

Chapter 11

Doing Classic Grounded Theory Research in Information Systems

Trust in Emergence

Titus Tossy

Mzumbe University, Tanzania

Irwin Brown

University of Cape Town, South Africa

Andy Lowe

Grounded Theory Institute, USA

ABSTRACT

Grounded Theory (GT) is a latent pattern recognition research method that was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). GT, which can use either quantitative or qualitative data, is a general research methodology and it produces empirically grounded but modifiable theory. Since the development of GT in 1967, some researchers have attempted to modify the original GT method, and remodelled GT approaches have been widely used in Information Systems (IS) research, often with unfortunate results due to disregard of the basic rules of the original GT. The continued use of remodelled GT methods has caused confusion and has prevented those in the IS research community from stimulating the development of new theory, which is the main benefit of using GT as it was originally outlined. Following publication of the original grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1978) went on to explain in detail how to operationalize the GT method. Despite this, some researchers mistakenly continued to classify GT as a subset of the qualitative data analysis research methodology. In doing so, they reveal that they have misunderstood both the purpose of GT and how to use it correctly. In this paper the author will concentrate on the authentic approach to GT, which is termed “Classic Ground Theory” (CGT), so as to differentiate it from any misconceived remodelled version of the theory. This paper explains how CGT can be carried out in an IS context by trusting in the emergence from the data of the required information, rather than forcing it.

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INTRODUCTION

There are a number of theories from other disciplines—such as the social sciences—that are being adopted for use in IS (Gregor, 2006; Truex et al, 2006). While some are adopted as they are, others are modified and yet others are combined to fit within the IS discipline. Such combinations, when they include grounded theory approaches, erode the known procedures and methods of the Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) (Glaser, 1978, 1992). There is likely to be repetition of the same mistakes made in the original disciplines (Truex et al, 2006). The original, or Classic Grounded theory was developed from a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to sociology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Many remodelled versions of CGT have been used in IS research projects, and the many approaches include evolved, mixed, and analytical versions (Matavire & Brown, 2011). This is an indication that there is confusion about how to use the original CGT in IS research projects.

CGT is a standalone general methodology and should not be used in a mixed method research design. While some IS researchers tend to mix CGT with other research methods to conduct their research, some simply use or borrow the vocabulary or analysis techniques of the CGT method to help them when analysing their data. Unfortunately, many of the claims for the use of CGT by IS researchers do not follow its original tenets (Tossy, 2012). Many researchers, for instance, mix CGT with other theories such as Quantitative Data Analysis (QDA). This is incorrect, since Glaser (2003:1-2) said that “Mixing QDA and GT downgrades or erodes the [classic] GT goal of conceptual theory through the process of default remodelling”. CGT, in effect, becomes remodelled as another QDA method with all its descriptive baggage. This is because of confusion about the use of CGT and the evaluation of data using CGT. This paper fills a gap by outlining the necessary route to follow when using and evaluating CGT in IS.

The paper has four main sections: clarification as to what CGT is; an overview of the prior use of the GT theory method amongst the IS research community; how to conduct CGT research in an IS context; and the proposed principles for assessing the claim of a paper/thesis to have used CGT.

CLARIFICATION OF THE MEANING OF THE (CLASSIC) GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Classic Grounded Theory methodology (CGTM) is faithful to the original formulation and follows all the original tenets of Grounded Theory as outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967). The tenets have been further elaborated by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011). CGTM is a general inductive research method designed to reveal deep seated latent patterns of human behaviour and how the main concerns of respondents studied are being continually resolved (Glaser, 1998). CGT provides IS researchers with a means to build theory relevant to the discipline, as explained in Matavire and Brown (2011). Lyytinen and King (2004) state that building theory for any field would help strengthen it. In the IS discipline, opportunities exist to build theory in both emerging fields and well-researched ones, as outlined by Matavire and Brown (2011). As Glaser (1992) states, in domains where a large body of knowledge already exists, new concepts and categories may not emerge, but CGT will still contribute to a better understanding of the basic social processes at play. Many authors, however, refer to having used CGT in their studies, when in fact what they mean is that they have been influenced by the idea of a grounded theory without following all the procedures (Bryant, 2002). This paper helps to avoid incorrect use of CGT, and enables the IS researcher to use CGT with skill and confidence.

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