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Reflecting on the Reflective Conversation

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Abstract

This brief essay develops three points to stretch the reflective conversation. One agrees that we need a more expansive understanding of qualitative research because doing qualitative research is doing real science. The second synthesizes insights in the conversation to develop three ways that grounded theory building (GTB) provides unique benefits to management research and complements conventional deductive work. With theory as our middle name, GTB generates new theory, something essential to a complex field with considerable fragmentation and ambiguity. Deductive research tests already established theory. Building defines the active process of gathering and analyzing data, and the conversationalists identify the bountiful array of approaches that already exist—if only all scientists would make some effort to understand them. Grounded means capturing the situated details and contingencies rather than abstracting them away since we need to understand the "things" of any phenomenon and how they interrelate if we are to build elegant new understandings. I offer suggestions for next steps in each area. My third point: Let's get over the idea that qualitative methods means using qualitative data.

Keywords

grounded theory, qualitative research, interpretivism, qualitative research, ethnography, qualitative research

I enjoyed this conversation about what grounded theory (GT) is and learned or relearned some essential points. I build on these points to stretch the conversation in two ways. One learning point is that yes, definitely we need to think of GT more broadly, and I elaborate on that idea by arguing that doing GT is doing real science. A second learning point is to synthesize the diverse ideas from the panelists in a way that highlights the contributions of GT (and I add B for building, so GTB) but also highlights the conundrums people need to deal with, both when they try to do GTB and when they try

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to engage non-GTB colleagues and/or publish the work. I suggest more conversations to delve more deeply into these issues.

A third learning point is more of a snit about how the term *qualitative* is used, and I will mention it only in passing here. Data are data. Period. Enumerating with numbers and/or labeling with words are both human constructions, and neither one should be privileged. Calling qualitative research "qualitative" because it uses symbols other than numbers drives me nuts. Think of that enormous reactor at CERN to measure the Higgs boson (actually to measure its predicted decay) along with a variety of other particles. Also think of the long history of developing this "precise" numerical measure, from capturing cosmic rays in the backyard to cloud chambers to small accelerators. Were those earlier quantitative measures really quantitative if they were qualitatively different? What sort of instruments will be devised 100 years from now to quantify (and qualify) underlying forces of physics, and what kind of theory will they be testing and exploring with all the new symbols they generate?

I will also draw gross contrasts between the two stereotypes of research that seem to divide rather than enhance the managerial sciences as their combination would. Let us call one camp the "discover-whees!" to refer to GTB users who seek to understand phenomena for which there are no complete explanations available. I use *whees!* to emphasize our GTB tendencies to become enthralled with our work of discovery and also the presumption from the other side that we are sliding easily ("whee!-ing") through what should be careful and hard work. Let us call the other camp the "comfirmatoids" to refer to researchers who seek to confirm established theory. I use *toids* to emphasize our view that these researchers are robotic and oddly dispassionate, and their view that they are very careful and objective.

In Support of the Expansive View of Grounded Theory Building

Yes! I agree fully. It would be great if we as a community of scholars could get to the point of understanding this kind of an approach to research more fully. One step toward developing this expanded view is to develop approaches for "data mining" of big data sets as well as deepening Lotte's ideas about working with data to figure out what is going on. I have tried to do GTB with big data sets but quickly got lost, and I assume that I am not alone. A research methods journal should be able to publish articles that describe in detail different approaches with big data sets (or even small ones) and what the limits and unique contributions of each would be. I recall being taught exploratory data analysis in my statistics course at MIT by a real statistician. Apparently these scientists use techniques that we do not see in our journals.

A second step toward developing this expansive view of GTB is to recognize that doing GTB is doing science. Unfortunately, some GT-oriented writers in management treat science as a bad word, something that deals only with deductive logic. I disagree. "Real" scientists rely on GTB because, with the possible exception of physics, there are no first principles from which one can use purely deductive logic. These sciences are dealing with phenomena for which there are fragmented and emergent understandings. One cannot deduce a "true" hypothesis from such uncertain understandings. Consider the following quote and name that mystery discipline!

> The basic philosophy of [mystery discipline], as it developed in the last 50 years, has become quite different from the classical philosophy of science as it prevailed from the Vienna School of Carnap and Neurath to Popper and Kuhn. In the rejection on the one hand of all vitalistic theories and of such concepts as essentialism, determinism, and reductionism, and their replacement by an acceptance of the frequency of random events, plural solutions, the importance of historical narratives, multiple causations, population thinking, and the greater

> importance of concepts than of laws in theory formations, the new [mystery discipline] has undergone a complete revolution.

What is this mystery discipline where narratives, multiple possible causes, and unexplained events are the stuff of study? What manner of science would deny the focus on simple, clear effects from clear causes (aka determinism)? What manner of science would fail to zero in on a few elements intensely and hold everything else properly constant (aka reductionism)? Sociology? History? Narrative or discourse studies? None of the above. This quote comes from Ernst Mahr's address to the American Institute of Biological Sciences in 2000, on the occasion of receiving the distinguished service award in biology (and on his 96th birthday). According to Mahr, our understanding of the basic biological phenomena is "remarkably well advanced" because of this revolution away from simple confirmatory approaches. But "where our knowledge lags behind is in the understanding of complex systems." He listed three complex systems that biologists needed to explore more fully: the developmental system (from a fertilized egg to the finished adult), the central nervous system, and the ecosystem. We in the social sciences have many more complex systems to explore scientifically, also without relying on determinism and reductionism.

Studies of science and scientists at work reflect similar processes of trying to learn and to understand when existing theories are incomplete and fragmented (see a few authors listed at the end). Scientists are engaged in scientific discovery, which means that they are creating theory, not just testing it. Darwin, for example, joined breeders clubs, established personal connections with pigeon raisers, contributed to gardening journals, and maintained a network of naturalists and missionaries around the world to whom he could address questions (Paavola, Hakkarainen, & Sintonen, 2006).

Paavola et al. (2006, p. 141) also quote Mahr on Darwin:

> [Darwin's] procedure does not fit well into the classical prescriptions of the philosophy of science, because it consists of continually going back and forth between making observations, posing questions, establishing hypotheses or models, and testing them by making further observations, and so forth.

This quote is a straightforward description of the process of GTB as I understand it.[1]

As a form of science, GTB carries with it all the trimmings of being careful, methodical, and "true" to our inner heart and soul of really wanting to understand important problems in a way that informs humanity. Unfortunately (for some), there are no recipe-like techniques that everyone can use because the phenomena of study and the questions being asked vary enormously. I agree with many of the panelists who said that we have to do GTB "right." Doing it right is not only about implementing correct techniques in a recipe-like manner, it is also about being a scientist and taking on that responsibility of carefully and thoroughly exploring the domain in question. We discoverwhees! do not have the luxury of ticking off proper steps or displaying "proper" logic (i.e., deduction) as do our confirmatoid colleagues, but we can carefully explain how we went about developing our new theory and why we think this new theory is useful. People who do GTB just because they do not want to learn statistics or collect all that dreary data like comfirmatoids do are probably not doing GTB "right" because discovering useful understandings is not in their heart and soul.

Synthesizing Ideas in the Dialog to Highlight Contributions and Conundrums of GTB

With the right perspective on being good scientists, we can proceed with the unique benefits of GTB and also appreciate the special challenges of doing it right and of engaging our confirmatoid colleagues in our efforts because they do not "get" these benefits. Each letter of GTB captures a

particular facet of this science, but each one depends on the others, and they cycle together over time. All three are very much a social process as well, as emphasized by one of the panelists, because doing good science depends on collective engagement and participation.

Let's Start With Theory, Our Middle Name

Most panelists discussed the discovery of theory as part of GTB. The obvious contribution is to theorize a domain of inquiry that is under-explained, confusing, and fragmented. But building theory raises conundrums. On the "doing it right" side, what the heck is a good theory? We have many understandings of theory and end up with diverse outcomes (which reinforces the confirmatoid stereotype that we are whee!-ing along). In reviewing, I see GTB papers that seem undertheorized. They lay out a variety of elements of the situation that somehow might combine, but they do not go the next step of analyzing what that combination might be and what might animate it. Perhaps we discover-whees! become enthralled with our cool study and rush to get it published even if it is not yet done. Glaser emphasizes discovering a pattern and then naming that pattern, which I think he sees as the same as discovering a theory. The challenge is to learn to develop a simple explanatory thesis for our phenomenon of study that answers the question in a nice, elegant way. We are looking for a nice clear "Ah! Ha!" A deeper conversation should concern what a good grounded theory is like, is it simple and elegant, and how do we know when we have one.

Another set of conundrums arises from the fact that confirmatoids do not discover or create theory, they test theory. The objective of GTB makes no sense to them and seems illegitimate. We have all seen confirmatoid colleagues working hard to find a hypothesis after the fact from existing theory that fits their findings or to add hypotheses at the behest of reviewers, all without the benefit of the process of theorizing, which is GTB. But they do it secretly because discovering theory is simply "not done" in proper science in their view. Moreover, I recall from *Discovery* that the theory is substantive, or connected to the phenomenon being explored, which may not be connected to existing academic theories. Another conversation can focus on how to connect new substantive theory to existing academic theories.

Building

I include this term because it reflects what we do with our data and how we deal with it to arrive at our simple, elegant theory. By building, we go around and around, gathering more data and reinterpreting the data we have until we arrive at "it," the simple Ah! Ha! Building is the methodology part that is based on active, hands-on collective working of the data that unfolds over many, many months (usually years for me). The contributions of building are that we have developed excellent ideas for carrying out this process. Most of the panelists discussed various methods, and I agree with them that we all need to go back to all (not just Glaser's) ideas for building. Building also raises conundrums for GTBers, in part because there is no recipe. Unfortunately, reviewers often ask for the recipe used to arrive at the theory or that we display the exact process, which forces us to make things up. Challenges in building include the lack of automatic stopping rules and the diverse epistemologies that would build in different ways. Another big conundrum is that the process of building theory is exactly what the confirmatoids espouse never doing. They teach our students this rule of never messing with the data in their methods courses. Much more conversation needs to occur around the processes of building theory based on diverse epistemologies, with comparisons and contrasts across different ideas and approaches, to bring these ideas out. And since we know that confirmatoids build theory without relying on the approaches for building that have been developed, we have much to contribute to our science.

Grounded refers to the kind of data that we build our theories from. Grounded highlights the actualities of the situation and the context, or "contextualizing" as some call it, and involves delving into the unique particularities. The contribution of grounding comes from the fact that we do not already know what is going on with the phenomenon of study, so we must use the details and the particularities of the situation for clues. The details can trigger insights and open up avenues of building theory that may get us to the theory better or even faster, provided that we build properly with ongoing comparisons and contrasts and ongoing questioning based on asking the "right" questions. How to do so, of course, is another topic for an in-depth conversation because how to leap from details to clues to possible explanatory hypotheses is difficult to describe. This challenge goes back to my first comment regarding the need to develop our "data-mining" abilities with all sorts of data.

Grounding also invokes a conundrum for confirmatoids who scrub the details away immediately in their efforts to generate abstracted and generalizable measures. Grounding is illegitimate. I no longer attend my department seminars (my colleagues are all confirmatoids) because I want to first see and hear the whole thing, all of what the researcher was doing and why and how and what interpretations he or she makes of the data and why and how. But my colleagues incessantly intervene with particular questions almost always about the research context that the researcher has already eliminated from the study. We never get to the real ideas or "results." I asked one young colleague why all the questions about the context, and he said he wants to see if the findings are "true." Yikes. But I do know open-minded confirmatoids who do want to understand, so we can begin a conversation about combining our work.

I conclude with the idea that GTB cycles repeatedly around these three facets of developing theory to explain something that is not well understood. Students who have been steeped in the confirmatoid methodology (and they all are) ask me how can we generalize from such situated and particular data. My answer is that if we have done our study carefully, we have explored deeply the various possible elements that may be involved rather than "hold them constant" and have considered their interactions and interdependencies rather than use them as control variables. Through all this systematic shifting of related facts and factors, we have identified and explicated the underlying social mechanisms that animate the pattern we have found. This rich, deep understanding can also explain other similar situations, and it is up to us to articulate how and why our grounded theory might generalize and what are the limits of that based on our data and our building process. Of course, this deep understanding is difficult to develop, which is at the core of this conversation.[2]

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Notes

1. Many scholars understand science as a process of discovery rather than confirmation. I list a few of my favorites and invite interested readers to look up their various studies, ideas, and citations: Ernst Mahr, Frederick Grinnell, Paul Nightingale, Kieth Pavitt, Richard Nelson, Anna Grandori, Danielle Dunne, Karen Knorr Cetina, Bruno Latour, and of course Charles S. Peirce, who emphasized the logic of scientific discovery, or abduction. I have issues with Simon's views, but that is another conversation.
2. Abduction: I did not want to interject additional issues in this conversation, but I believe that the underlying logic of grounded theory building (GTB) is the logic of abduction, which refers to the formulation and evaluation of explanatory hypotheses to explain puzzling facts. Of course there are diverse views of and uses of abductive reasoning in our field as well. Interested people can look at Locke et al (2008), Weick in various

papers, and Grandori for many citations to a new world of logic, and entire journals are devoted to pragmatism and to Peirce.

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Deborah Dougherty received her PhD from MIT and taught at Wharton, McGill, and Rutgers. She has published 50 articles and 12 essays on organizing for sustained innovation and science-based innovation and soon a new book on complex innovation systems titled *Taking Advantage of Emergence: Productively Innovating in Complex Innovation Systems*.