

Reclaiming Theory Building in Leadership Development Research: Why Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Grounded Theory Remains Methodologically Central

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Abstract: Grounded theory has become one of the most widely adopted qualitative methodologies within leadership and organisational research due to its capacity to explore process, interaction, and meaning-making in complex social environments. However, despite its widespread application, concerns have emerged that some contemporary grounded theory studies increasingly generate descriptive thematic frameworks rather than integrated explanatory theory. This paper argues that the progressive de-emphasis of axial coding, the paradigm model, and the explicit identification of a central phenomenon within later grounded theory developments has unintentionally weakened grounded theory's original theory-building mandate. Drawing on the methodological evolution of grounded theory from Glaser and Strauss (1967) through Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998), Corbin and Strauss (2008; 2015), and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2014), the paper critically examines the growing convergence between grounded theory and thematic analysis within leadership development scholarship. Anchored in Taylor's (2013) grounded theory study of servant leadership development, the paper demonstrates how Strauss and Corbin's (1998) paradigm model enabled the construction of an integrated explanatory theory linking causal conditions, contextual influences, action/interaction strategies, and developmental consequences across institutional settings. The paper contends that leadership development research requires analytic architectures capable of explaining how leadership identities and practices emerge, stabilise, and evolve over time. Retaining Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory framework is therefore positioned not as methodological rigidity, but as a necessary safeguard for preserving grounded theory's explanatory and theory-generating capacity within contemporary qualitative leadership research.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, Leadership Development, Axial Coding, Paradigm Model, Theory Building, Qualitative Methodology, Strauss and Corbin

1. Introduction

Leadership development has emerged as a major field of inquiry within leadership and organisational studies, driven by growing recognition that leadership capacity is not fixed, innate, or exclusively trait-based, but rather socially constructed, developmentally shaped, and institutionally mediated (Day, 2000; Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Day & Antonakis, 2012). Across organisational and educational contexts, increasing attention has been directed toward understanding how leadership identities, practices, values, and capabilities develop over time through interaction with institutional environments, relational networks, and lived experience (McDermott, Kidney, & Flood, 2011; Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Alongside this growing scholarly interest has been a corresponding expansion in the use of qualitative methodologies, particularly grounded theory, due to their capacity to capture complexity, temporality, meaning-making, and social process within leadership contexts.

Grounded theory remains one of the most influential qualitative methodologies within organisational and leadership research because of its original mandate to generate explanatory theory grounded in empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Unlike methodologies primarily oriented toward description or interpretation, grounded theory was explicitly developed to explain social processes through systematic conceptual integration. Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) further formalised this explanatory orientation through the development of open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and the coding paradigm, which collectively enabled researchers to move beyond descriptive thematic categorisation toward integrated substantive theory.

However, despite grounded theory's continued popularity within leadership studies, methodological scholars have cautioned that some applications prioritise thematic coding and descriptive categorisation over explanatory theory integration (Suddaby, 2006; Bryant, 2019). This concern is particularly evident within leadership development scholarship, where grounded theory studies frequently identify leadership attributes, developmental experiences, or leadership journeys without generating integrated explanatory theory capable of explaining how leadership development occurs as a socially situated process.

The progressive evolution of grounded theory methodology partly explains this shift. While Strauss and Corbin's (1990; 1998) formulations foregrounded the paradigm model, central phenomenon, and systematic category integration, later grounded theory developments increasingly softened the visibility of these analytic structures.

Corbin and Strauss (2008; 2015) repositioned the paradigm model as one possible analytic tool among many, while constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2014) further reoriented grounded theory toward interpretive co-construction, reflexivity, and meaning-making. These developments made highly valuable contributions to qualitative inquiry by foregrounding researcher positionality, context, and interpretive flexibility. Yet they also unintentionally facilitated a drift in which grounded theory increasingly became associated with coding procedures and thematic interpretation rather than explanatory integration and substantive theory generation.

This methodological drift carries important implications for leadership development research. Leadership development is inherently processual, relational, and temporally dynamic. It involves identity formation, institutional socialisation, symbolic recognition, relational learning, and evolving behavioural practice across multiple social contexts and developmental stages (Day et al., 2021). Such complexity cannot adequately be theorised through thematic aggregation alone. Rather, leadership development research requires integrative analytic architectures capable of explaining relationships between contextual conditions, social interactions, institutional structures, and developmental outcomes over time (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017).

This paper therefore argues that the central methodological issue within contemporary grounded theory is not flexibility itself, but the weakening of explanatory integration as grounded theory's defining analytical purpose. Within leadership development research, where social processes unfold across institutional, relational, and temporal contexts, preserving explanatory integration remains essential for substantive theory generation. The contribution of this paper lies in repositioning Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory as a contemporary methodological framework capable of preserving explanatory integration within leadership development research.

The following literature review therefore examines the evolution of grounded theory methodology and the growing methodological debate surrounding theory integration, thematic drift, and the role of the paradigm model in leadership research.

2. Literature Review

The methodological debate surrounding grounded theory increasingly centres on whether contemporary grounded theory approaches retain sufficient explanatory integration to support substantive theory generation. While grounded theory was originally developed to explain social processes grounded in empirical experience (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), later methodological developments have progressively shifted emphasis toward interpretive flexibility and thematic meaning-making. Understanding this evolution is important because leadership development research requires methodologies capable not only of identifying themes, but of explaining how leadership identities, practices, and developmental processes emerge across time and context.

Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) later formalised grounded theory procedures through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Their approach emphasised integration between categories through the paradigm model, which linked causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action/interactions, and consequences. The purpose of this structure was to move analysis beyond descriptive categorisation toward explanatory process theory.

The 1998 edition of Strauss and Corbin's work represented an important methodological refinement. While maintaining structured analytic integration, the framework allowed greater flexibility and reflexivity than earlier procedural grounded theory approaches. Importantly, however, the paradigm model and central phenomenon remained central mechanisms for explanatory integration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Later grounded theory developments increasingly shifted toward interpretive flexibility. Corbin and Strauss (2008; 2015) softened the centrality of the paradigm model, while Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory foregrounded co-construction, reflexivity, and interpretive meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). These developments significantly enriched qualitative inquiry, particularly within fields concerned with identity, power, and lived experience.

However, methodological scholars have raised concerns that grounded theory is increasingly being applied as a coding and categorisation technique rather than as a methodology for explanatory theory generation (Suddaby, 2006; Locke, 2001; Bryant, 2019). Within leadership and organisational research, this has contributed to studies that generate rich thematic description but more limited theoretical integration.

Leadership development research is especially vulnerable to this challenge because leadership development itself is highly processual and contextually situated. Leadership identities and practices emerge through socialisation, mentoring, institutional exposure, symbolic recognition, and developmental experience across time (Murphy & Johnson, 2011; Day et al., 2021). Explaining such complexity requires analytic approaches capable of integrating relationships between context, action, interaction, and developmental outcomes. Leadership development scholarship increasingly calls for process-oriented and longitudinal explanations of how leadership identities and practices emerge across institutional and relational contexts (Day et al., 2021; Vogel et al., 2021). However, much leadership research remains competency-focused or descriptively experiential. This creates a need for grounded theory approaches capable of integrating developmental process, social interaction, institutional context, and behavioural change into coherent explanatory frameworks.

Taylor's (2013) grounded theory study provides a useful illustration of how Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework can support explanatory integration. The study identified the central phenomenon as "the development of an individual's leadership philosophy and practice" and systematically integrated categories using the paradigm model. This enabled the development of the substantive theory described as "the social field of servant leadership development."

The literature therefore suggests that the key issue is not whether grounded theory should be rigid or flexible, but whether it retains its explanatory purpose. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework remains methodologically significant because it preserves grounded theory's distinctive capacity for explanatory integration and substantive theory generation. While these developments expanded interpretive sensitivity, they also reduced the visibility of explicit explanatory integration within grounded theory analysis.

The literature therefore suggests that the key methodological issue is not whether grounded theory should remain rigidly procedural or interpretively flexible, but whether it retains sufficient explanatory integration to generate substantive theory. This issue is particularly important within leadership development research, where understanding developmental process requires analytic structures capable of linking context, interaction, action, and consequence. The next section therefore outlines the methodological positioning adopted in this paper and explains why Strauss and Corbin's (1998) paradigm model remains central to explanatory integration.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual qualitative methodology grounded in critical analysis of explanatory integration within grounded theory research. Rather than presenting new empirical fieldwork, the paper examines how the evolution of grounded theory methodology has influenced theory construction within leadership development scholarship. The analysis is anchored in Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory framework and uses Taylor's (2013) servant leadership study as an empirical illustration of how explanatory integration can be achieved through the paradigm model.

The paper is positioned within an interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through interaction, experience, and meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective is appropriate for leadership development research because leadership identities and practices emerge through social and institutional processes over time.

The methodological focus of the paper is Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach, particularly the use of:

- open coding,
- axial coding,
- selective coding,
- and the paradigm model.

The paradigm model organises analysis around:

- causal conditions,
- the central phenomenon,
- context,
- intervening conditions,
- action/interaction strategies,
- and consequences.

This structure supports integration between categories and movement from descriptive coding toward explanatory theory generation.

To illustrate this approach, the paper draws on Taylor's (2013) grounded theory study, which explored servant leadership development across school, university, and workplace contexts using thirty-six semi-structured interviews analysed through Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory procedures. The methodological focus on explanatory integration provides the analytical foundation for the discussion that follows. The next section examines how weakening emphasis on the paradigm model and central phenomenon has contributed to methodological drift within grounded theory and demonstrates how Taylor's (2013) study illustrates the continuing value of integrative grounded theory analysis within leadership development research.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that contemporary grounded theory research increasingly faces challenges relating to explanatory integration. While grounded theory remains widely used within leadership and organisational studies, methodological scholars have cautioned that some applications prioritise thematic categorisation and descriptive coding over substantive theory generation (Suddaby, 2006; Bryant, 2019). The findings discussed below indicate that the weakening of integrative analytic structures such as the paradigm model has important implications for leadership development research, where process explanation remains essential.

However, later grounded theory developments increasingly prioritised interpretive flexibility and reflexive meaning-making while reducing emphasis on explicit integrative structures such as the paradigm model and central phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2014). While these developments enriched qualitative inquiry, they also contributed to methodological drift in which grounded theory studies increasingly resembled thematic analysis rather than explanatory theory generation (Bryant, 2019; Suddaby, 2006).

Several grounded theory scholars have raised concerns that grounded theory is increasingly being applied as a coding and categorisation technique rather than as a methodology for explanatory theory generation (Suddaby, 2006; Locke, 2001; Bryant, 2019). Within leadership and organisational research, this has contributed to studies that generate rich thematic description but more limited theoretical integration. Three key findings emerge from this analysis. First, grounded theory literature demonstrates a progressive reduction in emphasis on explicit integrative structures such as the paradigm model and central phenomenon. Second, this methodological shift has contributed to increased convergence between grounded theory and thematic analysis within leadership research. Third, Taylor's (2013) study illustrates that Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework continues to support substantive explanatory integration within leadership development research.

The findings also suggest that the reduced visibility of the paradigm model has contributed significantly to this shift. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework originally positioned the paradigm model as a mechanism for linking:

- causal conditions,
- context,
- intervening conditions,
- action/interaction strategies,
- and consequences.

This structure enabled researchers to reconstruct social processes and generate explanatory theory grounded in participant experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The empirical illustration drawn from Taylor's (2013) grounded theory study demonstrates the continuing value of Strauss and Corbin's framework within leadership development research. Taylor's study identified the central phenomenon as:

“the development of an individual's leadership philosophy and practice.”

Using the paradigm model, the study integrated leadership opportunities, institutional contexts, mentoring relationships, service experiences, reflection practices, and leadership identity formation into a coherent explanatory framework. This level of integration enabled the development of the substantive theory described as:

“the social field of servant leadership development.”

The findings therefore support the argument that Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) grounded theory framework remains methodologically valuable because it preserves grounded theory’s explanatory architecture. Leadership development research requires methodologies capable of explaining social process, interaction, and developmental change across time and context (Day et al., 2021).

Taylor’s (2013) study is significant within this paper not simply as an example of grounded theory application, but as evidence of how Strauss and Corbin’s framework supports explanatory integration across conditions, interactions, institutional contexts, and developmental outcomes. Rather than producing isolated themes, the study demonstrates how the paradigm model enables movement from participant experience toward substantive explanatory theory.

The findings also carry implications for doctoral education and qualitative research training. Contemporary doctoral students and novice qualitative researchers are often introduced to grounded theory primarily through coding procedures rather than systematic theory construction (Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019; Birks & Mills, 2023). As a result, researchers may become proficient in identifying themes but less confident in integrating categories into explanatory theory. This contributes to the growing convergence between grounded theory and thematic analysis identified by methodological scholars.

This paper is conceptual and methodological in nature and therefore does not present a systematic review or empirical comparative analysis of grounded theory studies within leadership research. The arguments advanced are based on critical methodological analysis and illustrative empirical application through Taylor’s (2013) study. a contemporary integrative architecture capable of preserving grounded theory’s explanatory purpose within leadership development scholarship

5. Conclusion

This paper has consistently argued that grounded theory’s distinctive contribution to leadership development research lies not simply in inductive coding, but in its capacity for explanatory integration. While grounded theory has evolved in important and valuable ways, the progressive reduction of explicit integrative structures such as the paradigm model and central phenomenon has weakened grounded theory’s original theory-building architecture.

Using Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) framework and Taylor’s (2013) study as an empirical illustration, the paper has demonstrated the continuing methodological value of the paradigm model for leadership development research. The paradigm model supports integration between causal conditions, context, action/interaction strategies, and consequences, enabling researchers to move beyond descriptive themes toward substantive theory generation.

The paper further suggests that current challenges in grounded theory application may partly reflect insufficient methodological training in theory integration. Contemporary doctoral students and novice qualitative researchers are often introduced to grounded theory primarily through coding procedures rather than through systematic theory construction (Tie et al., 2019; Birks & Mills, 2023). As a result, researchers may become proficient in identifying themes and categories but less confident in integrating categories into explanatory theory.

The paper therefore recommends that doctoral education and qualitative research training place greater emphasis on:

- the role of the central phenomenon,
- axial and selective coding,
- process explanation,
- and integration through the paradigm model.

Ultimately, the continued relevance of grounded theory within leadership development research depends not only on methodological flexibility, but also on preserving its explanatory purpose. Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) framework remains methodologically important because it retains analytic structures capable of integrating context, interaction, process, and consequence into substantive theory. Preserving explanatory integration within grounded theory is therefore essential if leadership development scholarship is to move beyond descriptive thematic analysis toward rigorous theory generation capable of explaining how leadership develops

across institutional and social contexts. Future research may benefit from systematic examination of how grounded theory is operationalised across contemporary leadership development studies. The contribution of this paper lies in repositioning Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework not as a rigid procedural model, but as a contemporary integrative architecture capable of preserving grounded theory's explanatory purpose within leadership development scholarship.

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