BRYANT RESPONDS: URQUHART OFFERS CREDENCE TO POSITIVISM

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I am grateful to the editor of JITTA for the opportunity to append a brief response to Cathy Urquhart’s article (Urquhart 2002). I am also pleased that Dr Urquhart has taken the trouble to reply to my earlier piece, and so develop the debate on GTM.

In many regards we are in agreement; we both wish to stress the usefulness of the method, we both understand that the early formulations may now need to be revised or reinterpreted, and we are both concerned that the philosophical underpinnings of the method be clarified.

In other respects our views diverge, and some of the differences are important. I think that Urquhart is too accommodating to positivism in general, and consequently to the positivist inclinations of GTM. She states that ‘GTM is paradoxical and unique’ in its claims to be a systematic way of generating theory from qualitative data. Unless I have misinterpreted her entirely, the unstated corollaries of this sentiment are that systematic theory generation is primarily associated with quantitative data, and that all non-GTM ways of generating theory from qualitative data are unsystematic – otherwise GTM would not be unique. I would dispute these ideas, and perhaps when stated so bluntly, Urquhart would as well.

That Urquhart expresses herself in this manner, indicates that she is prepared to offer credence to a scientific or positivist orientation; and this then explains her arguments regarding data and induction: Which are where we diverge most sharply. I do not understand why she thinks that induction is not intimately associated with positivism. She states that GTM is ‘above all … an inductive method … yet it is seen as a post positivist1 method’ . The concept of phenomenalism is central to Kolakowski’s characterization of positivism, and Giddens (1974) specifically uses the term in Kolakowski’s sense. As such positivism centers around phenomenalism, which implies induction; and classic GTM is unerringly inductive.

I must admit that Urquhart’s discussion of phenomenalism seemed confused, until I realized that the fault was mine in mentioning Haig’s (1995) work. Haig’s vain effort to rescue GTM from positivism introduces the distinction between data and phenomena – but the latter is used in a rather haphazard fashion and certainly does not equate to phenomenalism as used by Giddens (1974). In many ways, I rather wish that I had not

1 Post-positivist is a misleading term since it really refers to attempts to rescue positivism from its critiques; as such it is still positivism, but perhaps in a new guise – i.e. neo-positivism.

Ken Peffers acted as senior editor for this article.

mentioned Haig at all. My main motivation in referencing his article was that he is one of the few people writing about GTM who tries to take issue with what Urquhart terms the ‘philosophical baggage’. He recognizes that the simple use of induction that underlies ‘classic’ GTM will not stand any close scrutiny – hence his accusation of ‘naïve Baconian inductivism’ (not inductionism as Urquhart states it).

Haig’s solution is to introduce the term *phenomena* and distinguish it from the term *data*. His argument is not convincing and neither is it sustained, as I explain in my article. It is, however, indicative of the real nub of the problem which is the term *data*. The quotes I offer in my original article, taken from a range of writing by both Glaser and Strauss (Glaser 1978, 1992, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin 1989, 1990, 1994), indicate that the concept of data is both central to the method – theory emerging from the data – but ultimately ill-defined and unexamined. Urquhart tries to defend GTM from a simplistic view of data, arguing that coding somehow transforms data into something else – categories; but this is unpersuasive, as it still begs the question how the categories are formed, and in what sense is the data transformed rather than merely categorized? Urquhart feels she can go some way to answer this by saying that the process of coding is ‘subjective’; but it is not clear what she achieves by defining it in this way. She seems to be undermining her earlier claim that GTM is systematic, since some interpretations of the term ‘subjective’ would resonate with concepts such as personalized, idiosyncratic and diverse.

The reason she gets rather tangled in her own argument is that she is unwilling to let go of the GTM mantra of theory being ‘grounded in the data’. Anyone making this sort of claim has to grapple with critiques of positivism and also point out how to overcome issues such as the Quine-Duhem thesis of underdetermination; i.e. that a theory is never fully determined by the facts, or data.

GTM as stated by Glaser & Strauss cannot engage with these sorts of philosophical issues without emerging in a different form. That was the point of my original article, and Urquhart seems to be heading in this direction when observing that GTM is essentially concerned with meaning construction. Ultimately, however, she does not develop this point. Were she to do so her conclusions would be far closer to mine, and also to those of Charmaz in her contribution to the 2nd edition of the Handbook of Qualitative Research. Charmaz (2000) articulates the idea of constructivist GTM, contrasting it to objectivist GTM. Glaser (2002) has responded directly to Charmaz, and I leave to the reader to decide who has the more coherent set of ideas.

In conclusion I welcome Urquhart’s contribution as part of a continuing process of developing the method beyond its origins, and making it a key feature of IS research. The question posed by Urquhart in the title of her reply must be answered by ‘yes’ to the first part, and ‘no’ to the second – Cathy Urquhart and I concur on that.

**REFERENCES**


Bryant Responds: Urquhart Offers Credence To Positivism


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Having started my first degree in Cambridge as a natural scientist, I finished it as a social scientist. I then completed my PhD at LSE, before taking up temporary posts as a lecturer in Sociology. The curtailment of the social sciences in the UK under Thatcher, forced a change of direction, and I completed a Masters in Computing, followed by several years working in the commercial software sector. Since 1985, I have been teaching and researching at Leeds Metropolitan University; previously as Reader in Software Engineering, and since 1994 as Professor of Informatics. I also hold visiting posts at the University of Amsterdam, and University of Malaya where I co-ordinate an International Masters in Information Management.

*The Journal of Information Technology Theory and Application (JITTA)*, 4:3, 2002. 57