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Dealing with Literature Review and Epistemological Underpinnings in Grounded Theory Methodology

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to review the crucial debate about undertaking a literature review and adopting an epistemological position in doing a grounded theory study. By relying on existing knowledge about the subject, three main Grounded Theory Approaches are discussed: Glaserian, Straussian, and Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology. All of them differ somewhat both in adopting an epistemological stance that fits well with their research strategy and conducting a literature review at the earlier stages of the research process. The paper contributes to enhancing knowledge about Glaser's dictum of 'getting started' which seems to be misunderstood by those who still misunderstand the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) orthodoxy version.

INTRODUCTION

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) remains one of the most largely accepted research strategies in the world (Birks & Mills, 2015). Conversely to deductive approaches, this methodology aims at systematically collecting and analyzing data to rigorously generate a theory that is grounded in the data (Goulding, 1999). It was launched during the 1960s by two American Sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss who had different intellectual backgrounds and was developed through the combination of a set of principles based upon an inductive approach (Thornberg, 2012). Years after its inception in the sociological area, Grounded Theory Methodology has been extended to a range of fields including management sciences (Fendt & Sachs, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2016).

This innovative methodology has come back with some suspicion and skepticism in doing qualitative research. It has its specific method of data collection and analysis and requires a high level of abstraction. But two main issues remain misunderstood in doing a grounded theory study: epistemological orientation and literature review. On the one hand, dealing with epistemological orientation really troubles researchers engaged in a

grounded theory study because it is rooted in the co-founders' controversial backgrounds (Urquhart and Fernandez, 2006).

Epistemological orientation differs from one Grounded Theory approach to another. How Classical grounded theorists view epistemology differs from Straussian and Constructivist grounded theorists' viewpoints. On the other hand, there is an ongoing controversial debate about conducting a literature review in GTM (Charmaz, 2006; McGhee et al. 2007; Dunne, 2011). Scholars often face difficulties with the use of literature when they attempt to do a grounded theory study (Bryant, 2009). This appears as a recurrent issue, especially for Grounded Theory doctoral students who do not know how and when to undertake a literature review in their study (Urquhart and Fernandez, 2006; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Even though grounded theorists agree about conducting a literature review, the issue remains on when and how to conduct a literature review (Charmaz, 2006; Dunne, 2011).

Should the literature review be done before engaging the data collection? Should it be done at the end of the analysis process? Are all extant theories relevant to the research process? Based upon these underlined gaps, it becomes necessary to

set out new ideas about doing a grounded theory study. Therefore, this paper aims at raising the doubt about literature review and philosophical issues in GTM. The paper is structured as follows: We first outline the epistemological underpinnings of each grounded theory approach (Glaserian, Straussian, and Constructivist). Second, we focus on conducting a literature review of each approach before contributing to the debate by laying out new insights.

DISCUSSION

Epistemological Underpinnings in Three Grounded Theory Approaches

Guba and Lincoln (1994) stress that by outlining Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) epistemological underpinnings, the researcher may move toward realities and knowledge. Epistemology has been subjected to a wide discussion in Grounded Theory Methodology, but its adoption may vary from one grounded theory approach to another, depending on the authors' backgrounds.

1. Glaserian Grounded Theory ambiguous epistemology

Even though admitting the influence of symbolic interactionism and the Chicago school epistemological background through his teamwork with Anselm Strauss, Glaser rejects any epistemological underpinnings about doing grounded theory. He views GTM as a general methodology that can combine both qualitative and quantitative data (Holton, 2008). Glaser (1999) asserted 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". From a Glaserian perspective, epistemology does not stand as a specific way of doing grounded theory. By contrast, it may be usually clarified by undertaking the methodology which drives it: "Viewed as a general research methodology, GT is not confined to any particular epistemological or ontological perspective; rather, it can facilitate any philosophical perspective as embraced by the researcher" (Holton, 2008).

Hence it must be beard in mind that a Glaserian grounded theorist is free from any philosophical assumption during the whole research process. Otherwise, it is the methodology itself that constitutes a driving force for further

epistemological stance. But Glaser's rejection of epistemology may be ambiguous because he was first rooted in positivist backgrounds derived from Columbia University where he attempted to codify qualitative data as Paul Lazarsfeld coded quantitative data (Charmaz, 2006). Alongside his works, Glaser never breaks with the idea of considering the researcher as a neutral observer who does not take into account the situational context from which data emerge. According to him, the researcher must let the data express itself and try to understand the reality by remaining objective rather than moving toward an interpretive orientation.

2. Straussian Grounded Theory Epistemology: From negligence to recognition

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) did not put out any initial epistemological assumptions during their primary work about the Basics of Qualitative research. They only focused on meanings and actions by drawing huge attention to participants' voices (Charmaz, 2005). At that time, they assume that reality cannot entirely be known, but it may be interpreted (Hallberg, 2006). Nevertheless, Corbin and Strauss (2008) further explicitly recognized their work as being rooted in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism and moved the method toward an interpretive perspective. This is because Anselm Strauss was himself influenced by pragmatism and symbolic interactionism derived from the work of G.H. Mead and John Dey (Charmaz, 2005; Bryant, 2002). Charmaz (2006) assumes that "In pragmatist philosophy, meanings emerge through practical actions to solve problems, and through actions, people come to know the world". Whereas symbolic interactionism deals with people's construction of their world based on individual perceptions of that world (Benzies and Allen, 2001).

3. Inside an explicit constructivist grounded theory epistemology

In contrast to the Glaserian perspective, constructivist grounded theory rejects both the idea of external reality and an independent viewer who acts objectively (Charmaz, 2005). Even though the constructivist version adopts grounded theory guidelines (Theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, constant comparative method, memoing, sorting), it takes a reflexive stance and is mainly concerned with how meanings are co-constructed through the ongoing interaction between the

researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). Rather than insisting on the researcher's power of explanation, the constructivist grounded theory assumes that meanings are socially co-constructed by the researcher and the participants through an interpretive method (Charmaz, 2006). In this sense, the researcher is neither independent nor separated from the data, he is entirely in interaction with participants and data. He aims to know why and how participants give meaning to their experiences in particular circumstances (Charmaz, 2006). Hence, the result is a theory co-constructed by the viewer and participants with an interpretive rendering of meanings and therefore the idea of a 'neutral inquirer' is meaningless and unworkable.

Literature Review in Three Grounded Theory Approaches

Conducting a literature review remains debatable in grounded theory studies. Authors themselves adopt controversial positions and do not adhere to a unique and common way of undertaking a literature review. Some think that it is not necessary to do a literature review from the outset of the research process (Glaser and Holton, 2004; Nathaniel, 2006) while others (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998; Charmaz, 2006, 2008) believe that it is obvious to conduct a literature review at the early stage of the research process and later extend it in full chapters after the theory has emerged.

1. Glaser's dictum of delaying literature review

From a Glaserian perspective, it is commonly accepted that the researcher should be far away from the influence of preconceived concepts and go directly to the data by remaining open-minded to what is going on in the area under study (Hallberg, 2010). In this respect "having an open mind means being curious and sensitive to what may emerge" (Luckerhoff, J., & Guillemette, 2011). No theoretical ideas are predetermined but the researcher enters the field as soon as possible and tries to emerge them through the study by applying the grounded theory guidelines (Holton, 2008). He should be free, open to discovery, and avoid forcing data into preconceived ideas (McCallin, 2006). Setting aside preconceived ideas and theoretical frameworks may prevent contrasting the emerging categories and the credibility of the research (Glaser, 1992). Glaser and Holton (2004) assume that conducting a literature review at the outset of the research process is a waste of time and the

researcher is running the risk of reading 'wrong literature'. This idea of temporary suspension (Luckerhoff, J., & Guillemette, 2011) of the literature is rooted in Glaser and Strauss's former willingness to ensure the emergence of categories (versus forcing) from the data without any contamination of preconceived frameworks "An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The authors state that existing theories should be scrutinized and related to the research process only after the emergence of the 'core category' and its properties "Similarities and convergences with the literature can be established after the analytic core of categories has emerged" (Ibid, 1967). More broadly, the literature may be another source of data that will be incorporated in the fourth level of comparison with the emerging theory, after the core category, its properties, and other categories have taken place (Glaser and Holton, 2004; Holton, 2008). From a Glaserian perspective, neither preconceived theoretical frameworks including interview strategies nor research problem or research questions formulation should guide the researcher while entering the substantive area. The researcher should adopt a 'getting started' (Glaser, 2018) position that allows finding the research problem in the area under study but it is not established at the outset of the research process. In sum, Glaser's dictum of delaying literature review includes two main parts: being free from preconceived ideas and extant theories at the outset of the research process and further relating them to the emerging theory for comparison. The ideal is to avoid forcing preconceived concepts into the data and then undermining and biasing the emerging theory (Nathaniel, 2006; Holton, 2008).

2. Literature review in Straussian Grounded Theory methodology

Strauss and Corbin (1990) take a different stance to the original version of GTM. They differentiate an 'open mind' to an 'empty head' and call for the rejection of literature abstinence (Dunne, 2011). They argue in favor of conducting a literature review at the earlier stages of the research process and believe that each inquirer has to bring to the study the multidisciplinary backgrounds he

was rooted in before. To identify a research problem, Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) advise using personal and professional experience, professional or collegial suggestions, technical and non-technical literature, or relying on the research study itself (McClann and Clark, 2003). The use of non-technical literature such as reports and correspondence offers information, mainly about the context within which people operate (Mills et al., 2006). However, it must be stressed that Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) did not recommend conducting an extensive literature review before the emergence of the core category “we do not want to be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even stifled in terms of creative efforts by our knowledge of it” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Hence early readings allow for stimulating theoretical sensitivity, stimulating questions, directing theoretical sampling, and providing a supplementary secondary source of data and the research validity (McGhee et al., 2007). But Straussian grounded theorists should not extensively undertake a literature review until the end of the research analysis.

3. Literature review in constructivist grounded theory methodology

According to constructivist grounded theorists, the theory is built within the ongoing interaction between the researcher and the participants, and then focusing on the relevant literature at the earlier stages of the research process helps identify a research problem. However, Charmaz (2006) guards against using an extensive literature review before data collection and analysis. She argues in favor of a short and relevant literature review related to the substantive area. The researcher should critically use the literature and then widely go back to it after the analysis has been completed. “Use the literature review to analyze relevant works concerning your specific research problem and now developed a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In her view, the constructivist grounded theorist may assess and synthesize prior works in the area under study. Similarly, Urquhart and Fernandez (2006) call for undertaking a ‘preliminary literature review’ to scrutinize extant theories related to the substantive area rather than forcing data into preconceived concepts. But they claimed that the main literature review is later broadly refined after the emergence of the core category.

In summary, whether he is engaged in a Glaserian, Straussian, or Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach, it becomes imperative for the researcher to decidedly know in a reasonable way ‘how’ and ‘when’ to use the existing literature (Dunne, 2011). We recognize the issue of delaying literature review, especially for Ph.D. Students who have to prepare and submit proposals required by research committees. We also admit the fact that a proposal without theoretical backgrounds does not work and has little chance to caught the committee's eyes, but readers should bear in mind that Glaser's stance remains consistent with the original version of the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM). What makes it original and innovative is the suspension of any traditional qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. This includes conducting a literature review, identifying a research problem at the outset of the research process, and collecting and analyzing data separately. All these strategies were set aside by Glaser who goes beyond old conceptions of doing qualitative research: this is the reason why Glaserian GTM is just misunderstood by those who still misunderstand what doing a grounded theory study really means in its orthodoxy version.

CONCLUSION

The paper highlights both epistemological underpinnings and literature used in each grounded theory Methodology: Glaserian, Straussian, and Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology. Charmaz (2006) put out her epistemological positions in the early versions of constructivist grounded theory whereas Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1990) initially neglected epistemological assumptions and later explicitly recognized the influence of both pragmatism and symbolic interactionism in their work (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). By contrast, Glaser never recognized any philosophical underpinnings. He considers GTM as a general methodology that is free from any epistemological or ontological influence. With regard to the use of literature, both the Straussian and Constructivist grounded theories have argued in favor of a first literature review while Glaser's stance was viewed as an ambiguous and naïve induction (Charmaz, 2006).

However, it must be stressed that all those who criticized Glaser's position about literature use did

not advance any well-founded reason. The main reason behind a primary literature review is to avoid reinventing the wheel by discovering what is already done and finding research problems and research questions (Thornberg, 2012; Dunne, 2011). But in our view, the risk of reinventing the wheel is neither sufficient nor appropriate. In contrast, it belongs to the scholar to develop his ability by being reflexive to what emerges in the data and later to what composes extant theories. No scientific work is perfect, there are always limitations to put out. Limitations on prior studies may be theoretical, philosophical, or methodological. Once, the core category has emerged, it belongs to the researcher uses the constant comparison method to find similarities and differences between what emerges and what is inside extant theories. During this stage, two cases can arise: First, the emerging theory is well underway and there is no preexisting work similar to it. Second, the emerging theory seems to be similar to extant theories and there is a risk of reinventing the wheel. In the first case, the analyst continues comparisons and refines the emerging theory. By contrast, the second case is more complicated due to the risk of reinventing the wheel. Here, reflexivity plays a fundamental role in the way in which it symbolizes the researcher's ability to develop theoretical thinking by corroborating his work with previous studies to detect or find out possible limitations related to extant theories and then moving the research problem toward this new issue. Accordingly, the risk of reinventing the wheel disappears. Therefore, advocating for a literature review before data collection and analysis is simply dismissing the pure inductive nature of GTM. This also denies its status as a general and innovative methodology that breaks with the traditional and biased qualitative ones.

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