Puzzling the Picture using Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

Since the first publication by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, Grounded Theory has become a highly influential research approach in the social sciences. The approach provides techniques and coding strategies for building theory inductively from the "ground up" as concepts within the data earn relevance into an evolving substantive theory. Over time, Grounded Theory has undergone development and adaptations, and the first phases of analysis have been successfully applied to other types of inductive approaches, such as basic qualitative and case studies. The methodological literature can be difficult to navigate for new researchers as well as experienced analysts using the approach for the first time. This article synthesizes the work of various seminal scholars to address the value of grounded theorizing and it builds a picture of what it means to do grounded theory.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research is about bringing interpretation and order to voluminous and sometimes chaotic data. Imagine having a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle dumped out in a pile on the table in front of you and sifting through pieces that sometimes change shape as you hold them, trying to build a coherent picture without knowing what the final picture is supposed to be. There is no finished image on the box to guide your work and you may not know that you have missing pieces. Building theory from data is akin to solving such a puzzle, although you may never be quite sure you have a lasting picture as people change, new innovations and customs appear, and the socio-cultural advances into history. As history advances, theory for how the world works must also advance.

Building theory is an important part of research (Lynham, 2002; Reio, 2009; Storberg-Walker, 2007; Torraco, 2004) because it builds understanding and provides practitioners some level of explanation for phenomena they encounter. Indeed, Lynham (2002) noted that some see theory as disconnected from practice, but the point of good theory is to explain how things work and how we can improve actions. One highly influential method of theory building is Grounded Theory (GT), which is the subject of this article. Substantive concepts – those that are part of a given professional context – are highly bound to the practical context and are, thus, very relevant to practice, although formal concepts that apply to multiple substantive areas may also be found with protracted analyses (Seidel & Urquhart, 2013). Formal concepts may become generalizable in a GT study (Egan, 2002), although substantive theory is the primary outcome. Substantive theory has a specificity that is usable in everyday practice, such as studying "the coping mechanisms of returning adult students or a particular reading program that "works" with low income children, or dealing with grief in the aftermath of a natural disaster" (Merriam, 2009, p. 30).

GT was introduced as a methodological approach in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1999) through which social science researchers could generate theory "grounded" in data rather than using the "logico-deductive method of theorizing" (p. 5) that was pervasive at the time. Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1999) called the latter form a sometimes fantastical approach to theorizing, whereas GT is rarely refuted by new data because of its grounding, although it is expected that grounded theory may be altered and reformulated over time. Charmaz (2011) indicated that GT started with Objectivist, Positivist roots, which presume a singular reality, but later developed Constructivist orientation to incorporate reflexivity and relativity, as well as situating knowledge in time, location, and context. Merriam (2009) considers GT falling squarely in the Interpretivist-Constructivist camp because the purpose is to describe and understand. Crotty (1998), however, stated that GT emerged from Symbolic Interactionism as a type of ethnographic inquiry that builds theory through a sequence of intentional steps that he connected to Constructionist epistemology. Grounded theory studies can be quantitative as well as qualitative (Glaser, 1993), which may suggest different epistemologies could be at play; however, qualitative GT is the focus of this article. Glaser and Holton (2005) went as far as to say that epistemological discussion not only may not be useful for using GT methods, but may hinder the development of categories and cause premature closure of analysis.

Given there is no pat answer to the philosophical roots of GT, the beginning researcher should take care to craft an appropriate philosophical underpinning for GT and justify the selection of GT for a particular study. As such, this article will not focus heavily on philosophical issues; however, the reader is commended to the above resources as well as to Ponterotto (2005) to take up the issue of fitness with philosophical paradigm. In keeping with the idea that grounded theory is an art form, and thus one cannot be overly prescriptive about how to go about it (Böhm, 2004) this article aims to look across the work of various scholars to address the value of conducting a GT study and to build a picture of what it means to do grounded theory. The purpose of this article is to synthesize the process of grounded theory to guide the beginning researcher for understanding it and making methodological choices in GT. Thus, the article will focus on terminology and phases of GT to address how theory is generated, rather than advocate for one type of GT.

CHOOSING GROUNDED THEORY

In its relatively short lifespan, grounded theory has had a tremendous influence on qualitative research. It offers both focus and flexibility in the theory-building process (Charmaz, 2004). It is a good choice when little is known about a phenomenon and the researcher wants to study a microcosm of interaction in specific contexts or to study changes in a particular field (Grbich, 2007). Saldaña (2009) noted that many of the coding phases for grounded theory can be used in general qualitative studies. This includes inductive studies, such as basic qualitative research (see example in Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015) and case study (see example in Bennett, 2014), even if all the steps were not followed to create a grounded theory. Seidel and Urquhart (2013) reviewed grounded theory-related studies in information systems and found that case study by far was the approach most often paired with GT methods, particularly using coding strategies from Strauss and Corbin (1990).

The steps of GT lead to the development of conceptual categories that provide high-order answers to the research questions asked. Inductive qualitative studies often aim to develop an understanding or meaning of a phenomenon, which involves both analysis and interpretation. As such inductive studies deal with some level of theorizing. Grounded theory provides more specific steps and guidance for developing theory from the ground-up. Every professional academic field is informed by theory, which seeks to explain phenomena in our world. It is particularly difficult to build theory with regard to

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