Chapter III
Employing a Grounded Theory Approach for MIS Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the grounded theory (GT) approach to research, discussing how it has been used in information systems (IS) research, and how GT studies may be conducted to provide a significant theoretical contribution to the management information systems (MIS) field. The subject is of particular interest at a time when GT attracts frequent criticism for a lack of rigor. This chapter deals with what makes for a rigorous contribution to "grounded" theory in MIS. It addresses developments and controversies in the generation of grounded theories, examining the use of GT as a coding method vs. the use of GT as a method for generating theory. The discussion focuses mainly on the constructivist/interpretive perspective adopted in most qualitative data studies, as this is the way in which GT has been used most often in MIS. The chapter concludes with a roadmap for the use of GT in MIS research and a discussion of the contribution made by GT studies in MIS.

INTRODUCTION

The Grounded Theory (GT) research method has grown more popular in recent years. This is partly in response to an increasing awareness of the limitations of applying *a priori*, deductive theo- ries to human transactions embedded in a social context, and partly in response to the immaturity of Management Information Systems (MIS) as a discipline. The GT approach is used to generate a *substantive theory* – a theory that is grounded in specific mechanisms, contexts or environments.

This fits well with the need to produce in-depth empirical studies that develop a dynamic body of theory that evolves with the MIS field itself. The construction of a *grounded theory* relies on a systematic analysis of qualitative data, to theorize about "what is it that is happening here?" The result is a theory that is grounded in empirical evidence, rather than developed from existing conceptual frameworks. The GT approach may be used to analyze qualitative data to produce quantitative data that are analyzed statistically, or it may employ a qualitative, interpretive data analysis throughout. The latter approach is the most frequently encountered in MIS and so this chapter will focus mainly on these studies.

Grounded theories are situated, not only in "the data," but also in the context in which data was collected. They may be considered *idiographic theories*, that are "concerned with the individual [case], pertaining to or descriptive of single or unique facts and processes" (Dey, 1999, pg. 217). Quality criteria for idiographic theories of action emphasize transferability or adaptation to different contexts, rather than the generalizability concerns that are applied to nomothetic or formal theories (S. . Gasson, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The GT approach may be used over time to generate formal (nomothetic) theories, that are more generalizable as they are derived from multiple studies and contexts. This requires a substantial amount of time and relies on researchers who are capable of reflexive theoretical abstraction. The majority of GT studies contribute idiographic theories that provide deep insights into the research problem for a limited number of situations or contexts.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the GT method, to address controversies and issues surrounding its use, and to provide some guidance on how it may be used to contribute meaningfully to MIS research. The chapter is organized as follows. First, some background is provided on the GT approach to research and the GT "method." Secondly, I discuss controversies and developments in both the approach to, and

the methods for Grounded Theory generation. Thirdly, the contribution of the GT approach to MIS is demonstrated by means of illustrative studies. The fourth section presents a roadmap for GT research in MIS, examining the unique challenges that our field presents to GT researchers, discussing the constraints presented by seed categories and *a priori* theoretical models, ethics, boundaries, and scope in MIS research, and issues of generalizability. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the contribution of GT to the MIS field.

BACKGROUND

The Grounded Theory Method

The Grounded Theory (GT) research method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was devised "to develop and integrate a set of ideas and hypotheses in an integrated theory that accounts for behavior in any substantive area" (Lowe, 1996). GT researchers avoid proposing a theory at the beginning of their study, instead deriving and refining the theory through cycles of data collection, analysis, and synthesis, as shown in Figure 1. This model provides an overview of the structured process underlying the Grounded Theory research method. It is synthesized from multiple texts by the originators of the GT approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The dotted line box in Figure 1 refers to a stage introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1990), which many researchers find useful, but which was rejected by Glaser (1978, 1992).

At its simplest, the core GT method relies on specific processes that are not found in other approaches to constructing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both Bryant (2002) and Urquhart (2002) differentiate between the GT *coding method* and the GT *method of generating theory*. It is the combination of these two elements that makes the GT method unique:

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