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GROUNDING THEORY METHOD: THE RESEARCHER AS BLANK SLATE AND OTHER MYTHS

Epistemological and Philosophical Issues in Information Systems

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Abstract

The use of grounded theory method (GTM) as a research method in information systems has gradually increased over the years as qualitative research in general has become more prevalent in information systems. GTM offers a systematic way to generate theory from data, but is rarely used to its full potential in information systems. We believe that GTM is not used to its full potential in information systems because of a number of myths about its use that do not conform to the reality of the method. These myths – the Researcher as Blank Slate, GTM is Inflexible, GTM Produces Low Level Theories that don't do much, and GTM is Positivist/Interpretivist – are discussed in this paper. Each myth is examined and some implications drawn for the potential use of grounded theory in information systems.

Keywords: Grounded theory, research methods, epistemology

Introduction

Grounded Theory Method (GTM) was launched in 1967 by its co-founders Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and was defined by them as *the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analysed in social research*. It was a reaction to 'armchair theorising' by sociologists using functionalist theories (Kendall 1999, Dey 1999). GTM is now prevalent in sociology and health disciplines, and much more recently, has been adopted by IS researchers (e.g. Baskerville and Pries-Heje 1999, Urquhart 2001).

Orlikowski's (1993) paper on CASE tools as organizational change, which won an *MIS Quarterly* best paper award, was probably responsible for giving GTM widespread legitimacy in IS. Orlikowski (1993) introduced and justified her use of GTM on three counts. First, it was useful where no previous theory existed. Second, it incorporated the complexities of organizational context into the understanding of the phenomena. Third, GTM was uniquely fitted to studying process and change.

Charmaz (2006a, p.2) defines grounded theory method(s) as "systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves". These guidelines allow the identification of patterns in data. By analyzing these patterns, researchers can derive empirically valid theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Martin and Turner 1986). This is because "the theory-building process is so intimately

... tied with evidence that it is very likely that the resultant theory will be consistent with empirical observation" (Eisenhardt, 1989).¹

While GTM studies constitute a minority group in IS research (Lehmann 2001), the value of GTM is now acknowledged within IS. This recognition reflects the tremendous progress of interpretive research from insignificance in the 1980s (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991) to its current mainstream status in the IS. However, the increased adoption of GTM raises the issue of a number of damaging misconceptions or myths surrounding use of GTM. These myths damage the cause of research generally because they prevent full exploitation of the method in qualitative research. Worse, these myths assume monolithic status in some IS schools where GTM is not seen as a plausible research method .

This paper aims to discuss those myths and draw out some implications of GTM use in IS. The paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly discuss GTM as a research method, describing its origin and philosophical background. Second, we discuss how grounded theory has been applied in IS to date. Third, we identify four prevalent myths about GTM in the IS community. Finally, we discuss the implications of such myths and suggest further research issues regarding GTM use in IS.

GTM as a Research Method

Philosophical Background and Epistemological Claims

Grounded theory method (GTM) grew in importance and recognition after the seminal work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). These two sociologists come from different backgrounds, and their collaborative work melds fundamental traditions in sociology (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Strauss 1987, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Glaser 1992, Glaser 1978).

On the one hand, Herbert Blumer, Evert Hughes, and Robert Park trained Anselm Strauss in symbolic interaction at the University of Chicago's school of qualitative research, where Strauss was influenced by the pragmatist philosophical tradition (Charmaz 2001, Strauss and Corbin 1998).²

On the other hand, Bernie Glaser was trained in *quantitative* methodology and *qualitative mathematics* (a method in which mathematical expressions, such as those of statistical formulas, can be stated qualitatively) at Columbia University by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, an innovator of quantitative methods and one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century (Glaser 1998, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Glaser was also trained in theory construction by Merton, in particular theoretical coding, which Merton learned from Talcott Parson and others (Glaser 1998). Additionally, Glaser received training in explication of text at the University of Paris (Glaser 1998).

In the historical evolution of symbolic interactionism, Glaser and Strauss 1967 can be seen as one of the key representative texts of a phase of criticism and ferment, a period between 1963 and 1970, during which the fourth generation of symbolic interactionists and many new ideas emerged (Denzin 1992). One of those *fermenting ideas* was a reaction again what Glaser and Strauss called *arm-chair philosophers* that lead to the publication of *The Discovery* in 1967.

Strauss and Glaser worked together during the early 1960s, combining distinct backgrounds while sharing views about how rigorous sociology research could be done. In 1964, Bernie Glaser published his exploratory quantitative study of the professional careers of organizational scientists, with an introduction by Anselm Strauss. Glaser (1964) presented many of the core elements of GTM. The study's goal was "to explore for and to develop generalized formulations on these careers" (p.xiv); thus, the research was not about testing preconceived theoretical propositions

¹ Grounded theory is (a) an approach consisting of methods and (b) a theory of research. In this paper, 'grounded theory' and 'grounded theory method' refer to grounded theory approach.

² Herbert Blumer coined the term *symbolic interactionism* in 1937; since then, the term was adopted by prominent scholars (Blumer 1969). According to Norman K. Denzin (1992), the roots of symbolic interactionism can be traced to works of American pragmatists Williams James (*The Principle of Psychology*, 1890), John Dewey (*The Reflect Arc Concept in Psychology*, 1896), Charles Horton Cooley (*Human Nature and the Social Order*, 1902), and G. H. Mead (*What Social Objects Must Psychology Presuppose?* 1910).

but rather to develop plausible relations between variables that could “guide sociologists of science — as well as of occupations, professions, and organizations” (p.xv).

During this period, Glaser and Strauss developed the *constant comparative method*, later known as the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In GTM, *slices of data* collected for theoretical sampling are varied, providing researchers with limitless options for data gathering, including different collection techniques, data types, and ways of analyzing the data with the objective of generating “different views or vantage points from which to understand a category and to develop its properties” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p.65).

Regardless of early associations between GTM and quantitative data (Glaser 1964), from its inception in 1967, GTM spread quickly as an accepted qualitative research method, particularly in the health field. There were several more publications elaborating on, developing, and, later, debating the method (Glaser 1978, 1992, 1998, Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin 1998).

GTM offers “a logically consistent set of data collection and analysis procedures aimed to develop theory” (Charmaz 2001 p.245). These procedures allow the identification of patterns in data. By analyzing these patterns, researchers can derive theory that is empirically valid (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Martin and Turner 1986) because “the theory-building process is so intimately tied with evidence that it is very likely that the resultant theory will be consistent with empirical observation” (Eisenhardt 1989).

Kathy Charmaz, one of the few grounded theorists that studied under both Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss at UCSF (Martin 2006), offers the following list of distinguishing characteristics of GTM (Charmaz 2001, p.245):

1. Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis phases of research,
2. Creation of analytic codes and categories developed from the data, not from preconceived hypotheses,
3. The development of middle-range theories to explain behavior and processes,
4. Memo-making, i.e., writing analytic notes to explicate and fill out categories, the crucial intermediate step between coding data and writing first drafts of papers,
5. Theoretical sampling, i.e., sampling for theory construction, not for representativeness of given population, to check and refine the analyst’s emerging conceptual categories, and
6. Delay of the literature review.

Points 2 and 6 above indicate that researchers have to *set aside theoretical ideas*. Also, as previously discussed, we know that in GTM concepts are developed through *constant comparison*. These are two key features that distinguish this approach from any other approach to analysis of qualitative data.

Setting aside of theoretical ideas seems to imply that the researcher does not look at existing literature. This is not in fact an accurate representation of grounded theory. The position of both Glaser and Strauss on this issue is far more subtle and will be addressed in Myth #1: The Researcher as Blank Slate.

Any discussion of GTM is complicated by the fact that the founders continued developing the method over the years independently of each other. These separate paths culminated in very public disagreement between the co-originators on the publication of Strauss and Corbin’s book in 1990 (see Kendall 1999, Urquhart 2001 for a full description of the disagreement). Since then, different approaches were referred to as the ‘Straussian’ and ‘Glaserian’ versions of GTM (Stern 1994). Essentially the disagreement revolved around the guidelines published in the Strauss and Corbin book. While a detailed discussion is outside the scope of this paper, it is important that those using GTM are aware of the split between Glaser and Strauss as the two strands have evolved quite differently.

GTM in Information Systems

A purposive survey of information systems articles using GTM from 1996 to 2005 (Lehmann et al. 2006), found that GTM use fell into four categories: Full use of the method, using the method to generate concepts, mixing grounded theory with other research methods, and mislabeled as GTM, i.e., not following any known procedures of either Glaser, Strauss or Strauss and Corbin.

Researchers that made full use of the method usually produced a theory covering a substantive area, i.e., pertaining to the area of interest. Concepts were linked, building the theory, and this generally led to strong papers. Attempts

were generally made to engage emergent substantive theory with competing theories. None of the articles attempted to articulate a formal theory. Some of the articles used GTM to generate concepts that were then used for surveys. Some articles mixed GTM with other methods – the most notable and successful being Baskerville and Pries-Heje (1999), where the grounded theory generation was combined with action research.

The category of ‘misabeled’ GTM generally contained papers where some coding had taken place, but the coding was descriptive and, in some cases, derived from previous literature. This category is common in the health discipline, where GTM is often equated with qualitative research in general (Benoliel 1996). There is a sense in which GTM, as a well respected coding method, provides a convenient imprimatur for any coding of data, even if the method itself has not been followed.

Myths about GTM Use in IS

We think using the device of myths for analysis, as demonstrated by Hirschheim and Newman (1991) in their discussion of ISD, is very apposite to our discussion of GTM. Hirschheim and Newman use the definition of myth from Trice and Beyer 1984: “A dramatic narrative of imagined events, usually used to explain origins or transformations of something. Also, an unquestioned belief about the practical benefits of certain techniques and behaviors which is not supported by the demonstrated facts.” It is this last aspect of the definition we wish to concentrate on, as we believe that the practical benefits of GTM are now well demonstrated in IS research.

Myths can have many different aspects. Bolman and Deal (1984, in Hirschheim and Newman 1991) identify different functions of myths: to explain, to express, to maintain solidarity and cohesion, to legitimize, to communicate unconscious wishes and conflicts, to mediate contradictions, and to provide an anchor from the present to the past. We would say that most myths surrounding GTM use are directed at communicating unconscious (and conscious?) conflicts between qualitative and quantitative research, and legitimizing a view of GTM as impractical for dissertation research. As we both conducted successful dissertation research using GTM, this last point is particularly worrying, in that a person’s dissertation is the basis of their research training. GTM is then closed off as an approach for dissertations, which cuts down on the plurality of research method and subject that has come to mark IS research as a discipline in recent times.

The motivation for this paper comes from our direct and shared experience of such myths. The authors met as a result of one author seeking information and support for the use of GTM in a dissertation. We can both furnish many emails from postgraduate students around the world, seeking help to justify the use of GTM for their dissertations and seeking support in the coding process. This paper is written to help people wanting to use GTM who find that certain myths are a barrier to that use. It is also aimed at experienced academics who may unwittingly be perpetuating those myths, and anyone curious about the potential of GTM as a method for qualitative research.

The most pervasive myths about GTM, that in our view prevent its more frequent use in qualitative research, are set down below.

Myth #1: Researcher as Blank Slate

The idea that the grounded theory researcher is a ‘blank slate’ who launches into data collection without first looking at the literature is a particularly pervasive misconception (McCallin 2003, Andrew 2006). For instance, Selden (2004) says, *‘It is impossible to comply with GT notions of not being influenced by early reading’*. Selden then goes on to say that he put their readings in mental brackets. This is entirely consistent with Strauss (1987), who says that the advice about delaying the scrutiny of related literature applies less so to experienced researchers, as they are more practiced at subjecting theoretical statements to comparative analysis.

Like most myths, the idea of the researcher as blank slate, has at its base a kernel of truth. However, it is more accurate to say that grounded theory research does not *start* with a theory to prove or disprove.

According to Glaser (1992), the dictum in grounded theory is that there is no need to review the literature in the substantive area under study, first stated in the Glaser and Strauss book of 1967, “is brought about by the concern that literature might contaminate, stifle or contaminate or otherwise impede the researchers effort to generate categories.” (Glaser 1992 p.31). Walsham (1995) expresses our view of this succinctly when he says that it is possible to access existing knowledge of theory without being trapped in the view that it represents the final truth in that area.

It is difficult, if not utterly impossible, for the PhD candidate to avoid reviewing the literature for many good reasons, including passing the research committee review. Thus, among classic grounded theorists, it is generally accepted that a pre-study literature has to be conducted to find the problem; however, this should be done in such a way that the extant theories do not “derail the emerging theory” (Nathaniel 2006). The appropriate use of the literature in GTM is a question of *phasing* (Martin 2006). The first phase is *noncommittal* in which the researcher develops sensitivity and finds the problem. The second phase is *integrative* in which the researcher integrates the emergent theory with extant theories to render the new theory in the context of existing knowledge and thus making the theory more valuable.

Our own experience leads us to think that the tactic of a preliminary (noncommittal) literature review works well when using grounded theory. The preliminary literature review examines what theory exists in the area and how other people may have addressed aspects of a research problem but does not then impose a framework on future data collection. Importantly, this preliminary literature review is conducted *on the understanding that it is the generated theory that will determine the relevance of the literature*. The literature review is revisited, and extended, once the theory has been generated from the data. The notion of a preliminary literature review helps graduate students embarking on a dissertation, as it provides a way to conform with departmental or school requirements, while its draft or preliminary status indicates to the student that this is not a final statement on theory in the area. Indeed, the whole point is to generate theory that will engage with the literature review in a critical manner.

In our view, the idea that GTM is not rigorous because of delayed literature reviewing is most unfortunate, as the very crux of GTM is the rigorous generation of theory using systematic procedure. All the texts of GTM stress the need to engage the resultant theory with the literature.

Myth #2: GTM Is Inflexible

The second myth follows somewhat from the first. The dictum about literature is erroneously seen as one inflexibility about GTM that makes it difficult to use. For instance, Allan (2002) talks of both the difficulty of putting aside preconceptions and coding at a micro level. Allan then concludes that both these difficulties were satisfactorily resolved. Some of these notions of inflexibility may have come from applying the Strauss and Corbin (1998) guidelines. For instance, Hansen and Kautz (2005), Melia (1996) and Kendall (1999) report difficulties in using the Strauss and Corbin paradigm.

The notion that GTM is inflexible is not borne out when one considers its widespread use in all disciplines. As in IS, disciplines such as health have reported that many researchers adopt GTM for a purpose other than developing theory, generally data analysis (Benoliel 1996). A common use for GTM in the health field, for instance, is the generation of questionnaire constructs. This can be seen as combining theory building (the aim of the method) with theory testing. As previously stated, there are a number of successful adaptations of GTM in IS (e.g. Baskerville and Pries-Heje 1999, Lings and Lundell 2005), as well as ‘pure’ studies (Orklikowski 1993, Urquhart 1999, Lehmann 2001) using either Straussian or Glaserian versions of GTM.

GTM has great strengths as a stand-alone coding method, since the stages are well sign posted for the novice researcher (Urquhart 2001). One concern is that IS researchers may not be leveraging the undoubted potential of that coding method to generate good substantive theories that contribute to our discipline.

Myth #3: GTM Produces Low Level Theories that Don’t Do Much

The general impression of GTM is that it produces low-level theories that are difficult to ‘scale up’ (Urquhart 2001). The low level of the theory is a natural consequence of the type of ‘bottom up’ coding, starting at the word and sentence level, which GTM employs. This produces rich theory with a very close tie to the data, and this is a major strength of GTM. The close tie to the data means that the theory will be substantive, i.e., pertaining to that particular area. However, because a low-level theory is produced does not mean that there is no possibility of scaling that theory up, and indeed GTM places an obligation on the researcher to do so.

This myth has foundation in Layders’ (1993) view that GTM needed to break away from focusing on micro phenomena, as this prevented researchers from enriching the research with macro structures. This viewpoint was conveyed in Walsham’s influential 1995 article on interpretive case studies to IS researchers. In fact, Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledged from the beginning that substantive theory development can and should shade into formal theories. They devoted a whole chapter in their book to this issue. Glaser and Strauss never saw GTM as only

a micro theory. They both worked at organizational levels, and Strauss's interest in social arenas and social worlds led him beyond the micro level to the 'meso' level (Charmaz 2006b). Strauss (1987) talks about the obligation, having produced a substantive theory, to wrestle with other theories. Glaser (1978) suggests several routes to extending and scaling up the theory, including considering similar theories and data in similar substantive areas, and how the substantive theory relates to formal models and processes. In our own field, there are formal theories such as structuration theory and actor network theory in use, which could be used as a lens to view grounded substantive theories.

In practical terms, we have found it useful to 'scale up' substantive theories by considering whether the core categories that are generated can be grouped into further concepts or themes. The important point here is that generating a theory using GTM does not exclude researchers from the obligation of engaging their theories with the current theories in the field, and that this is an important element of the method.

Myth #4: GTM Is Positivist/Interpretivist

There has been some debate about whether GTM carries with it philosophical baggage in the shape of interpretivism or positivism inherent in the method (see Bryant 2002 and Urquhart 2002). We include it here as a myth because the assumption that GTM is inherently positivist or interpretivist, and therefore not suitable for use if the researcher is coming from the opposing paradigm, is not supported by the demonstrated facts.

A qualitative method, depending on its underlying epistemology, can be seen as positivist, interpretivist, or critical (Klein and Myers 1999). Therefore, GTM "in use" can be influenced by different underlying epistemologies. The fathers of GTM made no claim about *correct* epistemology; thus, GTM as a research method is orthogonal not only to the type of data used, but it can be appropriated by researchers with different assumptions about knowledge and how it can be obtained. This property of the method allows researchers with dissimilar epistemological stances to succeed in using the method.

Anells (1996) points to statements by Glaser (1992) about GTM focusing on 'concepts of reality' (p.14) and searching for 'true meaning' (p.55) as evidence of a critical realist position, inherently positivist. Madill et al. (2000) argue convincingly that the philosophical position adopted when using grounded theory depends on the extent to which the findings are considered to be discovered within the data, or as the result of construction of inter subjective meanings. They locate the former view as Glaser's (1992) position and the latter as Strauss and Corbin's (1998).

GTM, therefore, has been characterized both as positivist and interpretivist by various commentators. We support Charmaz's (2006a p.9) view that GTM is in many ways neutral, and can be seen as a container into which any content can be poured. It is helpful to move beyond debates about epistemology to consider the practical issues of using GTM in IS, with all the variations that use implies.

GTM helps us build theory, and it is in this light that GTM should be viewed by IS researchers. One of the issues we have noted with GTM is that people find it difficult to place it within their epistemological assumptions, precisely because of the tensions noted above, and the history of the co-founders. We leave the last word to Glaser (1999) who stated during a conference address:

"Let me be clear. Grounded theory is a general method. It can be used on any data or combination of data."

Conclusion

This paper has briefly reviewed the use of GTM in IS research, and identified four prevalent myths about its use. Most of the myths we identified tended to, intentionally or unintentionally, promote the view that GTM is an impractical research method, particularly for dissertation research. This has not been our experience. GTM has a number of advantages as a research method, namely: relevance, as it has a built-in closeness to the data, and rigor, in the form of clearly prescribed analysis procedure and a clear pathway to generating substantive theories. It is a flexible research method that is good for researching processes and for building theory in unexplored areas, two strengths that could undoubtedly benefit IS research.

As GTM use becomes more widespread in IS, we look forward to more debate about GTM, moving beyond epistemological issues to the key issue of what GTM can contribute to IS research. Future questions include the consideration of whether, because of the unique nexus between people and technology in IS, this necessitates

adaptations of GTM, and what type of adaptations they might be. As more IS researchers use GTM, we would urge those researchers to be reflective about those adaptations rather than perceiving them as a deviation from 'pure' GTM. We concur with the point made by Hughes and Howcroft (2000) that it is an indication of maturity in use of the method if researchers account for their actual use in the method and supply a reflective evaluation. A further question concerns the potential of GTM for theory building in IS, given that theory-building has been identified as a key requirement for the further development of the IS field. While such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, we view GTM as potentially very helpful in bringing both rigor and creativity to theory-building efforts in IS research. We look forward to further debates as GTM evolves in IS research and is leveraged further by researchers in the field.

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