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## **Researching memories of *The Exorcist*: An introduction to grounded audience studies**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay critically evaluates grounded theory methodology and mixed qualitative methods of data generation used in an ongoing international audience research project dealing with the forty-six-year history of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). The project employed an international survey, individual interviews and small focus groups to produce data on audiences' experiences with the film from its release in 1973 to the present day. It resulted in a data set constituting the recollections of around 800 individuals from the US, the UK, and other English-speaking countries, detailing encounters with *The Exorcist* in its many incarnations over the years in the cinema, at the drive-in and in the home. In this essay, I argue for the potential of Kathy Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory methodology in producing grounded audience studies which employ a more iterative, collaborative, open-ended process of discovery. This approach facilitates research which speaks more to audiences' everyday experiences, forgoing the quest for the verification or rejection of age-old theories and giving more power to participants. Resultant studies, with their concerns grounded in original data, may reflect better the immediate, personal circumstances affecting the reception of individual films. I discuss how grounded theory methodology shaped the direction of this research and offer a template for a grounded audience study.

**Keywords:** audiences; cinema-going; home-viewing; methods; grounded theory; horror

This article is drawn from an on-going audience research project concerning *The Exorcist*. The study employs 'grounded theory' methodology using mixed qualitative methods to generate theories on the workings of memory and identity with regards to film spectatorship and people's everyday lives. The research was designed to be flexible and iterative, using early analysis stages to ensure more effective data generation which would aid in the generation of theories. The aim was to specifically generate new theories in

reference to the reception of *The Exorcist* in a variety of circumstances, with a view to their being more widely applicable to others. Using the methods outlined in this article, the study was able to transcend the folklore and media sensationalism that has for so long dogged the film to investigate personal experiences with *The Exorcist* spanning its long history. Despite being infamous for its reported power over its audiences, audiences of *The Exorcist* are only represented in Julian Hoxter's (2000) synchronic study in fan-made websites of the late 1990s. The film has been largely set aside within film scholarship but for those who wish to conduct textual analyses that say nothing about watching a film in its everyday context. This project is designed to explore what the film meant and still means to those who watched it, not as an historical object but as a living thing. Helen Taylor's study of fandom features women who had watched the film so frequently in their lifetimes that they came to describe *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) as more than just a film; it was a 'friend' (Taylor, 1989: 232). This study set out to examine processes of viewing in the family home and at the cinema, processes of remembering the same, and the workings of long-term reception, of what happens when one gets on first-name basis, so to speak, with a film such as *The Exorcist*. This article does not discuss the findings of the study, but instead offers a template for conducting audience research after the fashion of grounded theory.

Grounded theory, a stalwart methodology in medical research on patient experiences since the late 1960s, has been absent from the field of audience studies to date. Only Stefanie Rauch's (2017) study of audience evaluations of Holocaust films employs the methodology, albeit with only a brief methodological description and without using grounded theory methods of analysis. Drawing on my experience with this study of *The Exorcist*'s audiences, I argue that grounded theory provides a fresh and highly structured yet flexible approach to conducting audience research capable of producing new insights into the place of film in people's everyday lives, particularly as it relates to historical experiences and diachronic reception. This approach allows audiences to better participate and to steer the focus of research to ensure the findings speak to their experiences. A grounded theory approach forgoes the application or even the testing of extant concepts and theories, ensuring that a project's findings grow from its own data and not the academic echo chamber of the particular field in which the research is set.

The methodological approach described in this article provides an effective and pragmatic framework for generating and analysing a large data set, especially for small teams or solo researchers. It presents a viable alternative to the currently popular online survey approach which was recently questioned by Alan Brown (2017: 60) in this journal. I will first outline the key tenets of grounded theory before describing the process of doing audience research in the manner of grounded theory methodology – hereafter referred to as a 'grounded audience study' for the sake of brevity – and then I critically evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

## **Grounded Theory Methodology**

In the foundational text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's stated mission was to close 'the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research' that had become a mainstay of the social sciences by the 1960s (Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]: VIII). Driven by an increasing sophistication in quantitative research methods, Glaser and Strauss noted in 1967 that, at the cost of new theories, 'verification of theory is the keynote of current sociology' (2008 [1967]: 10). A consequence of this focus was that theories were applied to situations and experiences to which they were ill-suited. Theories were often applied after being transposed wholesale from other studies, usually 'proven' with selectively chosen examples from their own data, resulting in research which was not fit for purpose (Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]: 4-5). Building upon their work together on death and dying in American hospitals (1965's *Awareness of Dying*), Glaser and Strauss developed an inductive process of doing qualitative social research in which resultant theories are intrinsically linked to, and thus 'grounded' by, data (2008 [1967]: 3). Grounded theory studies investigate a particular process, action or interaction in a systematic manner to explain it, rejecting a focus on verifying other researchers' extant theories and concepts.

As developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967; Glaser, 1978, 1998; Strauss, 1987; Corbin and Strauss, 2015 [1990]), grounded theory provides a highly structured methodology for qualitative research. The defining feature of a grounded theory study for Glaser and Strauss, as outlined by Kathy Charmaz (2014), is concurrent data gathering and analysis with constant comparisons (the 'constant comparative method') between and within data and developing concepts. The exclusive focus is on advancing the development of theories, rather than proving or disproving an existing theory for a representative sample. The primary features of a grounded theory study are as follows:

- There is original coding of data rather than the borrowing from other researchers of preconceived hypotheses which were logically deduced (i.e., not arising from data);
- Theoretical sampling drives data generation, through concurrent analysis and data generation stages;
- Memos are written throughout the research process, detailing the steps taken to arrive at one's findings;
- The conducting of a thorough literature review only *after* the independent development of one's own concepts and theories (Charmaz, 2014: 7-8).

Along with these criteria for conducting the research, a resultant grounded theory will meet the following criteria: 'a close fit with the data, usefulness, conceptual density, durability over time, modifiability, and explanatory power' (Charmaz, 2014: 8).

The role of the literature review is a point of contention in grounded theory methodology. Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, the proponents of the most widely used strand of grounded theory, argue that it is unnecessary for a researcher to conduct a thorough literature review before undertaking a research task (2015: 49). The concern is

that a literature review may stifle the researcher's imagination and direct his or her inquiries, leading to the inclusion or mere influence of borrowed theories or concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 49-50). Glaser's misgivings about an up-front review of the literature are presented in much stronger terms. Glaser states that conducting a literature review 'violates the basic premise of [grounded theory] – that being, the theory emerges from the data not from extant theory' (2004: 46). As stated, there is resistance to using any extant theories or concepts that do not come from one's own data, and, for Glaser, this extends to an insistence on avoiding all literature on the subject for fear of being subconsciously swayed.

Not all grounded theory scholars agree with such extreme measures, however. A researcher must understand the current theoretical conversation in a field to be able to enter into it with any hope of providing theories of use to other researchers, Lora Bex Lempert argues, making a case for a broad initial literature review (2007: 254). She suggests researchers should be aware of gaps in current knowledge, though she does emphasise caution not to let the literature review define the research (2007: 254). Becoming familiar with work in the relevant fields ensures a researcher is more sensitive to nuances within generated data and a second, more focused review of literature may be undertaken after the development of theories arising from one's data. This second literature review is a useful tool in comparison, seeing where the theories arising from one's own research fit with or contradict existing theories. Corbin and Strauss advise keeping comparisons at a conceptual level, however, rather than treating other researchers' findings as data (2015: 49). It cannot be stressed enough that only concepts that have been derived from data, rather than logically deduced, are useful in such comparisons (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 50).

Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (2007: 20) also question the assumption that a researcher who has not read widely on the topic of study is a 'blank slate' when beginning research, and this is something which informed the decision, for this project, to conduct an initial broad literature review after Lempert's (2007) suggestion. 'An open mind does not imply an empty head', Bryant and Charmaz state (2007: 20), arguing that experienced researchers often arrive at a project with a deep knowledge of their subject. Claims about being able to eliminate a researcher's influence on the study are part of the positivistic Glaserian and Straussian slant of early grounded theory which prompted Charmaz (2014) to develop 'constructivist grounded theory'. Charmaz acknowledges the subjectivity of qualitative research and attempts to account for researcher bias, rather than claiming to be able to eliminate it (2014: 12).

The most widely used incarnation of grounded theory, being that derived from Corbin and Strauss's (2015, first published in 1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, is heavily criticised for its positivist underpinnings. Charmaz calls attention to the perceived rigidity and in-built assumptions of this approach (2014: 12). Developing constructivist grounded theory as an answer to such problems, Charmaz (2000, 2005, 2014) aimed to be less mechanical in the application of grounded theory methods and to draw attention to the role of interpretation for both the researcher and the participants.

Constructivist grounded theory, which is the school of grounded theory to which this study aligned itself and is most promising for audience studies, grew out of a necessity 'to acknowledge the subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data' (Charmaz, 2014: 14). The research is thus no longer defined by the positivism and supposed 'objectivity' of the work of Glaser, Corbin and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Charmaz rejects the idea of one fixed and knowable 'truth' about a given process, action or interaction, dismisses the idea of a researcher beginning a project as a 'blank slate', and focuses on subjectivity, emphasising research as a construction under a certain set of circumstances (2014: 13). Audience studies' need to account for the role of the researcher in co-constructing data and the unavoidable subjectivity inherent in asking for audiences' interpretations of media makes constructivist grounded theory a very good fit, methodologically. Grounded theory's strength is that the development of theory is driven by (therefore grounded in) data, and it is important to remain aware of who, the researcher or the participant, is behind the wheel. Charmaz's constructivist twist on grounded theory has this as its defining revision, a heightened reflexivity which is incredibly important in research that claims to be open-ended and iterative (2014: 13).

As outlined by Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory provides a strong methodological framework with an important emphasis on researcher reflexivity, but it would be unfair to portray it merely as a modern upgrade of grounded theory of the past. Glaser (with Holton, 2004) responded to Charmaz's (2000) critique with a rebuttal which bears discussion here. Glaser calls constructivism 'a backdoor approach to studying the professional problem in lieu of studying the main concern of the participants' (2004: 43). He argues that grounded theory is specifically about theory and therefore a focus on description of process does nothing to add to the applicability or otherwise of any theories which may emerge (2004: 41). Glaser's (2004) chief complaint is that Charmaz (2000) turns grounded theory, with constructivist additions, into little more than a descriptive method of qualitative data analysis. For Glaser, her additional structure is 'not consistent with [grounded theory], it is just a remodel erosion of pure [grounded theory]' (2004: 39).

While this research employed Charmaz's (2014) constructivist model to better account for the process, particularly in the rejection of any pretense to 'objectivity' and of simply gathering data rather than co-creating it, I am cautious of the tendency towards over-description Glaser discusses. Glaser's (2004) concerns about the in-built tendency of constructivist grounded theory studies to concentrate more on storytelling and descriptive research narratives than on the generation of theory are valid and worth heeding in a grounded audience study. Glaser states, 'There is no need to preamble grounded theory to distraction with promises of legitimacy. Let the product legitimize itself, as it is doing in the health, education and business professions, where it is crucial to have relevant research that works' (1998: 16). Glaser's (1998, 2004) criticisms do not negate the need for openness about the research process, however. These criticisms should be minded in grounded

audience studies as a corrective against over-description, rather than being used as an excuse for a lack of reflexivity.

This article's primary concern is methodology, of course, so I will here continue to outline the steps involved in this grounded audience study. I will provide blueprints for theoretical sampling and the analysis of data after the fashion of constructivist grounded theory in the hopes of providing an alternative approach to audience studies. This approach does not involve trying to verify extant theories, it prohibits the borrowing of age-old concepts from literary studies, and the research design is not defined by its opposition to baseless folk theories, such as the 'effects' model. Neither does this approach permit the testing of researchers' own logically deduced theories. Rather, grounded theory presents an opportunity, and a clear process, for producing research that speaks to audiences' experiences and interests above all else. It forces a fresh start, so to speak, that, most importantly, prioritises participants' input and embraces the strengths of qualitative research.

### **The Research Process: Step-by-step**

Charmaz (2014: 18) outlines seven steps in constructivist grounded theory research which were followed for this grounded audience study. These steps, as follows, will be discussed in turn, accompanied by a specific description of how they were applied to this study:

1. Determine broad research interests through an initial literature review
2. Recruit participants
3. Generate data
4. Conduct initial coding
5. Conduct focused coding and practice theoretical sampling to generate more data
6. Build theories
7. Write up the research

A common criticism of grounded theory studies, exacerbated by its increasing popularity, is that more researchers cite it as their methodological framework than actually use it as intended (Barbour, 1998: 358; Charmaz, 2014: 15). Charmaz states that the lack of evidencing of theoretical sampling is the most common downfall in grounded theory studies which fail to maximise on the strengths of the approach (2014: 15). Theoretical sampling is particular to grounded theory and is common to both the objectivist school of Corbin and Strauss (2015) and Glaser (1978) and the constructivist school of Charmaz (2014). Corbin and Strauss describe it thus: 'In theoretical sampling, it is concepts and not people, per se, that are sampled. So when researchers sample theoretically, they go to places, persons, and situations that will provide information about the concepts they want to learn more about' (2015: 135).

The sampling becomes more specific later into the research process as new data adds to the concepts and theories being developed (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 137).



Categories created in the coding process take on more dimensions and become more nuanced as the research progresses. Certain elements can then be specifically targeted in further data generation efforts, after being identified through the constant comparative method of always moving back and forth between data being generated and data being analysed. This differs from 'selective sampling', which is where a specific locale is sampled based on preconceived categories. Glaser states, 'The analyst who uses theoretical sampling cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead him' (1978: 37). The direction of the study emerges as data is generated and analysed, the participants driving the direction of inquiry, and theoretical sampling is an invaluable strategy in this regard.

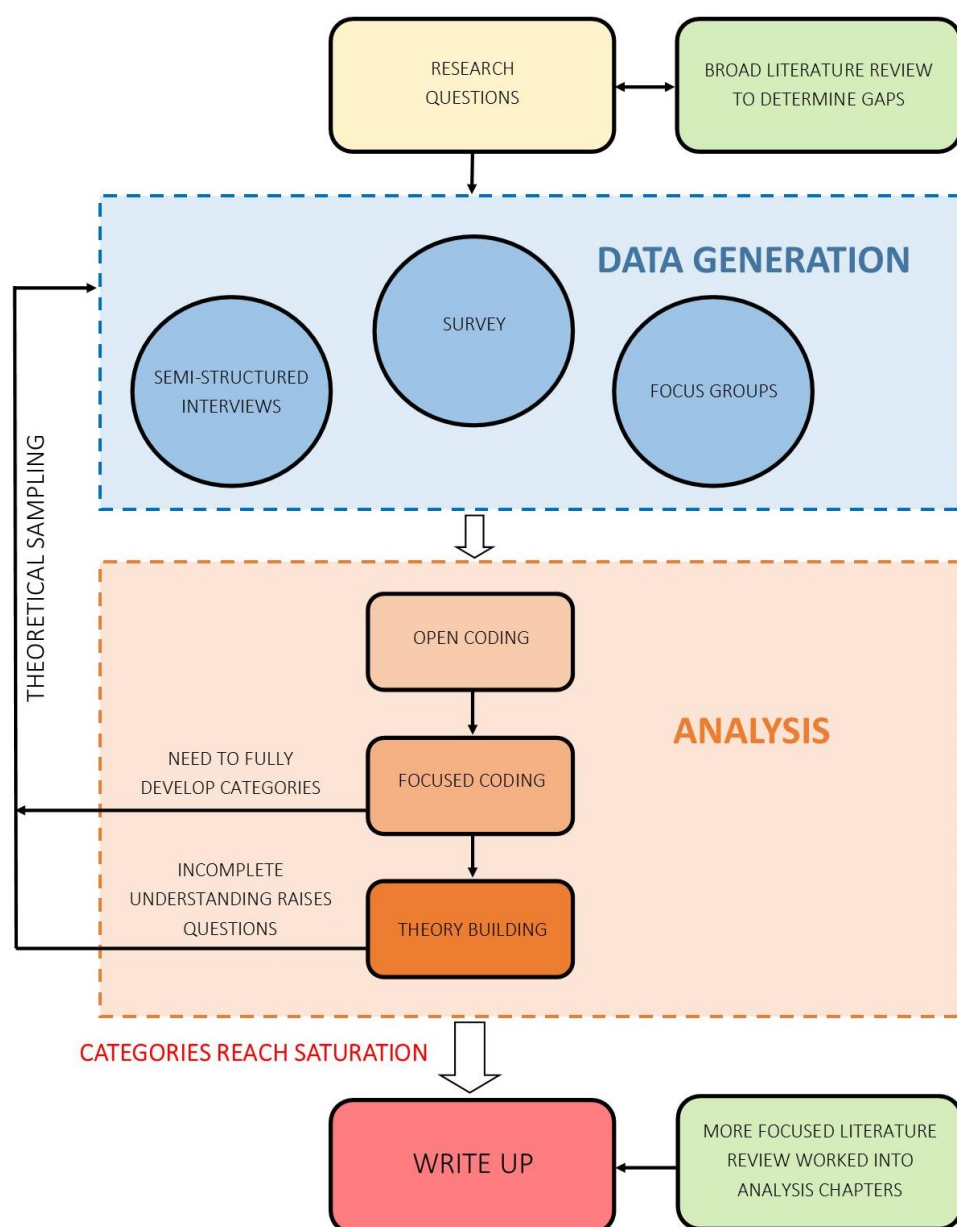
Theoretical sampling is commonplace in oral history work as a way of combating 'retrospective representativeness', being when a particular historical moment or event is far enough in the past that many of those involved or affected have passed away (Thompson, 2000: 151). British historian Paul Thompson (2000) advocates for theoretical sampling to explore topics, events or periods when the number of people still living, or at least accessible to a historian, is insufficient. Theoretical sampling, Thompson argues, is more effective in developing an understanding of the past than seeking a sample representative of the population involved (2000: 151). In this way, a grounded audience study using theoretical sampling is a particularly effective way of tackling historical investigations of the reception of a film, which to date remains largely the domain of archival studies. For this study of *The Exorcist*, whose early audiences are now difficult to reach, there was no other option if I were to conduct an audience study.

When the categories are fully developed after coding and new data stops generating new ideas, checked via the constant comparative method, this is called the 'saturation point' or reaching 'theoretical saturation' (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 85). It is at this point the recruitment and sampling is stopped. Although there is no fixed requirement for a number of interviews in grounded theory – the number required varies depending on the topic or event – Creswell and Poth state that twenty to thirty interviews is often enough to reach the saturation point (2018: 85). This study resulted in interviews with twenty-four individuals along with data from the survey (746 responses) and five small focus groups. With a wealth of data, this concept of theoretical saturation, of stopping when new data were producing no new insights, was invaluable in judging when enough data had been generated to begin the real work of theory construction and writing. During the coding process, the constant comparative method of grounded theory was employed, where questions raised by the data are taken back into the recruitment and sampling stage as the researcher looks for ways to fill out the categories (codes) being created.

For example, 'parental censoring' became a clear theme and was an early code upon examining the first survey responses. It arose again in early interviews, with participants talking about how they, as children, were not allowed to see the film, and what that meant to them and their approach to the film. In order to fully understand acts of parental censorship, new interviewees were selected from the survey responses based on their



potential for shedding light on this code from any direction. Interviews were conducted with those who saw the film in different decades, to allow for technological differences such as VHS and streaming, and even parents were sought out, to account for the other side of this parent-child scenario. As questions arose about this censorship process – for example, questions about whether some participants *wished* they had been protected from the film by their parents – these questions were put to new interviewees to explore further, where possible. Newly generated data in this way is compared with existing data, because the analysis and generation stages are concurrent, and questions raised are taken back to more participants. Crosswell and Poth (2018: 85) describe the process of moving back and forth between data generation and analysis as a zig-zag pattern, and so it was. Memos are written throughout these steps, providing space to think on paper, and the constant comparative method drives theoretical sampling based on data already generated and coded. The flow chart below (figure 1) visualises the research process to highlight how theoretical sampling drove theory generation. The chart is a heavily modified version of a diagram offered by Charmaz (2014: 18).



**Figure 1: The research process.**

In the core grounded theory literature (being Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]), the issue of mixing qualitative methods, as did this study with a survey, interviews and focus groups, is rarely addressed. (Though this research employs a survey which uses mixed qualitative and quantitative questions, the quantitative input was merely a guide for initially recruiting a wide range of participants and providing contextual data for the survey). Many grounded theorists are simply satisfied with Glaser's proclamation that 'All is data' (1998: 8). However, as useful and pragmatic an approach as that is, differences in data generation methods bear more thinking about, especially when used in combination with one another.

Combining qualitative methods is something that perhaps grounded theory can learn about from audience studies, where qualitative methods of analysis have been combined effectively, such as in Daniela Treveri Gennari and Silvia Dibeltulo's (2017) work on Italian cinema-going history which utilises oral testimony and archival records. Rosaline Barbour's (1998) discussion of combining qualitative methods addresses an issue which she states is often presented as the primary concern to researchers quantitative and qualitative alike: the triangulation of data through combining methods of data collection. Barbour states that the term triangulation is employed by qualitative researchers, despite its origins in quantitative research, as 'an attempt to claim rigor rather than a description of how this is to be achieved' (1998: 358). Barbour takes issue with much of the language used in qualitative research which has its beginnings in quantitative methods. She cites criticisms about concepts such as validity, reliability, objectivity and generalisation being used in qualitative research. Instead, very much in line with the aims of constructivist grounded theory, Barbour argues for the less positivist concepts of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (1998: 358). Barbour takes specific issue with the idea of triangulation being applied to qualitative work, discussing how in quantitative methods exceptions are used to disprove the rule, whereas in qualitative work it is more fruitful to use exceptions to fill out theories, to prove the rule (1998: 359). In the study of audiences of *The Exorcist* throughout its history – quite a task given the number of variables over forty-six years of history – this approach was invaluable when the intended outcome was never to iron out difference between such varied experiences.

Barbour expresses a stance on mixing qualitative methods which is in concert with approaches in grounded theory, despite its lack of theorization in the core grounded theory literature. Barbour states that a process of analytic induction, which naturally includes grounded theory, can allow for the analysis of data from different sources and the generation of theories which are all the more fully developed for it (1998: 360). Defining contradictory data from different qualitative methods as a boon rather than a burden, Barbour states: 'We need to be less apprehensive about apparent contradictions that emerge when we analyse data elicited using parallel methods from the qualitative stable' (1998: 360). The combination of a survey, interviews and focus groups in this research was conducted in this manner. Data from each method of generation was used to develop and lend nuance to findings from the others, rather than as a tool to disprove concepts in a quantitative manner. That is not to say, however, that the context of the data generation was ignored. In keeping with Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach, the role of the researcher in the generation of data was always considered during the memo-writing and analysis.

### ***Stage 1: Initial Literature Review***

The initial, broad literature review at the outset served to direct the first lines of inquiry through becoming aware of the ways in which *The Exorcist* and historical audiences had and had not been discussed previously. In foregoing a detailed literature review up front, for the

reasons discussed previously, this study began with only the broad research concerns of memory and identity and the reception of a controversial but highly successful film.

### ***Stage 2: Initial Data Generation***

The project was organised around three separate but near-concurrently run stages of data generation:

- An international, English-language online survey, which launched before the other stages but continued to generate data after they began.
- Semi-structured interviews.
- Focus groups conducted with attendees of arranged screenings of *The Exorcist*.

The survey was designed and circulated online first of all with the intent of efficiently generating data from a broad and diverse group. The intention was to attract people with a wide variety of opinions of the film, to avoid this becoming a study only of *Exorcist* fans, and so the survey was publicised as widely as possible on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, multiple sub-Reddits, horror and non-horror film forums (such as Cult Labs and Fan Edit), and a project-specific blog, [theexorcistproject.com](http://theexorcistproject.com). *The Exorcist* was a mainstream blockbuster upon its release, so to only focus on devoted fans would be to misrepresent the nature of the film's audiences. The process of self-selection involved in any recruitment drive ensured that fans were more likely to participate, but a suitably varied group of participants were sourced with a wide range of views on the film. It took eight months, from April 2017, to generate the 746 responses for this study.

The survey served double-duties as a recruitment tool, providing a pool of interviewees with some information about their history with and views of the film. This was invaluable in the process of theoretical sampling. Knowing even a small amount about the participants' background and talking points regarding their experiences helped to more effectively source interviewees with relevant experiences. The survey was as short and simple as possible with only two open-ended questions:

- What can you remember about that first viewing? Where did you see it? Who were you with? How much did you know about the film beforehand? Tell us as much as you can!
- How many times have you seen *The Exorcist*? Has your view of the film changed over the years at all?

The first open-ended question is based on language used by Barker et al (2016) in their study of audience memories of *Alien* (Scott, 1979), for which they were able to obtain lengthy, detailed narrative responses from a great many respondents. The use of extra questions provided prompts for those unsure of what to discuss. The language was kept deliberately informal, simply worded, and in short chunks to encourage responses and keep

the power in the respondents' hands (after de Vaus 2014: 97-99). The survey was designed to capture as many responses as possible by lowering the barrier to entry, and to allow themes to emerge from the respondents. Rather than asking ten carefully worded qualitative questions, each with their own researcher-set priorities, having only two very basic questions allowed the key issues to emerge from what the participants wanted to discuss and what was most important to them.

Seven closed questions filled out contextual data detailing the following: when the respondent first saw *The Exorcist*; how they would have rated it out of five at the time; how they would describe their relationship with films; and basic age, sex, country of residence and ethnicity questions. These questions were used to aid the selection of a wide variety of participants with differing ages and ethnicities and to determine if there was a balance between men and women in the first instance when coding the initial survey data. Whether there would be a pattern in differences in the film's reception between men and women, between ages groups, or between different ethnic groups was not a key research concern, but I needed to have the information available should such patterns have arisen. As they did not, and after the fashion of theoretical sampling, these factors did not drive further data generation except where relevant to the concepts being developed, e.g. when discussing mothers sharing the film with their daughters. Efforts were instead driven by the need to fill out categories and codes with further examples of different kinds of experiences, e.g., watching the film at a sleepover, watching the film secretly after it was forbidden by one's parents.

*The Exorcist* being forty-six years old meant that the majority of the film's first audiences have now passed away, potentially skewing participant recruitment efforts in favour of more modern viewers. Computer literacy being lower in older age brackets was also a barrier I considered. This was mitigated to some extent by younger respondents passing information about the research along to older family members. The function of *The Exorcist* as a shared cultural object between different generations within families – something which became apparent during the course of this research – was a boon for participant recruitment. A number of participants referred their parents to the site to take part. In one instance a mother and daughter were interviewed separately, which was especially fascinating for investigations into parental censorship. The original release of *The Exorcist* is an important centrepiece for any discussion of its audiences, but this research also studies later audiences in the cinema and the home. The 1970s audiences are only part of the picture, and a sufficient number of participants were recruited from this period. A wider range of people with non-Christian and non-atheist religious backgrounds may have proved interesting for discussion of the film's religious themes, but such participants were not forthcoming. Ultimately, the data set generated for this project, the lion's share of which comes from the survey with interviewees being sourced from survey responses, was suitably diverse so as to not negatively affect the wider applicability of the theories developed, which is always the key concern.

### ***Stage 3: First Stage of Initial Coding***

Approximately the first 500 responses to the survey were coded before the interview and focus group stages began, the results of the survey data analysis driving the direction of the semi-structured questioning in these later stages. The survey responses shaped the direction of the project in this way, highlighting key themes of the importance of place and the cinema environment, the role of the family dynamic in the home, and questions of parental censorship. Beginning with broad research interests and then discovering what was important to audiences, rather than starting with fixed, specific research questions, ensured the study would be grounded in the interests of its participants rather than its organiser. The analysis of data occurred as further data was generated, rather than after all data was collected, to drive theoretical sampling. New discoveries, in a grounded audience study, can lead the way to more questions, producing flexible and detailed research that may answer new questions as it asks them. Beginning the analysis only once all data is collected leads to a researcher working on a fixed, dead object, with new questions going unanswered. This is true of both closed and open questions, since it is the researcher, not the participants, who have set the agenda and decided on the most important aspects of a given experience or process by only asking questions relevant to their own interests. In this project, limiting the initial survey to just two broad open-ended questions left ample space for participants to discuss their own concerns. Simply put, if it was not important to participants, they would not bring it up. In this way, this first stage of coding set the agenda for the direction of the research based on participants' responses. The direction was then honed over the course of interviews and focus groups.

### ***Stage 4: Further Data Generation***

Each stage of data generation informed the others and was conducted simultaneously, or at least as near as possible to simultaneously given the research team of one. A clear separation between each stage of data generation – survey, interviews and focus groups – was not possible, but neither was it desired. Each method generated a different kind of data which was useful in prompting avenues of exploration in the others. With questions in hand, themes and topics suggested by the analysis of around 500 survey responses covering the forty-six-year history of *The Exorcist* in all settings, the interview process began.

The aim of a grounded audience study is to produce generalisable concepts and theories that are of practical use, and this is by no means hindered by using as broad and varied a data set as can be feasibly produced. Charmaz states that one of the primary aims of grounded theory is to produce 'generalisable theoretical statements that transcend specific times and places' (2014: 113). With this in mind, a total of twenty-four interviewees were selected, primarily from the UK and the USA with a variety of ages to account for differences in times and places, and five focus groups were conducted in the UK.

***Stage 5: Focused Coding and Theoretical Sampling***

Constructivist grounded theory uses two stages of coding, 'initial' and 'focused', to produce the material for theory building (Charmaz, 2014: 147). The process of coding systematically dismantles data to break it down into its constituent parts. This allows for comparisons between pieces of data, helping to uncover, through such comparisons, 'how people enact or respond to events, what meanings they hold, and how and why these actions and meanings evolved' (Charmaz, 2014: 113). Practically, this involves reading through data and categorising pieces of it, by 'actively naming data' (Charmaz, 2014: 115).

In keeping with Glaser's (1978) preference, Charmaz advocates for phrasing codes as gerunds, rather than as topics or themes (2014: 120). This enables a researcher to take the point of view of the participant, retaining a focus on actions. It labels the phenomenon rather than the person or the topic and keeps the researcher close to the data (Charmaz, 2014: 120). It also prevents imposing broad labels upon participants which may colour any conclusions about what is happening in their responses with baseless assumptions. As Charmaz argues, 'assigning types to people casts them with static labels [which] make them one-dimensional although the behaviour on which you based the label may represent only a small part of who they are and what they do' (2014: 117). After this fashion, a phrase such as 'I'm an atheist' (#593) was not categorised under the code 'Atheist' or 'Atheism'. Instead, it was coded in terms of the action being performed, 'Establishing atheism', which is what the respondent is doing in making this statement. To categorise the participant as an atheist, or to interpret his or her response in terms of religious non-belief, is to make an assumption about the importance of this non-belief for the participant. Coding for action places the emphasis where it belongs, on the language used and the actions described.

These initial codes were kept as short and simple as possible to remain closely tied to the data, as advised by Charmaz (2014: 116). Where possible, 'in vivo' codes – being codes which are direct quotes from participants, such as 'Putting on a brave face' – were also used for this purpose (Urquhart, 2013: 103). Coding consisted of simply looking for the action being performed in the response, either in the language or in the content. These codes were 'provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data' (Charmaz, 2014: 117). There were many instances where words or sentences were categorised under more than one code. Determining relationships between codes comes under the banner of 'focused coding', the second stage.

After each data generation phase was subjected to initial coding using the methods described above, focused coding was performed to place those initial codes in the larger context of the data set. This secondary stage of coding is common to qualitative research, its purpose being 'to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organisation from your array of [initial] codes' (Saldana, 2009: 149). The re-categorisation and comparison of initial codes helps to unearth patterns and to determine which codes are most relevant or promising for developing theories, and which are less so. Those that are promising are then pursued in further interviews.



Focused coding is where the core of the theory building takes place, feeding back into the theoretical sampling as the need to fully develop categories and answer new questions is made evident. As stated previously, the data set of survey responses provided a brief overview of many of the important aspects of the film experience for respondents, many of whom were willing to be interviewed further. Interviewees were selected from this stable based on their fit for the categories needing expansion and the questions needing answering, e.g., where the overall category of 'parental censoring' needed expansion, I sought out survey respondents with different experiences of parental censorship to those already interviewed, and interviewed them.

This loop, of answering questions and generating more data where new questions arose, repeated until new interviews were prompting neither the development of new codes nor the expansion of existing ones. At this point theoretical saturation was reached, and the bulk of the writing of the project began, incorporating a second review of relevant literature which could now be specifically targeted to theories developed in the process of this study.

### **Grounded Audience Studies and You**

Alan Brown's (2017) insightful keynote address from the Symposium of the International Network for Audience Research in the Performing Arts, reproduced recently in this journal, makes a number of calls to action for audience researchers, and I argue that grounded audience studies go some way to address at least some of his concerns, specifically those that relate to participant engagement. Brown (2017: 58) calls for a greater variety of methodologies within audience studies, citing the recent predominance of online surveys as a cause for concern:

I worry a great deal about the problem of survey fatigue, arising from the convenience of online surveying, and the ethical and practical problems of asking audience member repeatedly and endlessly to take surveys, and the abuses. Audience members click 'Submit' on surveys and have no idea what happens to the information they provide. There is a near total lack of transparency about the findings of audience research, which, I think undermines the credibility of organizations and reduces the willingness of audiences to spend their precious time filling out surveys.

With the development of greater communication technologies allowing for communication with media audiences around the world for merely the cost of labour of producing a survey, it is easy to see why they have enjoyed such a rise in popularity. International audience research projects on global film and television franchises of a scope previously unmanageable are now possible. Projects on *The Lord of the Rings* (see Barker and Mathijs, 2008), *The Hobbit* (see Barker and Mathijs, 2016) and *Game of Thrones* (upcoming, see [gameofthronesresearchproject.wordpress.com](http://gameofthronesresearchproject.wordpress.com) for details) are producing valuable insights

into the role of fantasy in global audiences' lives using an effective survey template, involving a combination of qualitative and quantitative elements, which was honed over a number of projects by Martin Barker and others (see Barker et al, 2008). *The Exorcist* project used a survey precisely for its ease of use and dissemination, taking the work on *The Lord of the Rings* and *Alien* (Barker et al, 2016) as inspiration. However, the exclusive use of a survey for this project, with no further contact with respondents, would not have met the standards of being able to produce iterative and flexible research in the manner of grounded theory, which must be able to adapt data generation methods during the research process. Where one cannot adapt the line of questioning and the direction of the research as one proceeds, the study is no longer 'grounded'. The use of other qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, also allows for the closing of the disconnect between the researcher and the researched, which is Brown's (2017: 58) criticism of survey-based projects. Indeed, interviews and focus groups were conducted by some of the national research teams in the *Lord of the Rings* project.

But much of the personal interaction of audience research projects of the past is now no longer necessary. The nature of survey-based research, being a process of designing a series of questions once and then simply directing different people to it, means the researcher is somewhat out of the process until all he or she feels there is sufficient data to stop the gathering process. The lack of human interaction and the sheer numbers of such projects – the *Lord of the Rings* survey generated just under 25, 000 responses and *The Hobbit* survey took an astounding 36, 109 (Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 158-159) – may lead to participants being seen merely as data.

The international survey design also produces a fixed data set. Once the ball is rolling, the outcome can only be shaped further by asking different people. There is no opportunity to ask different questions. When dealing with tens of thousands of responses, such a task may be unmanageable. The problem – less a problem, actually, and more a difference to grounded audience studies – is that the questions determine the data. The questions you ask of your participants determine the kinds of questions you will be able to answer with your data. Therefore, in working with a fixed set of questions that do not change, the researcher is deciding for audiences what are the most important elements of the film experience, be they 'identification' with characters, interpretations of violence, or anything else, particularly where questions become more specific. While the questions for the survey in this project did not change, the line of questioning was set for interviews and focus groups from this survey data. There was, in these other stages of qualitative data generation, the ability to be flexible in focus. Crucially, there was no attempt to answer all possible questions through the initial survey. It was a starting point for further enquiries, and was treated as such. The difference between this approach, the survey-as-starting-point, and my approach on my own survey-only research concerning *A Serbian Film* (Smith, 2018), the survey-as-final-data-set, is night and day, with the latter consisting of much more targeted questions leaving little room for respondents to talk about other issues.

The traditional linear progression from data generation to data analysis together with a single fixed method of data generation, such as a survey or a series of structured interviews using the same template, produces a fixed, final data set from which the theory must grow. There will inevitably be gaps as a result of the research design due to the need for the writing of specific research questions before determining what is important to the audiences themselves. While no audience research project can hope to be completely exhaustive, the flexibility of a grounded audience study at least allows the full development of emerging concerns – rather than the disregarding of any data which does not fit the initial research questions – and this ensures findings are relevant and recognisable to participants. Outside theories and concepts are brought to bear in the final discussion of theories generated by your project, allowing the research to engage with the field while seeking independence from it in the first instance. Most importantly, priority is given to the participants' experiences rather than to borrowed theories which the researcher wishes to either support or refute.

This issue, of a researcher determining the output via question choice, can be mitigated (and has been mitigated successfully) in the large-scale, international survey projects with dozens of researchers by simply asking many more questions and taking more time to analyse the much larger data set one receives back. When one has a team of researchers from forty-six countries, as did the World Hobbit Project (Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 159), this approach of placing the heavier research load on the back end of the project is more feasible. However, with smaller research teams, or for individual researchers, this is not realistic. Replicating the research processes of enormous international projects for a solo researcher will only lead to an unmanageable data set or, should the researcher compromise on the length of the survey, a data set which speaks to the researcher's interest much more than to the interests of his or her participants.

I am guilty of this narrowing of focus myself in my own work (Smith, 2018), crafting questions specifically about censorship for my research on *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010). I attempted to replicate the large survey projects but, of course, lacked the resources to analyse a data set of a comparable size. Therefore, I limited the data set in the only way possible, by limiting what the research participants were free to discuss. In instances such as this, being a solo researcher, a grounded audience study which starts small and is directed by data as it emerges is considerably more practical and much more likely to reflect the concerns of audiences. There is of course always a need for focused investigations into certain aspects of film experiences, but such studies do not reflect audiences' concerns. A grounded audience study permits a lone researcher to produce a smaller, more focused data set which is co-created with his or her participants, audience studies from the 'bottom up'. This approach affords solo researchers and small teams the rigor that is afforded to enormous survey projects through having an unusually high number of researchers while attending more closely to aspects of film experiences *audiences*, not researchers, find important.

While the international audience surveys which have become more popular are producing excellent research, methodologies that work well for large teams do not necessarily work well for small teams or individuals. When you are a research team of one and studying audiences, you can do much worse than making co-researchers of your participants. At a time when audiences are more involved than ever in shaping the media they enjoy, perhaps they should be getting more of a hand in shaping the research of which they are subjects. As Brown (2017: 58) states, audience members who submit their thoughtfully drafted survey answers into the online void, never to hear of the project again, may, rightfully, begin to lose interest in such research, which can only lead to ever-dwindling returns for researchers looking to engage with audiences. By making participants of these audience members, we ensure not only their investment in the current project but also in future projects.

This is somewhat hyperbolic, of course, the concept of participants as co-researchers. You do not ask your participants approval before investigating potential theories during the research process. You do not send them a draft of your work and ask them to go through it with a red pen (though it is good practice to send them a copy of a late draft for validation purposes). What you should do, though – and what was done in this study of *The Exorcist* – is be completely open. Discuss your ideas during interviews. Tell them exactly why you are asking a specific question. Talk to them about the responses of your other (anonymised) interviewees and ways in which their accounts may support or even contradict the one you are being given. In conducting this project, it became clear that many participants, especially older people, had never taken part in academic research before. This led to some trepidation at first about what it was I was interested in hearing about, but there was also excitement and a real enthusiasm to help. Many participants followed up on interviews later to provide materials such as magazines and newspaper clippings which had been dutifully hunted down in attics and local libraries. By being more open with participants, by having a connection in a way that is not permitted when you are one of fifty researchers on a team or when you are analysing data that was entered into a form on a website, a researcher can combat the ‘survey fatigue’ Brown (2017: 60) discusses and, most importantly, produce research of which participants truly feel a part.

Potential criticisms of conducting a grounded audience study could, of course, come from the process of analysing data as you generate it and allowing early analysis to guide one’s hand in further participant recruitment. Surely, allowing your research interests to morph over time leads to the possibility of your research being steered, possibly unconsciously, to the most dramatic outcome. This approach allows more than ever for the researcher’s interests to be placed first. ‘Flexibility’ is a great cover for researchers who wish to steer their projects to whichever area interests them the most. However, the process of moving back and forth between data generation and analysis, using theoretical sampling, has been a mainstay of grounded theory methodology since its inception. The simple fix for this potential downfall is, as previously discussed, participant-led. The answer is transparency. Speak to your participants about your ideas. Involve them in the process. Ask

them what they think of your developing theories. When you are trying to free yourself of decades of academic baggage, perhaps the best help you could ask for is the opinion of people who have not read such studies before, who have never taken part in a study, who even, sometimes, fail to see the point in audience research.

## **Conclusion**

The refusal to employ extant theories and the focus on keeping developing theories tied closely to original data was invaluable in forcing this study into new avenues of enquiry, ones important to participants rather than imposed by the researcher. The integration of the data generation and data analysis stages, moving between them both to fill gaps in developing theories using theoretical sampling, ensured that resultant data was fit for purpose as raw material for building theories grounded in participants' experiences. Ideas from analysis were fed back into further interviews, producing a study which is much more collaborative in nature, much more a product of the participants rather than of a researcher's suppositions or interests.

Grounded theory methodology is a practical, flexible approach which has a great deal to offer audience studies, particularly in response to Brown's (2017) call for innovative research designs that serve to better engage with participants. Grounded theory, as Glaser (1998: 16) states, has been producing valuable insights into the fields of health, education and business for decades, and grounded audience studies provide a viable, pragmatic and, most importantly, participant-led alternative model of research. As difficult as it may be, in giving up some of the control of the research to our participants, in allowing their responses to drive the direction of our inquiries, we may be able to better represent their everyday experiences.

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## **Biographical Note:**

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