preconceptions. Another check would be to observe the evolution of the prompt sheet over the span of the study, as generalization makes way for more focused data searching as the grounded model achieves further integration.

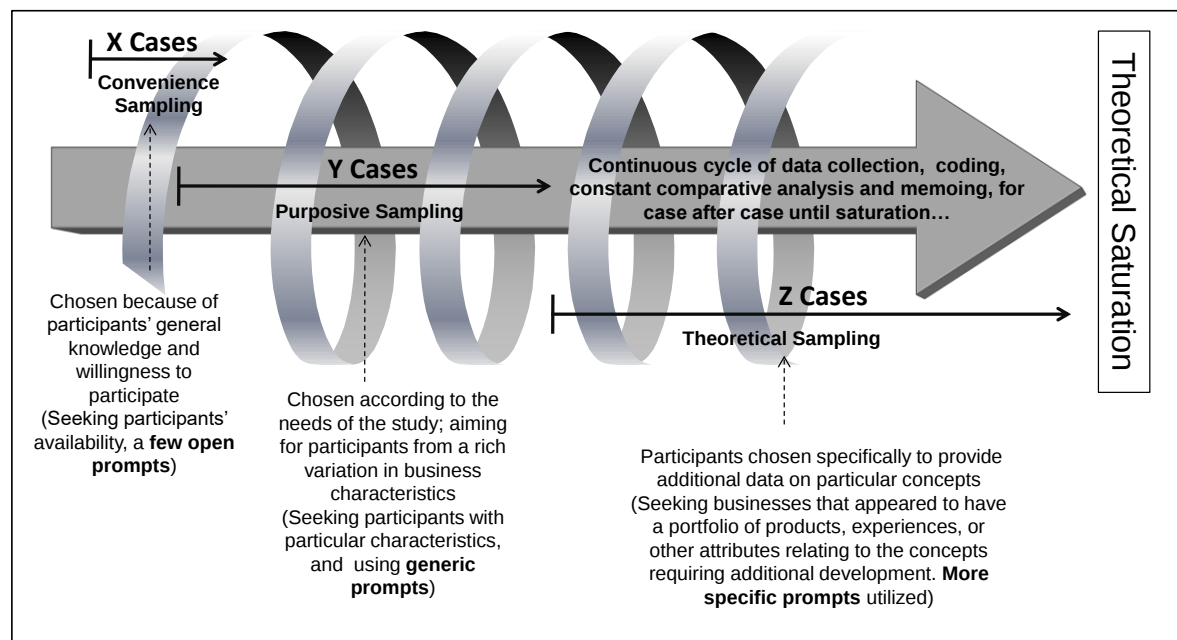


Figure 4. Grounded theory's systematic strategy of simultaneous data collection and analysis. Adapted from Rizzo et al. (2024a).

5.2 Quality Process Expectation 2 — Data-Driven

GT researchers are guided to keep open to the data and to allow themselves to be driven by the data, tolerating ambiguity (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021), particularly in early research stages. Different GT schools will position researchers in diverse ways in relation to the data; however, whatever the philosophical stance chosen, by taking an open-ended approach and by keeping categories provisional until the very end, the final theory will better reflect the reality of what is being studied. Suddaby (2006, p. 640) emphasises that GT researchers “must account for their positions in the research process. That is, they must engage in ongoing self-reflection to ensure that they take personal biases, worldviews, and assumptions into account while collecting, interpreting, and analysing data”. Furthermore, GT researchers are driven to work towards constantly building on their theoretical sensitivity through both the data coming in and through relevant external literature that encourages further abductive insights. It is suggested to think of theoretical sensitivity as the “ability to discern patterns in the data, to relate these patterns to ideas, and to relate ideas to other ideas through the process of emergent fit” (Simmons, 2022, p. 62).

Researchers are encouraged to rigorously capture all valuable insights through reflexive writing via memos, comments, and similar methods; this becomes part and parcel of the core data. Also, *methods triangulation* is encouraged, such that “qualitative and quantitative data can be fruitfully combined to elucidate complementary aspects of the same phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 558).

The rich incoming data should thus be supported by the researcher's reflexive writings to fuel ever-higher conceptual analysis, as the data incidents integrate into early codes, which evolve into conceptual categories, and further integrate into a final substantive theory. A useful check for abidance to this second expectation is that of an audit trail that captures the development of the study's category schema, that should show evidence of dynamic and creative evolvment until the very end of the GT study.

5.3 Quality Process Expectation 3 — Analytic Proficiency

The practitioner-researchers are trained to achieve a high level of technical competency that allows them to move between different levels of analysis, looking at GT research as an evolving process that will benefit significantly from being supported by a modern toolbox. Software such as MAXQDA (VERBI Software) significantly facilitates data management and analysis, from the early stages of coding data incidents to the more advanced analytic phases through visual tools that allow for easier comparisons, mapping, trend identification, and pattern recognition, while still allowing the researcher to easily dig down to the founding data incidents and researcher's reflexive thoughts captured along the way. As Sal Moslehian et al. (2022, p. 3) aptly put it: “particularly in MGT (mixed grounded theory) studies, the adoption of a combination of analytical tools and strategies is widely suggested to creatively probe the data, increase researcher's sensitivity, and move away from descriptive summation to conceptual explanations of the phenomenon”. The concept of the qualitative bricoleur once again is promoted, where the researchers actively construct their research methods from the tools at hand rather than passively receiving the ‘correct’, universally applicable methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The toolbox will also facilitate revisions, corrections, and reformulations of aspects such as the category schema, meaning that the GT researcher can afford to be creative and try out concepts and configurations that may not stand the test of time or, more correctly, the test of the data.

This approach makes irrelevant a common argument by established GT schools on the error of early adoption of a coding family or a particular analytic technique, simply because a technically skilled GT researcher can easily replace or re-model anything that does not work. By way of a practical example, MAXQDA's ‘Creative Coding’ function can be used to seamlessly reconfigure both a category schema and all the data within it. This vital third expectation provides a plethora of options for quality evaluation, in fact for the full framework of expectations that has been outlined. For example, utilising MAXQDA's Code Matrix Browser will immediately visualise the variance of data across a study's category schema, highlighting data strengths and weaknesses. Or, alternatively, applying MAXQDA's Two-Cases modelling will provide a comparative contrast between cases, or between sets of cases, allowing researchers and supervisors alike to quickly confirm relationships and interactions within the data. Even a basic view of MAXQDA's Code Window will provide access to the full codebook of a study, evidencing the volume and variance of data incidents and reflexive writings related to each and every code or theoretically developed category.

Such strength of toolbox allows for ease of monitoring, evaluation, correction and recalibration, significantly facilitating the overseeing task of the supervisor and proving practical and continuous assistance to the student.

6. Final Considerations

Six GT practitioner-researcher studies have been outlined in this paper, all rigorously following the framework of three process-oriented quality expectations previously discussed. The final product of these practitioner-researchers' doctoral journey is required to be a parsimonious, process-based substantive theory that is deemed by industry to be relevant and usable. In all of the examples, the practitioner-researchers were following a professional doctorate trajectory and had chosen a field of research that was strongly correlated with their previous work life and also related to their present field of expertise and work focus. It was commonly observed that the level of interaction and synergy between the researcher and the industry stakeholders followed an incremental trajectory of increased collaboration and value enhancement. This aspect was even evidenced in the sampling strategy of the researchers, as they evolved from convenience to purposive to theoretical sampling and, in the process, built a closer partnership with the industry concerned. The methodological contribution offered by this paper is that quality in GT is best safeguarded not by inflexible checklists but by process-oriented expectations embedded throughout the research, together with the positioning of the practitioner-researcher as a reflexive, industry-embedded inquirer.

Not all GT research involves practitioner-researchers, and not all GT research aims at providing understanding and solutions to real-world industry challenges. However, where this is a necessity the students need to be initially knowledgeable, informed and sensitised towards the industry or the societal needs relating to their particular field of study. This requirement is even more acute for resource-limited industries or entities where, for example, “small business owners are busy people, often under considerable pressure. Understandably, they may not be too sympathetic to requests from researchers for some of their time” (Curran & Blackburn, 2001, p. 60). This may be a limitation for students entering an unknown research setting, as a lack of industry insight may not be tolerated by hard-pressed entities, possibly resulting in weak or inconsequential data at early research stages, that could then lead to a cascaded weakness for the whole of the study. Two alternative recommendations are made here; Firstly, that researchers with limited field exposure work towards acclimatisation within the substantive area of study prior to commencing, possibly through internships or by supporting local projects, striving to build early practitioner-researcher maturity. This will then be significantly strengthened as the processual research unfolds. A second alternative is that early researchers are initially supported by experienced supervisors that help deal with industry gatekeepers and use their knowledge position to persuade industry about the potential benefits and practical significance of a particular research endeavour, encouraging a strong industry contribution to support the early researcher.

Ethical Approval: The present paper is a methodological reflection drawing on already-published or ongoing doctoral research and did not involve additional primary data collection requiring separate ethical review. The doctoral studies referenced as illustrative examples in this paper were individually subject to the institutional ethical approval procedures of the doctoral programme mentioned earlier, run by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and accredited by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority. Thus, all studies followed the institution's rigorous ethical guidelines and were provided with ethical clearance to proceed with their research by the MCAST Ethics Committee.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the underlying doctoral studies cited as examples, in line with institutional ethics requirements, ensuring respect for the principles of confidentiality, voluntariness, and anonymity.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The material has not been published, in whole or in part, elsewhere and is not currently under consideration for publication in any other journal. All authors were personally and actively involved in the work that led to this article and assume responsibility for its content. All ethical standards concerning the protection of participants in the underlying studies were implemented in accordance with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2023).

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): An Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool (Claude.ai) was used solely to review the academic writing, textual formulation, and organisational layout of the final draft of this paper, in line with the publication guidelines. This did not replace the critical analysis, data interpretation, methodological decisions, script compilation, or the academic responsibility of the authors, who fully assume authorship and the integrity of the content presented.

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