

11-1-2011

Grounded Theory Methodology: Positivism, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism

Lars-Johan Age

Stockholm School of Economics, ljg@hig.se

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Age, L. (2011). Grounded Theory Methodology: Positivism, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(6), 1599-1615. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1319>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Grounded Theory Methodology: Positivism, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism

Abstract

Glaserian grounded theory methodology, which has been widely adopted as a scientific methodology in recent decades, has been variously characterised as "hermeneutic" and "positivist." This commentary therefore takes a different approach to characterising grounded theory by undertaking a comprehensive analysis of: (a) the philosophical paradigms of positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism; and (b) the general philosophical questions of the aims of science and the issue of choosing a scientific methodology. The commentary then seeks to position grounded theory methodology in terms of these philosophical perspectives. The study concludes that grounded theory methodology contains elements of positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism. In coming to this conclusion, the study clarifies the degree to which these three perspectives are found within Glaserian grounded theory methodology.

Keywords

Grounded Theory, Positivism, Hermeneutics, Pragmatism

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Grounded Theory Methodology: Positivism, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism

Lars-Johan Åge

Stockholm School of Economics, Stockholm, Sweden

Glaserian grounded theory methodology, which has been widely adopted as a scientific methodology in recent decades, has been variously characterised as “hermeneutic” and “positivist.” This commentary therefore takes a different approach to characterising grounded theory by undertaking a comprehensive analysis of: (a) the philosophical paradigms of positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism; and (b) the general philosophical questions of the aims of science and the issue of choosing a scientific methodology. The commentary then seeks to position grounded theory methodology in terms of these philosophical perspectives. The study concludes that grounded theory methodology contains elements of positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism. In coming to this conclusion, the study clarifies the degree to which these three perspectives are found within Glaserian grounded theory methodology. Key Words: Grounded Theory, Positivism, Hermeneutics, Pragmatism.

Although grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) has been widely adopted in scientific research in recent decades, this qualitative methodology has been the subject of various interpretations and criticisms from a variety of perspectives. Some authors have classified grounded theory methodology as a positivist methodology (Charmaz, 2006), whereas others have considered it to be an interpretive methodology (Brown, 1995; Goulding, 1998). Barney Glaser is one of the two originators of grounded theory methodology in 1967 and Glaser (1998) himself claimed that the methodology occupied a pragmatic position that went beyond other philosophical schools of thought. Regarding the difficulty to classify this particular methodology, Gustavsson (1998) mentioned that it has been subjected to criticism from both *subjectivists* and *objectivists*.

The present study aims at analysing grounded theory in terms of various philosophical schools of thought. It is hoped that such an analysis will provide insights regarding the different philosophical perspectives inherent within this particular methodology. In other words, the purpose of this commentary is to position Glaserian grounded theory methodology in terms of the philosophical paradigms of positivism, philosophical hermeneutics, and pragmatism. Also, practical implications of this analysis are also discussed.

The report of this study begins with a brief description of grounded theory methodology. Secondly, I present researchers perspective in order to describe my own relations to this topic. Thirdly, I use two general question of science in order to position the Glaserian grounded theory methodology in terms of the philosophical paradigms of positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism. Based on this analysis, a picture of Glaserian grounded theory methodology is emerging that implies that influences from all these

different philosophical traditions are found within this particular methodology, an insight that has practical implication in terms of opening up this methodology to a broader use.

Grounded Theory Methodology

According to Glaser (1978), data collection in grounded theory methodology begins with a “sociological perspective [of a] general problem area [rather than a] preconceived conceptual framework” (p. 44). The researcher thus begins with an attitude of openness, which seeks to ensure that the “the emerging of concepts never fails” (Glaser, 1978, p. 44).

The next step involves the generation of various categories by “constant comparison” of data through a procedure known as “open coding” (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to this procedure, which permeates the whole research process, “incidents are compared to incidents [and then] concepts to more incidents” (Glaser, 1978, p. 62), in order to generate more conceptual properties. Finally, concepts are compared to concepts in order to integrate the theory.

By continuing this procedure of constant comparison, the researcher then establishes a “core category” (Glaser, 1978, p. 95), which is a category that holds all other categories together. When the core category has emerged, the researcher undertakes the process of selective coding (Glaser, 1978), whereby incoming data are compared to the core category in a more precise manner than when the categories were first established. In this process of “selective coding,” only variables related to the core category are considered.

The way in which the various categories are related is considered under a process of theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978). This process is facilitated by the writing down of so-called “theoretical memos” (Glaser, 1978, p. 83) that elaborate on the theoretical codes. These “theoretical memos” represent immediate notations of emerging ideas about categories and how they inter-relate. These memos are then sorted into a theoretical outline. Finally, a process described as “theoretical writing” (p. 128) is undertaken, whereby all the details of the substantive theory are brought together in an overall conceptual description that is then integrated with or “weaved into” (Glaser, 1998, p. 207) the extant literature on the subject.

It is noteworthy that these various steps are, to a greater or lesser extent, conducted concurrently during the overall research process. In doing so, all the steps, from data collection to analysis, are guided by the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978). This means that the each session in the continuous process of data collection is determined by the previous sessions in which the data have been closely examined. This process is known as “theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). This data-collection process continues until theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61) is reached, which indicates that the substantive theory has been satisfactorily developed.

However, the grounded theory methodology has been subjected to changes and variations since it was presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967). One of the first signs of the methodology being interpreted differently from the original authors was the work of Strauss & Corbin (1990). In practical terms, for example, while Glaser emphasized the emergence of concepts, Strauss & Corbin (1990), in a more systematic version of the methodology, provided several analytical tools that the researcher could choose from in

order to “create” and “construct” a theory from the stories told by the participants. This difference was later discussed by Glaser (1992) as the polarities of emergence versus forcing (Glaser, 1992).

Interestingly, what in Strauss & Corbin’s (1990) version of the grounded theory methodology has been looked upon as systematic tools that have procedural affinity to positivism (Locke, 2001) others find characteristics of post-positivism in Strauss and Corbin’s emphasis on context and complexity. Inspired by this emphasis on context and complexity, Clarke (2005) argues that she has moved the grounded theory around the postmodern turn by developing something called situational analysis, which focuses on discourses, narratives, and historical analyses.

Other researchers (e.g., Charmaz, 2006), emphasize that the connection to the researcher is to be made visible as the theory is a construction and results from the interplay between the researcher and the respondents.

Researcher’s Perspective

The motivation for this commentary arises from a combination of my academic and practical experience with this interesting subject matter. As a doctoral student in 2002, I soon became interested in grounded-theory methodology, which I pursued with enthusiasm in my subsequent postgraduate studies. Given my practical experience as a practitioner in selling and sales management, it therefore seemed appropriate to combine my theoretical and practical areas of expertise and interest by conducting a grounded-theory study within the field of business-to-business selling processes. The result of this project was a successful postgraduate dissertation entitled: “Business Manoeuvring: A Grounded Theory of Complex Selling Processes.”

While conducting this grounded-theory research, I became increasingly interested in the philosophical underpinnings of this particular methodology. However, when discussing my research project with academic colleagues, I received conflicting opinions regarding the essential nature of grounded-theory methodology. Some colleagues insisted that it was a “positivist” methodology, whereas others felt that it was more closely related to a “subjectivist perspective.” Intrigued by these conflicting opinions and curious to learn more about the philosophical antecedents of this particular methodology, I proceeded to study the philosophy of science in general terms with a view to obtaining a broader philosophical understanding of the Glaserian nature of grounded theory methodology.

I was interested to discover that the founders of particular scientific methodologies, including grounded theory, often fail to explore and explain the fundamental philosophical basis of their particular methodologies—even when the theoretical and conceptual principles of a given methodology are ostensibly being presented. However, in the writings of Laudan (1977, 1984, 1996) and Popper (1963, 1972), I found some answers to such fundamental questions as: “What are the aims of science?” and “How should a scientific methodology be chosen?” By addressing these sorts of fundamental questions to Glaserian grounded theory methodology, I discovered new and insightful perspectives on the issue of the basic nature of Glaserian grounded theory.

Approach

This brief introduction reflects how my insights and understanding of grounded-theory methodology began to form in the initial stages of my research journey, and how my perspectives subsequently became enriched by deliberately placing the methodology under the spotlight of a rigorous examination of its *fundamental philosophical nature*. The present commentary gathers these ideas and insights together—with a view to providing readers interested in grounded theory methodology with a new (and perhaps enlightening) perspective on the fundamental philosophical and scientific basis of this increasingly popular methodology.

The purpose of this commentary is to position Glaserian grounded theory methodology in terms of the philosophical paradigms of positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism. Thus, the present commentary seeks to discuss the extent to which the original Glaserian grounded theory methodology (as described by Glaser) can be argued to have *positivist*, *relativist*, and *pragmatic* characteristics. In undertaking this task, the commentary addresses two broader philosophical questions, both of which have been previously raised by prominent authors in other contexts—Popper (1963, 1972) in discussing the nature of science in general, and Laudan (1977, 1984, 1996) in discussing differences between positivism and relativism. These two questions are:

- What is the aim of science?
- How should a scientific methodology be chosen?

By using these two general and broad philosophical questions the philosophical underpinnings of the grounded theory methodology will be clarified. In this analysis, the focus is on the original version of grounded theory (Glaserian grounded theory) as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978, 1998, 2001, 2007).

Aims of Science

Dimensions of a Scientific Theory

According to Alvesson and Sköldböck (1994), a scientific theory has three distinct properties: (1) correspondence; (2) understanding; and (3) usefulness. Alvesson and Sköldböck further suggest that a theory: should have elements of all three dimensions (even if some dimensions are emphasised more than others in a particular theory); and might be more or less valid, with respect to certain dimensions (but not others). In this commentary, these three dimensions can be considered as desiderata for scientific theories—that is, these dimensions not only represent properties of a theory, but also more general aims of science, all of which have significant methodological and theoretical implications. Each of these dimensions, and their applicability to a substantive theory produced by grounded theory methodology, is discussed in more detail below.

Dimension of correspondence. Popper (1963) was as a positivist interested in the “the idea of objective and absolute truth” (p. 224) which he articulated as *correspondence to the facts* (Popper, 1963, p. 223). However, while emphasising *correspondence to the*

facts, Popper (1972) nonetheless argues that “... satisfactory theories must, as a matter of principle, transcend empirical instances which gave rise to them” (p. 355).

The basis for Popper’s (1963) argument was Tarski’s (1933, 1944) theory of truth, which, according to Popper, “... rehabilitated the correspondence theory of absolute or objective truth” (p. 223). According to Popper, the implication of this theory for scientific truth was that any criterion of scientific truth would be valid only if subjective criteria for truth (such as “belief”) were replaced with the notion of *correspondence to the facts* (p. 223). To illustrate this idea of objective truth, Popper makes a trivial example, “the statement, or the assertion, *Snow is white* corresponds to the facts only, and only if, snow is, indeed, white” (p. 224, emphasis in the original).

In other words, according to Popper (1963, p 223), a scientific procedure must lead to the establishment of *objective* and *true* knowledge. However, to understand what he meant by the terms “objective” and “true,” it is necessary to undertake a brief exploration of Popper’s (1972) understanding of the role and properties of scientific theory.

According to Popper (1972), the aims of scientific theory are twofold: (1) theoretical understanding (which can also be termed *explanation*); and (2) practical understanding (which incorporates *prediction* and *technical explanation*). Popper emphasised that the aim of science is to provide “satisfactory explanations” (p. 191) of things that are “in need of explanation” (p. 191). To do so, scientific enquiry requires testable hypotheses. As Popper (1972) observed:

An analysis and comparison of the degrees of testability of different theories shows that the testability of a theory grows with its *degree of universality* as well as with its degree of *definiteness*, or *precision*.
[emphasis in original] (p. 356)

According to the positivist perspective of Popper (1972), scientists propose conjectures that are then subjected to attempts to refute them. Popper argue that scientific progress occurs by a process of empirical falsification or “refutation” (p. 13) as theories are tested and discarded, to be replaced with new theories that have greater universality, precision, and explanatory power than the preceding formulations. As Popper noted: “*From the point of view of objective knowledge, all theories therefore remain conjectural*” [emphasis in original] (p. 80). According to Popper (1972), objective and true knowledge is thus derived from a process of empirical falsification that determines which statements *correspond to the facts* (p. 46) and can therefore be regarded as scientific “truth” (p. 46).

In terms of Glaserian grounded theory methodology, certain aspects of the *correspondence* dimension seem relevant. For example, referring to grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that “... the theory must closely fit the substantive area in which it will be used” (p. 237). Similarly, Glaser (1998) contends that the notion of *fitness* can be equated with *validity* in that it describes the extent to which concepts and theory reflect the data from which they are generated.

Further evidence of the relevance of the dimension of correspondence to grounded theory has been provided by Glaser (1978), who notes that a grounded theory should *work*—by which he meant that it should be able to *explain*, *predict*, and *interpret*

what is happening in a specific area of interest. Taken together, the requirements that a grounded theory should both “fit” and “work” constitute the notion of *relevance*, which can be defined as a theory’s ability to grasp the core problems and processes of the subject under investigation. Such a basic social process is denoted in Glaserian grounded theory as a core category.

According to Glaser (1978), such a basic social process consists of two or more stages, and can therefore be characterised as “processural” (p. 101). In addition, a basic social process has several other properties, including: (1) being pervasive (by which is meant a fundamental process that continues over time “irrespective of the conditional variation of place”); and (2) having full variability (by which is meant a process that can be found in different places in different forms).

In most grounded theory studies, such a core category or basic social process is the cornerstone of the study. To exemplify, in Lowe’s (1997) study of mergers, the core category/basic social process was *default remodelling*, in Christiansen (2005) study of business management, it was *opportunizing*, and in Bigus (1972) study of milkmen, the basic social process was depicted as *cultivating*. These core categories or basic social processes are thus the centrepieces of a grounded theory study, and bind the other categories together. For example, in Lowe’s study of bank mergers, the core category of *default remodelling* describes the way that relationships were redesigned in three main ways by supporting, terminating, and neglecting.

This search for a core category or basic social process within the grounded theory methodology resonates with Popper’s (1963) contention that “[a] new theory should proceed from some *simple, new, and powerful unifying idea*” [emphasis in original] (p. 241) that connects previously unconnected things.

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be argued that Glaserian grounded theory methodology incorporates certain presumptions that have similarities to the scientific canons proposed by Popper (1963, 1972). In particular, the insistence that grounded theory categories should fit the empirical data and the emphasis on a core category grasping the basic social process that (presumably) exists in the empirical field are both notions clearly related to the positivist scientific dimension of correspondence. These aspects of Glaserian grounded theory are in accordance with Popper’s insistence on the existence of objective facts that are independent of the researcher, and the need to determine the extent to which theoretical statements correspond to these facts.

Another similarity between Glaserian grounded theory methodology and Popper’s (1972) position is the latter’s criterion of *transcendence*—whereby “satisfactory theories must ... transcend empirical instances which gave rise to them” (p. 355). In a similar vein, Glaser (1978) argued that a grounded theory repeatedly places a researcher beyond the data to new research problems and ideas; that is, the theory “transcends” (p. 110) the substantive field of interest by being more general and abstract than the data from which it is derived.

Nevertheless, despite these similarities, it is acknowledged that there are also salient differences between the so-called “positivist” tradition (commonly associated with Popper) and Glaserian grounded theory. In particular, Glaser (1978) insists that grounded theory should also be “modifiable” (p. 5) during and after the data-collection process when he observes that “... nothing is sacred if the analyst is dedicated to giving priority attention to data” (p. 5). This property of modifiability is not consistent with the

falsification criterion of science as proposed by Popper (1963, 1972) since the notion of modifiability is based on the perspective that a theory is never finished but subjected to continuously modifications.

Dimension of understanding. As previously noted, the second dimension of a scientific theory proposed by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994) was the dimension of *understanding*. According to Ödman (1979), the hermeneutic tradition in natural science focuses on understanding the world—that is, it focuses on establishing meaning and interpretation. In Ödman’s view, this understanding can be characterised as “inter-subjective”—in that it is established through a “dialogue” (p. 49). Ödman (p. 56) identified three forms of interpretation within the hermeneutic tradition: (1) elementary interpretation (which refers to everyday interpretations during daily activities); (2) narrative interpretation (which involves a higher level of abstraction in the process of interpretation); and (3) scientific interpretation (which is a more abstract interpretation made by a researcher). According to Ödman, the last of these, scientific interpretations (or theories), are more formal than the other two types of interpretation, and usually incorporates a broader span of incidents.

Giddens (1984) acknowledged that scientific theories are more formal than other types of interpretations, but noted that it is more difficult to establish definitive categories of interpretation in the social sciences than it is in the natural sciences. For example, Giddens described what he termed *double hermeneutics*, which occurs when *second-order concepts* created by sociologists become *first-order concepts* by mediating so-called *frames of meaning*. In practical terms this can mean that a second order concept invented by social scientists, such as the term social class, is transferred and used by the social actors in order to orient themselves in their everyday activities.

Giddens (1984) and Ödman (1979) thus focused on what might be termed the dialogical nature of understanding. This means that the process of understanding is to be looked upon as a dialogical process between the researcher and the subject of the research. In other words, social science can be looked upon as an interaction process of a dialogical nature between the scientists and the involved actors, which in practical terms can lead to construction of concepts which have the inherent ability to change both the perspectives and the activities performed by the actors.

Other hermeneutic philosophers have focused on the context of the research and the researcher. For example, Gadamer (1975) contends that an understanding of a phenomenon requires researchers to recognise their own prejudices and notes that “... to be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible” (p. 361). Thus, “a person who thinks he [sic] is free of prejudices will be unconsciously dominated by them” (p. 360). However, Gadamer acknowledged that scientists must examine the legitimacy of the “fore-meanings dwelling within [them]” (p. 267), and must adapt these beliefs according to the phenomena being studied if they are to arrive at the “truth” (p. 268).

In terms of Glaserian grounded theory methodology, the dimension of understanding is clearly relevant, as it is also described as a dialogical process, even though a somewhat different vocabulary is used compared with the hermeneutic tradition. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), a grounded theory in any given area must be “*understandable* by laymen concerned with this area” [emphasis in original] (p. 237).

Such understanding is essential to the usefulness of the theory, because it “sharpens [laypersons’] sensitivity” (p. 240) with regard to present problems and potential solutions. To accomplish such understanding, Glaser and Strauss argue that the crucial concepts need to be both “analytical” (p. 38) and “sensitizing” (p. 38). Such a sensitizing concept is, according to Glaser (2001), a concept that has an instant grab, which enables people to see an underlying pattern in the things that are going on in the area of interest. When a theory consists of such concepts, actors can understand the theory in the light of their own personal experiences.

In summary, Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) insistence that concepts should be abstract corresponds to Ödman’s (1979) categorisation of a hermeneutic scientific theory as a third order of interpretation. Furthermore, Glaserian grounded theory’s focus on producing so-called sensitizing concepts can be related to Giddens’ (1984) contention that a hermeneutic theory merges with the existing conceptual framework of the actors involved in the phenomenon under study. Finally, Gadamer’s (1975) views on prejudices are also relevant to Glaserian grounded theory methodology, in which the vexing question of the researcher’s presumptions is a recurring issue for discussion (Glaser, 1998). Indeed, it can be argued that, just as Gadamer was reluctant to abandon the notion of one true interpretation, Glaserian grounded theory also searches for the core process which can only be discovered if the researcher is able to avoid pre-existing prejudices affecting the research process. As expressed by Glaser (1998) “The grounded theorist has no preconceived view of what problems they may encounter in the research or how the participants resolve their problem or main concern” (p. 118).

Finally, although Glaser (1978) did note that there should be a separation of data from theory in grounded theory methodology, the methodology does allow for a *dialogic* research process. This resonates with Giddens’ (1984) description of a merger between the framework of the researcher and that of the involved actors, which implies a diminishing linguistic and conceptual distance between the object of the study and the researcher. Thus, the hermeneutic perspective of establishing meaning through an inter-subjective and dialogical process between the social scientists and the involved actors is to a great extent present within Glaserian grounded theory methodology.

Dimension of usefulness. As previously noted, the third dimension of a scientific theory proposed by Alvesson and Sköldböck (1994) was the dimension of usefulness. In this regard, Laudan (1977) contends that “the central cognitive test of any theory ... [is] its adequacy as a solution of certain empirical and conceptual problems” (p. 70). Laudan defined such an “empirical problem” as “... anything about the world which strikes us as odd or otherwise in need of explanation” (p. 15).

According to Laudan (1977), empirical problems can be divided into three categories: (1) *unsolved problems* (which are empirical problems that have not yet been solved by any theory); (2) *solved problems* (which have been solved by an existing theory); and (3) *anomalous problems* (which are not solved by a particular theory, but which are solved by a competing theory). According to Laudan, “... one of the hallmarks of scientific progress is the transformation of anomalous and unsolved problems into solved ones” (p. 18).

Whereas Laudan (1977) referred to empirical problems as phenomena that have not yet been satisfactorily explained, Jensen (1995) referred to practical problems, for which it is possible to imagine situation that is more desirable” (p. 16).

In addition to treating empirical (or practical) problems, both Laudan (1977) and Jensen (1995) also discussed conceptual problems. According to Laudan (1977), a conceptual problem is a problem that is “... exhibited by some theory or another” (p. 48). This implies that conceptual problems cannot be viewed in isolation from theories, which sometimes is the case with empirical problems. The relationship between theory and conceptual problems was explained by Laudan (1996) in the following terms: “... a theory solves or eliminates a conceptual problem when [the theory] fails to exhibit a conceptual difficulty of its predecessor” (p. 81). In a similar vein, Jensen argued that a theoretical problem occurs when there is something wrong with existing theory, which can be manifested as contradictions that are puzzling. Jensen also commented upon the relationship between theoretical problems and practical problems, and concluded that the solution of a practical problem sometimes requires more knowledge in a specific area of interest, which, in itself, can constitute a conceptual problem.

In terms of grounded theory methodology, the dimension of usefulness is clearly relevant. Indeed, Glaser (1998) stated that a grounded theory can provide two useful contributions to conceptual problems. First, in practical terms, grounded theory can open up a particular area by providing concepts that are appropriate to the real contemporary activities and challenges of that area of interest. Secondly, in a more theoretical sense, a grounded theory can synthesise and integrate existing concepts into a broader view. In both cases, a grounded theory clearly fulfils the criterion of usefulness.

Moreover, the focus of grounded theory methodology is often on how actors control their daily endeavours. In the words of Glaser and Strauss (1967), a grounded theory provides the user with “... partial *control* over the structure and process of daily situations as they change through time” [emphasis in original] (p. 237). This useful function is accomplished by the application of a grounded theory that consists of both “controllable variables” (p. 245), (which give the user a feeling of control in situations of change), and “access variables” (p. 248), (which provide access to existing controllable variables).

However, although Glaserian grounded theory methodology certainly has the property of usefulness; the effectiveness of this dimension is dependent on the dimension of understanding. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is important that the concepts generated by grounded theory are not so abstract that the sensitizing effect is lost. As Glaser (2007) observed, the properties of understanding and usefulness are both natural consequences of a theory that is well grounded in the empirical field. It is thus apparent that the actual groundedness, that is, the extent to which the theory is grounded in empirical data determines its ability to facilitate both understanding and usefulness for the involved actors.

Summary of Applicability of Dimensions to Glaserian Grounded Theory

These three dimensions of correspondence, understanding, and usefulness, which in this discussion represent the perspectives of positivism, philosophical hermeneutics, and pragmatism each have a place within a substantive theory produced by Glaserian

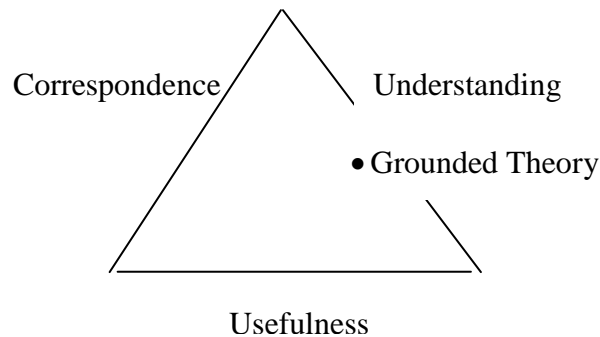
grounded theory methodology. For example, it is clear that there are similarities between Glaserian grounded theory methodology and the so-called positivist paradigm, as formulated by Popper (1963, 1972). In particular, both approaches aim to identify something that lies in the empirical field waiting to be discovered. Moreover, both approaches aim to generate transcending theories, and both seek to unify previously disconnected phenomena.

It can also be argued that there are similarities between Glaserian grounded theory methodology and the hermeneutic tradition. For example, both approaches focus on the establishment of meaning and interpretation through inter-subjectivity and dialogue. Moreover, with regard to the vexing issue of researcher prejudices, there are resemblances between Glaserian grounded theory and Gadamer's (1975) emphasis on the role of "fore-meanings" (p. 267) in arriving at the truth. As explained by Gadamer, "the important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings." (p. 269)

With regard to the three specific dimensions, it can be argued that usefulness and understanding are especially applicable to Glaserian grounded theory. Glaser probably emphasizes the dimension of usefulness more than other properties within his grounded theory methodology, and the preceding discussion has demonstrated that this property is strongly linked with the dimension of understanding. However, despite the influence of the positivist tradition on grounded theory methodology, it is acknowledged that the dimension of correspondence has a slightly different meaning within Glaserian grounded theory from that ascribed to it in the positivist research tradition. More precisely, correspondence in Glaserian grounded theory methodology refers to the production of a substantive theory that is useful for the actors in the area of interest, whereas correspondence in the positivist tradition has always referred to a true theory that corresponds to the facts. This difference of emphasis with respect to the dimension of correspondence obviously has implications for the notion of accuracy. In this regard, Glaser (2003) downplayed the importance of accuracy in grounded theory when he argued that this is not a first priority for grounded theory, because the methodology expressly envisages that theory will be continuously modified in accordance with new data; as a consequence, a grounded theory is always in progress and never finalised. Indeed, Glaser contends that "worrisome accuracy" (p. 130) is not the issue for grounded theory, because the principal focus for grounded theory is whether it explains "how a main concern is continually resolved in a substantive area and its general conceptual applicability" (p. 130). This pragmatic position can be contrasted with the emphasis on the notion of objective truth in the positivist tradition, which was expressed by Popper (1963) in the following terms: "... the very idea of error, or of doubt, (in its straightforward sense) implies the idea of an objective truth which we may fail to reach" (p. 226).

It is apparent from this discussion that Glaserian grounded theory methodology has significant affinity with philosophical positions that emphasise the dimensions of understanding and usefulness, but a somewhat different interpretation of the dimension of correspondence. In terms of the model of Alvesson and Skoldberg (1994), the grounded theory methodology can thus be positioned as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Positioning Grounded Theory Methodology within the Model of Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994)*



As seen above, within Glaserian grounded theory methodology the most emphasized desiderata or aims of science are that a scientific theory should be useful and providing understanding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The dimension of correspondence is there, but in a different meaning than in the perspective of Popper (1963), since it is not about what is true in the sense that it is *corresponding to the facts* (p. 223), but about what can bring the involved actors conceptual understanding and be useful for them.

Accuracy and Credibility

The above discussion raises the issue of what is meant by the notions of *accuracy* and *credibility*. By adopting a more instrumental and pragmatic view of “truth” (and the cognitive goals of science in general), Glaserian grounded theory methodology ostensibly leaves itself open to criticism with regard to the notions of accuracy and credibility.

Aside from the positivist canons of validity and reliability, there are other criteria for the quality of qualitative research, for example, trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); trustworthiness, rigor, and quality (Golafshani, 2003); or the act of putting data into a broader context by historical and structural analysis (Wainwright, 1997). Glaser (1998) has a different perspective on quality based on the view that a grounded theory is *modifiable*. More specifically, Glaser (2003), contends that the issues of “worrisome accuracy” (p. 130) and whether a theory is true or false are not relevant when pursuing theory that is, by its very nature, subject to continuous modification, as it aims to solve empirical and conceptual problems. However, if accuracy is not to be regarded as the primary criterion for judging the credibility of a theory generated by grounded theory methodology, Glaser suggests other criteria of credibility will be required. Glaser (1998) offers the following criteria for credibility of a grounded theory:

- **Fit:** According to Glaser (1998) is another word for “validity” (p. 18). The term *fit* refers to whether the concepts generated in a grounded theory adequately describe patterns in the data. In Glaserian grounded theory methodology, fit is continuously sharpened during the research process by ongoing comparison of incoming data with existing categories.

- **Workability:** According to Glaser (1998) refers to whether the concepts account for the main concern of the participants and how it is “continually resolved” (p.18).
- **Relevance:** Refers to whether the theory is important to the practitioners and whether it evokes instant “grab” (Glaser, 1998, p. 18).
- **Modifiability:** Implies that the theory is never “wrong;” rather it is continuously modified because, as argued by Glaser (1998), “new data never provides disproof, just an analytical challenge” (p. 19).

Having discussed the general question of the aims of science (including the concept of a scientific theory, and the related issues of accuracy and credibility), it is now appropriate to turn to the second question posed in the Introduction: “How should a scientific methodology be chosen?”

Choosing a Scientific Methodology

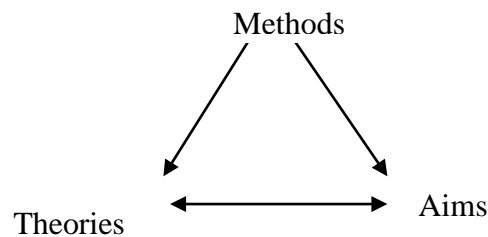
With regard to the means that are adopted to achieve a certain end in scientific enquiry, there is a dispute about processual credibility between what might be termed the positivist perspective and the relativist perspective. From the positivist perspective, there is a belief that strict adherence to certain methodological rules will invariably result in the objective truth. Popper (1963) thus argues that methodological choice is based on axiomatic conventions (such as correspondence to the facts), and that there is therefore no room for discussion about how different methodological alternatives might fulfil different objectives. In essence, this positivist position is based on the traditional scientific model of rationality, which consists of three levels of agreement (or disagreement): (1) matters of fact or theory; (2) matters of methodology; and (3) cognitive goals or aims of science. According to this schema, disagreements on the first (fact or theory) level are settled at the second (methodological) level, disputes at the second (methodological) level are settled at the third (cognitive or axiological) level, and disagreements about the third level (such as the cognitive goals of science) are irresolvable.

In contrast, from the relativist perspective, Feyerabend (1975) suggests that adherence to prescriptive methodological principles can represent a hindrance to the attainment of scientific knowledge. According to this view, history shows that scientific progress has, more often than not, resulted from the abandonment of strict methodological principles, because all methodologies, no matter how well conducted, have their limitations. Feyerabend therefore advocates the use of so-called counter-induction, which involves the utilisation of a combination of various methodological perspectives, including non-scientific methods, in order to develop knowledge of reality. In effect, Feyerabend’s position is that “anything goes”—a position that is not amenable to arguments about the justification of a chosen methodology. Indeed, Feyerabend questions whether there is any connection between idea and action in arguing that scientific progress often results from the actual dismissal of reason. For example, Feyerabend argues that the idea of starting with a problem that needs to be solved should be abandoned because, in his view, most human achievement begins with extraneous (and non-argumentative) activities, such as play.

It is thus apparent that the logical conclusion reached by extrapolation of both the extreme positivist perspective and the extreme relativist perspective is that the ultimate cognitive aims of science (and hence the choice of methodology) are not amenable to rational debate. Glaser (1998) argues a different position, emphasising that grounded theory methodology fulfils certain aims and that other methodologies fulfil other aims. Glaser thus took a more pragmatic view of the question of methodological choice. Glaser describes his view on methodological choice as, “it is merely another methodology, not a best methodology that replaces and supplements other methodologies. The researcher should always (at least try) to choose the method best for him [sic] and for the problem at hand” (p. 11).

This reflects the fact that neither the extreme relativist perspective, nor the extreme positivist perspective represents the essentially pragmatic view of methodological justification adopted by Glaserian grounded theory methodology. But this does not mean that this position lacks scholarly support within the scientific community. Indeed, a well-documented view that closely resembles the approach that is apparent within Glaserian grounded theory methodology is that of Laudan (1984, 1996). According to Laudan (1984, 1996), the cognitive aims of science are not immune to debate, even among different paradigms. In support of this view, Laudan (1984) presented a reticulated model of scientific rationality (as illustrated in Figure 2).

Figure 2. *A Simplified Version of Laudan’s (1984) Triadic Network of Justification*



As can be seen in the diagram, this model consists of the three elements of the traditional scientific model of rationality noted above—(1) theories; (2) methods; and (3) aims. However, in contrast to the traditional model, the three elements are connected in a “triadic network of justification” (p. 63). This means that the three elements are posited as being inter-related in that sense that they can justify each other in a non-hierarchical fashion (rather than being posited as separate hierarchical levels). As a result, a decision with respect to one element can be motivated from a position with respect to another element. For example, just as issues of facts (or theories) can constrain methods, so methods can justify theories; similarly, aims can justify methods, but methods must exhibit “realisability” (p. 62) with respect to selected aims, that is, make it probable that a certain method will obtain a particular goal. According to Laudan (1984) the elements of this model “imply that our factual beliefs drastically shape our views of which sorts of methods are viable, and about which sorts of methods do in fact promote which sorts of aims.” (p. 62). In other words:

- A scientific aim is justified by being methodologically realisable
- Matters of fact (or theory) must harmonise with aims

This model differs from the position adopted by both the extreme positivist perspective and the extreme relativist perspective by enabling different aims in science to be subjected to a justification process that goes beyond conventions and paradigms. By adopting a pragmatic criterion of realisability, that is expressing an aim of probability to be realised, the model thus transcends both the positivist search for true theories (which is difficult to maintain, because it is, as argued by Laudan (1996), impossible to ascertain the extent to which a nebulous criterion such as truth has been realised), and the relativist position that the different aims of science (and hence methodologies) are incommensurable. In other words, if decisions about scientific aims and methods are based on the triadic network of justification, such decisions become an exercise in empirical comparison, rather than a matter of adherence to conventions.

Conclusions

The major conclusion of this analysis is that a Glaserian grounded theory can be understood as a conceptual theory that primarily aims to enhance *understanding* and be *useful* in the substantive field of interest. It thus fulfils the first two dimensions of any scientific theory, as enunciated by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994). However, the third dimension of *correspondence* is interpreted within Glaserian grounded theory as the ability to depict reality in terms of relevance and usefulness, rather than as a theoretical property of objective “truth.”

There is affinity between Glaserian grounded theory and the perspective of Popper (1963, 1972) in terms of: (1) grasping something that lies out there waiting for discovery (correspondence); (2) finding a core category, which is similar to Popper’s (1963,) search for a “*simple, new, and powerful unifying idea*” [emphasis in original] (p. 241) that connects previously unconnected things; and (3) an emphasis on transcending theories.

Similarly, there is relatedness between Glaserian grounded theory and hermeneutics in terms of: (a) the notion that concepts should be abstract; and (b) a dialogical research process, which relates to the hermeneutic emphasis on the diminishing linguistic and conceptual distance between the object of the study and the researcher.

Glaserian grounded theory also has affinity with the more pragmatic “problem-solving” stance, as expressed by Laudan (1977) and Jensen (1995) in terms of focusing on solving empirical and theoretical problems. This was expressed by Glaser (1998) as either “opening up” (p. 78) a new area by providing appropriate concepts or, in a more theoretical sense, synthesising and integrating existing concepts into a broader view.

It is also evident that the Glaserian grounded theory methodology is pragmatic with regard to the question of means and ends in science. The methodology upholds a position outside those of the positivists and relativists in the sense that it contends that methodological issues are not given by the conventions that underpin both the positivist perspective and the relativist perspective. Rather, Glaserian grounded theory

methodology holds that methodological choice is, in itself, an empirical question in which the aims, method, and theory can justify each other in a non-hierarchical fashion.

Practical implications

Investigating the extent to which the different philosophical schools are present within Glaserian grounded theory methodology has practical implications. First, this discussion hopefully opens up the methodology for a broader use in the sense that it can be used by researchers independent of research tradition and philosophical standpoint. The methodology can be used by positivists to discover what actually lies undiscovered in the empirical field of interest or to connect and unify before unconnected categories or constructs. It can be used by researchers inspired by hermeneutics as a tool for creating dialogical understanding and inter-subjective interpretations. Or it can be used by researcher with a more pragmatic standpoint to create something conceptually that will be useful for the practitioners by solving empirical and conceptual problems.

Second, this discussion clarifies the philosophical ingredients in Glaserian grounded theory methodology. By this clarification, instead of viewing this methodology as either objectivistic or subjectivistic, a more nuanced picture of the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of a grounded theory can be depicted.

Third, in the descriptions by Glaser (for example, Glaser 1992, 2001, 2003), the grounded theory methodology is described as having certain specific characteristics and specific procedures that separate this methodology from other methodologies, and Glaser strongly emphasizes that they should not be mixed. This discussion places the Glaserian grounded theory methodology in context and shows that the methodology is not that orthodox in the first place. Instead, its procedures are actually compromises between different perspectives to begin with. This conclusion should not be looked upon as a problem, but rather as a possibility for broader, and perhaps a more conscious, use by researchers from different research traditions.

References

- Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (1994). *Tolkning och reflektion. Vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod*. (Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research), Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.
- Bigus, O. S. (1972). The milkman and his customers: A cultivated relationship. *Urban Life and Culture*, 1, 131-165.
- Brown, S. (1995). Postmodern marketing research: No representation without taxation. *Journal of the Market Research Society*, 37(3) 287-310.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London, UK: Sage.
- Christiansen, O'. (2005). The theory of 'opportunitizing' and the sub-process of 'conditional befriending', *Journal of Business & Economics Research*, 3(4) 73-88.
- Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Feyerabend, P. (1975). *Against method: Outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge*. London: NLB.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussion*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2001). *The grounded theory perspective: Conceptualization contrasted with description*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2003). *The grounded theory perspective II: Description's remodelling of grounded theory methodology*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2007). *Doing formal grounded theory: A proposal*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. New York, NY: Seabury.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4) 597-607.
- Goulding, C. (1998). Grounded theory: The missing methodology on the interpretivist agenda. *Qualitative Market Research*, 1(1) 50-57.
- Gustavsson, B. (1998). *Metod: Grundad teori för ekonomer – Att navigera i empirins farvatten*. (Using the grounded theory methodology in business research), Lund: Academia Adacta.
- Jensen, H. S. (1995). Paradigms of theory-building in business studies. In T. Elfring, & H. S. Jensen (Eds.), *Money. european research paradigms in business studies* (pp. 13-28). Copenhagen, UK: Handelshøjskolens Forlag.
- Laudan, L. (1977). *Progress and its problems*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Laudan, L. (1984). *Science and values*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Laudan, L. (1996). *Beyond positivism and relativism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Locke, K. (2001). *Grounded theory in management research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lowe, A. (1997). Managing to post merger aftermath-default remodeling. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 16(7), 585-589.
- Ödman, P.-J. (1979). *Tolkning, förståelse, vetande: Hermeneutik i teori och praktik*. (Hermeneutics - theoretical foundation and practical implications), Stockholm: AWE.
- Popper, K. R. (1963). *Conjectures and refutations*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Popper, K. R. (1972). *Objective knowledge: An evolutionary approach*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *The basics of qualitative analysis: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tarski, A. (1933). The concept of truth in the languages of the deductive sciences (Trans. from Polish). (*Prace Towarzystwa Naukowego Warszawskiego, Wydział III Nauk Matematyczno-Fizycznych*). Reprinted in Zygmunt (1995), pp. 13-172; expanded English translation in Tarski (1983), pp. 152-278.

- Tarski, A. (1944). The semantic conception of truth and the foundation of semantics. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4(3), 341-376.
- Wainwright, D. (1997). Can sociological research be qualitative, critical *and* valid? *The Qualitative Report*, 3(2). Retrieved from: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-2/wain.html>
-

Author Note

Lars-Johan Åge, Ph.D, is a researcher at Stockholm School of Economics. Having practical experiences of sales management, his areas of interests are sales and sales management. His dissertation thesis was a Grounded Theory study of complex selling processes in contemporary industrial markets. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to his E-mail: ljg@hig.se

Copyright 2011: Lars-Johan Åge and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Åge, L.-J. (2011). Grounded theory methodology: Positivism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(6), 1599-1615. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-6/age.pdf>
