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The Conflicts between Grounded Theory Requirements and Institutional Requirements for Scientific Research

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Abstract

The authors examined the conflicts between grounded theory (GT) requirements and institutional requirements for scientific research such as they were experienced by researchers and students. The overview of how GT was originally conceived served as background to the analysis of the problems GT users often faced when they submitted research projects to academic or granting committees. Three especially contentious aspects that arose from the data were discussed: the circularity of the general research method, the suspension of references to theoretical frameworks, and theoretical sampling. Participants to this study have explored some possibilities to overcome those conflicts.

Keywords

Methodology, Grounded Theory, Scientific Research, and Conflicts

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The Conflicts between Grounded Theory Requirements and Institutional Requirements for Scientific Research

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The authors examined the conflicts between grounded theory (GT) requirements and institutional requirements for scientific research such as they were experienced by researchers and students. The overview of how GT was originally conceived served as background to the analysis of the problems GT users often faced when they submitted research projects to academic or granting committees. Three especially contentious aspects that arose from the data were discussed: the circularity of the general research method, the suspension of references to theoretical frameworks, and theoretical sampling. Participants to this study have explored some possibilities to overcome those conflicts. Key Words: Methodology, Grounded Theory, Scientific Research, and Conflicts

As O'Connor, Netting, and Thomas (2008) mentioned, there has been an ever-expanding use of grounded theory and a general increase of the development of new qualitative technologies and perspectives. Because the qualitative designs have become so diverse, the application of quality and rigor standards have become an increasing challenge (Lincoln, 1998; O'Connor et al.; Patton, 2002; Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005). The review of dissertation abstracts by O'Connor et al. has confirmed their suspicion that Grounded Theory (GT) is being used in many different ways:

some researchers are using classical grounded theory as originally conceived, others are using grounded theory to establish deep meanings, others are using constant comparison methods without developing theory, and still others are using the words *grounded* or *grounding* without engaging in grounded theory research at all. (p. 42)

The authors argue that it makes it difficult to assess quality of research if reviewers are left without guidance or criteria to make judgments. From positivist or objectivist to interpretivist or subjectivist assumptions, the way GT is used should be very different. It appears clear that "the extension of the traditional, classical grounded theory design to respond to more postmodern developments has created a good deal of confusion about what is 'good' grounded theory research" (O'Connor et al., p. 42). It is not our purpose to discuss legitimate GT, the evolution of GT, or criteria to evaluate GT. Of course, though, the conflicts between institutional criteria and those of GT are nourished by the confusion on what GT is. Knowing this, we wish to understand these conflicts and the strategies researchers and students use to overcome them.

Method¹

In order to understand the problems encountered by researchers and graduate students when choosing to use the grounded theory methodology we collected five types of data: (a) an analysis of scientific texts including theses and research reports in French; (b) two focus groups (one in Québec and one in Europe); (c) semi-structured interviews; (d) email interviews, and (e) informal interviews with researchers and graduate students.

More specifically, we analyzed 66 Canadian theses and research reports and 18 from Europe. The focus group in Québec was organized at Université Laval and the one in Europe took place at Université Libre de Bruxelles in Brussels. We invited Francophone graduate students writing a thesis for which they are using the GT method to those focus groups. Most of them didn't know each other. In Québec, we asked many professors if they had graduate students who used the GT method. We invited them and their students to participate in a focus group. In Brussels, we organized the focus group within a seminar organized for students and professors using the GT method. Seven students and four professors participated in the focus group in Québec and five students and three professors in Europe. Because we met only with Francophone researchers and graduate students from Québec and Europe, our results may only concern Francophones in North America and Europe. In further research projects, we wish to interview Anglophones and researchers from other countries. More research of this type will have to be done with Anglophones in North America, in Europe and in other parts of the world. Interviews in French using email were organized with twelve participants who discussed particular aspects of different problems they faced.

In order to study the problems GT users face, we used the traditional GT method that is characterized by the circularity of the general research method, the suspension of references to theoretical frameworks, and theoretical sampling. Our research was carried out over a three-year period and data was collected up until May 2008. We analyzed all data as soon as it was available and the subsequent collection episodes were planned and done according to the interim results provided by the first analyses.

The first data collection led us to the analysis of the experience of five researchers who used the GT method. We analyzed all data obtained from semi-structured interviews, informal interviews and email interviews that could allow us to better understand conflicts between grounded theory requirements and institutional requirements for scientific research. After having analyzed these data, we chose theses and scientific articles in order to attain theoretical sampling. The theses and articles were chosen on the basis of their ability to promote a deeper and larger understanding of conflicts between grounded theory requirements and institutional requirements for scientific research. The analysis of the theses and articles therefore lead us further in the theorization and to new questions asked to new participants by email. The new

¹ At all stages of this research project we sought the permission of participants to record them or to use data provided by them, through email or notes we have taken. Permission was given verbally and not in writing, but nevertheless given freely. There was absolutely no risk incurred by participation in the project. We committed ourselves to the strictest confidentiality and took the most stringent measures to ensure it. There is no way to recognize any individual in the publications associated with the research project. Comments cited have been made completely and strictly anonymous.

participants were not necessarily the authors of the theses and articles. After having analyzed the data obtained by these new email interviewees, we chose other participants - according to theoretical sampling - and asked different questions to increase our understanding and to complete our theorization. This means that there were not any criteria such as socio-demographic variables used to choose the new participants. Theoretical sampling, as opposed to statistical sampling, led us to finding answers to questions that were linked to the analyses we had done when reading the data collected to that point. When our theorization seemed complete and a certain saturation seemed inevitable, we organized two focus groups, hoping that the interaction amongst participants would give way to new sayings and developments. What emerged from the focus groups was then submitted to new email interviewees in order to attain in-depth analyses of the problems that had briefly been mentioned during the focus groups.

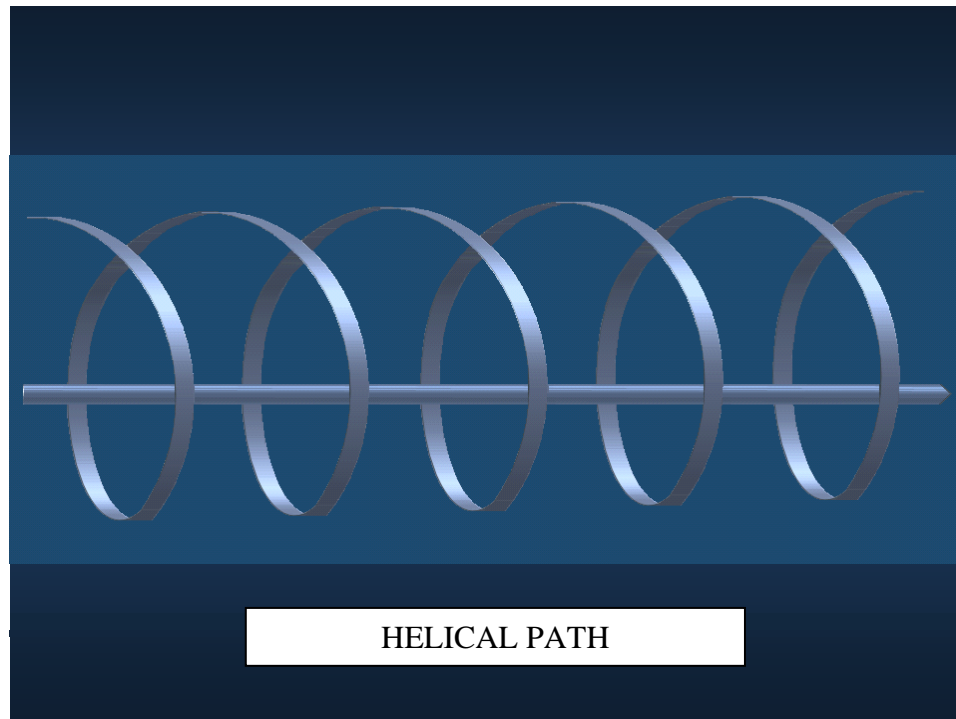
Throughout the analysis process we used what some call classic techniques of Grounded Theory, meaning open coding, axial coding and theoretical coding. This type of developmental analysis is deployed in the dynamic of categorization (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser, 1978; Laperrière, 1997) and densification theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Paillé, 1994; Strauss, 1987). Using the constant comparative method, we sought the variation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 2001; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Laperrière; Schreiber, 2001) and continual validation of progressive analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1998), and that, to the point of theory saturation (Charmaz, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Laperrière; Morse, 1995). In the course of this general process of analyzing empirical data, we arrived at three major categories of conflicts, all included in the main category, which is associated with the inductive character of GT.

These inductive analyses were all done according to two important criteria in GT: suspension of references to theoretical frameworks and theoretical sampling. When it appeared clear that our analyses had saturated, we referred to theoretical literature on GT. The following presentation of the results is therefore the outcome of the linking of these analyses to literature on GT.

Methodological approaches usually follow sequential research steps. With grounded theory, the approach is more like a helical path (curve winding in motion around an axis). The researcher moves forward in the project, constantly returning to the sections already underway, and finds links between these different steps. The aim of this iterative movement of circumvolution is to challenge and enrich the understanding of the phenomena under study. (Plouffe, M-J., 2009)

Using the GT method, it is impossible within the format of a journal article, to mention exactly what results emerged at each step of the method, what new questions the results lead us to ask, and what theorization all this allowed for. This is why we show little empirical data and summarize what participants to the study mentioned in the theorization. We do give, however, a descriptive account of the procedures. In fact, our goal was to theorize. Therefore, when we show empirical evidence, we do so through theorization. Theorization and empirical evidence are consequently interwoven. Therefore, we include illustrative quotes from the data to support the categories or themes. By way of clarification, in the presentation of results we have attempted to

distinguish those that are derived from the empirical analysis of data from those that come from reference to the literature review. It was not always possible to make a clear distinction because in the analysis process itself we were not able to completely put aside all references to literature on GT that are present in our opinions, given that we made reference to these writings in all our research projects over the years.



Results

Interviewees we met in semi-structured interviews told us that the level of difficulty having GT accepted as a method in departments and for grants varied accordingly to the presence or absence of professors working in GT or in a very inductive way in those committees or departments. As a participant put it, “working in GT shows us at what point scientific criteria are only intersubjectively shared and agreed-upon standards.” According to that same participant, “there is no objective rationale to refusing the GT method in departments or granting committees. The underlying epistemological posture of the hypothetico-deductive model is not less interpretative than that of inductively based theoretical propositions.” Some other interviewees mentioned that some solid research traditions such as history have a perspective that looks much like that of the GT method: “they focus on data or sources and don’t apply a theoretical background to them.”

The Inductive Aspect of GT at Center Stage of Our Problematic

Unanimously, participants of the focus groups we moderated had stories to tell regarding all the problems they faced in order to have their projects accepted by academic or granting committees. One participant said that “Academic, granting committee and

ethics committee criteria are greatly influenced by the hypothetico-deductive model.” Others expressed that GT users define GT by comparing it to classic or traditional research methods and procedures.

Many participants mentioned having faced this particular constraint: “I was told, during a doctoral seminar, that it was naïve to think that I would find interesting results while performing a *tabula rasa*”, “I received an evaluation of a paper in a double-blind review process that consisted only of a criticism of the GT method. It was written that I had announced a lot but didn’t deliver much”, “I was told that it was impossible for a graduate student to do research according to grounded theory principles. Professors from my department said that this method was only for experienced researchers because of the absence of a theoretical background and of the difficult suspension of theory.”

When one reads about GT, we learn that when Glaser and Strauss proposed this new approach, they had anticipated that it would be considered radical and that it would face resistance. As a matter of fact, discussing the methods most sociologists used at that time, the two authors mentioned: “these sociologists over-emphasize rigorous testing of hypotheses, and de-emphasize the discovering of what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the substantive area being researched” (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, p. 5).

In 1967, Glaser and Strauss introduced grounded theory in polemical terms as a new way to conduct research in social sciences and in sociology by social scientists. The new principle was discussed with regard to the speculation and deduction-based methods that predominated in the West at that time. With these types of methods, researchers build a speculative, theoretical framework from existing theories before proceeding deductively to apply a theory to empirical data, and thus explaining observed phenomena. This is, in other terms, the hypothetical-deductive model.

Instead of “forcing” data into a theoretical framework, Glaser and Strauss propose inverting hypothetical-deductive logic to construct a data-based theoretical framework. Their perspective becomes an inductive one, their method one of emergence. By this, they mean that the end result of the research process is a theory that has emerged from the data.

According to the researchers we met during our research, it is this fundamentally inductive perspective that conflicts with the intrinsic and institutional requirements one comes across when dealing, notably, with thesis approval committees or grant application evaluation committees. For example, one participant explained that there was immediate opposition in his thesis committee when he said he would use the GT method. Some professors said that it wasn’t a scientific method. Another participant said that his thesis committee allowed him to use the GT method only if he provided hypotheses and a theoretical background. Of course, this means he was allowed to use the GT method if in fact he didn’t use it. One participant was asked to introduce this method to the faculty for professors to vote in order to accept or not the GT method in their department. What became obvious analyzing this data is that it is very easy to work in GT in a department in which many professors already use this method. To the contrary, in a department where no professor uses this method, there is constant and subversive opposition to its use.

The inductive approach of grounded theory presents three especially contentious aspects according to the participants we met: the circularity of the general research method, the suspension of references to theoretical frameworks, and theoretical sampling.

First Issue: The Circularity of the Research Method

The first issue that appeared in the participants' discourses stems from the "circularity" in grounded theory or the alternation and interaction that take place between episodes of data collection and episodes of analysis. In the terms of our participants, the researcher analyzes as soon as the data is available. The subsequent data collection episode is done according to the interim results provided by this first analysis, and so on. The analysis emerges from the data while the data continues to be sampled according to analysis results. We find an equivalent to these sayings in Corbin and Strauss (1990):

In grounded theory, the analysis begins as soon as the first bit of data is collected. By contrast, many qualitative researchers collect much of their data prior to beginning systematic analysis. While this may work for other modes of qualitative research, it violates the foundations of this method. Here, analysis is necessary from the start because it is used to direct the next interview and observations. (p. 6)

According to a participant in our research project,

it was very difficult to have my thesis committee understand why I had analyzed data in order to write my research problem. It was even more difficult to have them understand that my problem would not be finished before the defense of my thesis.

According to Starrin, Dahlgren, Larsson, and Styrborn (1997):

This is where grounded theory is different from traditional ways of working. Usually you collect the data, then analyze them. When collecting theoretical puzzle pieces, you have no idea ahead of time what you will collect. Above all, you do not know where they will lead you. By discovering codes and trying to saturate them by seeking comparable groups, you get a growing feeling of where you should look for more data. (p. 34)

Starting with the usual sequence (data collection, coding, categorization, memo drafting, drafting of statement, etc.), Glaser distinguishes grounded theory by calling it a "process composed of a set of double-back steps. As one moves forward, one constantly goes back to previous steps" (1978, p. 16). Strauss also discusses a "double back-and-forth" (1987, p. 19). He points out that this "return" has a "temporal" aspect (that is, a return to data already collected – old data), while clarifying it as primarily "relational" (that is, there is a continuing relation between analysis and data). More often than not, this "relation" occurs with "fresh" data, but it can also occur with "old" data.

Participants mentioned that the problem here is often viewed as a lack of planning when compared with the sequence normally found in research projects. With the grounded theory, the researcher lets the key issues emerge "rather than to force them into preconceived categories" (Charmaz, 1995, p. 47). In contrast, "traditional research

design requires the investigator to prestructure each phase of the research process to verify or to refute [...] extrant theories” (Charmaz, 1995, p. 47).

Researchers we met in this research project mentioned that they only discover the necessary data as research progresses. They don't have this information ahead of time and, as a result, can plan only for the short term. What's more, they don't know at the start of work which collection and analysis instruments will be most useful during the study. It is this precise issue that participants mentioned being contentious when evaluating research projects. The emergence requirement calls for rudimentary research designs. How the research will unfold cannot be known ahead of time. And this “unknowability” becomes a fundamental requirement in grounded theory, fundamental because it stems from the epistemology of grounded theory.

One participant mentioned that “evaluation committees tend not to approve research projects that lack details (research subjects and goals, data collection instruments, samples, analysis procedures and framework, etc.)”

As a matter of fact, Gilgun (2001) considers that dissertation committees rarely accept proposals that are vague: “To state that the research questions and the design will evolve as research proceeds asks funders to have faith” (p. 359). In the same vein, Charmaz (1995) mentions:

The grounded theorist builds the research as it ensues rather than having it completely planned before beginning the data collection. Similarly, you shape and alter the data collection to pursue the most interesting and relevant material. This approach differs sharply from the traditional research design with its structured instruments that are used in the same way with each research subject. (pp. 47-48)

The participants in this research project identified the specific relation between data collection and data analysis as the most important stake in this issue when using GT. Glaser and Strauss maintain that these operations must be carried out “together”: “They should blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end” (1967, p. 43). In a more recent work, Glaser (2001) talks of a “circling spiral” in which we find both data collection and analysis operations. This circular approach differs from the sequential approach normally found in the research process. In fact, researchers generally collect all necessary data before beginning the analysis. However, with grounded theory, as the participants in our study told us and as is found in the literature, “data collection and analysis are linked from the beginning of the research, proceed in parallel and interact continuously” (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002, p. 155). In other words, the “generation of grounded theory is inherently circular in nature with data collection and analysis taking place concurrently” (Hutchinson & Wilson, 2001, p. 234). Norton (1999) also talks of “cyclical processes” by opposing this method to the linear logic we normally find within research methods. To explain this circularity, we can look to a “continuous and responsive interaction between the collection of data and analysis, with the data directing the coding process and vice versa” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 157).

Second Issue: The Suspension of References to Theoretical Frameworks

Participants in our study discovered, with the grounded theory method, a different way to reference the scientific literature containing theories on social phenomena. They found, more specifically, another way to use existing theories and survey the existing literature. They temporarily suspended their recourse to theoretical scientific literature. As one participant mentioned: “We start by collecting and analyzing data; then, and only then, do we turn to scientific literature to enrich the theory.” What participants meant is that they refused to impose an explanatory framework on the empirical data, a framework preliminary to these data, not based on them. Once more, the fundamental logic is one of emergence. This logic works in opposition to the logic of application and deduction. The younger participants expressed that they were somewhat “liberated” from the obligation to analyze using theoretical frameworks provided by others because of the grounded theory method. For them, this temporary suspension strategy made it possible to avoid contamination from pre-established theories.

The first idea participants try to clarify is that “a-theoretical” research is not the issue. And, as many have expressed, “it is not easy!”, “We are told that we do a-theoretical research all the time!” Another focus group participant went on saying that “the suspension in question is a refusal to apply a priori explanatory theoretical frameworks to collected data. This does not, however, imply that phenomena can be considered by ruling out theoretical references entirely.” What we understand from that data, rather, is that it asks that one make an effort to avoid taking into account one’s awareness of the existence of explanatory theories so as to avoid “forcing” them onto the data.

Learning GT, Glaser says, is to “learn how ‘not to know’ [...] This minimizes forcing to the maximum possible degree” (1998, p. 92). This is an important nuance; it means to suspend “as much as possible.” The grounded theorists we met understand that all analysis implies recourse to theories, but the consensus is to abstain from prejudice and preconception “as much as possible” in order to remain, once again, open to what may emerge from the data and to shape an interpretation founded on these data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998): “Whether we want to admit it or not, we cannot completely divorce ourselves from who we are or from what we know. The theories that we carry within our heads inform our research in multiple ways, even if we use them quite un-self-consciously” (p. 47).

This intellectual effort can be likened to that of jury members asked by a judge to disregard certain data (a statement or an event) when reaching their verdict (Glaser, 1998). Once again, the researcher must carry out this effort “as best he can” (Glaser, 1998, p. 123) with the goal of optimal openness to what may emerge from the data.

In concrete terms, participants mentioned that they privilege this suspension by remaining conscious, first of all, of the “theories” related to their study, notably through the use of a journal, as Strauss and Corbin recommend (1998). According to Schreiber (2001), “What is needed is for the researcher to recognize her or his own assumptions and beliefs, make them explicit, and use grounded theory techniques to work beyond them throughout the analysis” (pp. 59-60). One of these techniques “is to memo one’s pet theories and set them aside for later comparison against the data” (Schreiber, p. 61). According to Glaser (1998): “Suspending one’s knowledge of the literature by clarifying

its assumptions so they would not force the data and doing field notes on one's experience to correct these preconceptions also worked" (p. 122).

We find a similar preoccupation in phenomenology. In fact, in the phenomenological method the researcher works under an *epoché*, that is, in what phenomenologists call a "bracketing" of a judgment or a vision of the world that normally exists when considering phenomena (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Ray, 1994). Ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel speak of a posture of indifference (Coulon, 1987). Strauss speaks of a method "without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests" (Strauss, 1987, p. 5). In other words, the researcher ignores any supposed reality and therefore remains open to experience and to the awareness that is gained from it. In methodological terms, the researchers we met make efforts to clarify or expound (by writing them in a journal or in memos) all their preconceptions, knowledge and understanding concerning the phenomenon under study with a view to facilitating the mental effort that involves suspending judgment while collecting research data from the subjects. According to Hutchinson (1988):

Only by being aware of his own "mind-set" and "bracketing" his own values can the researcher begin to search out and understand the world of others. "Bracketing" refers to being aware of one's personal values and preconceptions and transcending them during the research in an effort to see a situation with a new perspective. (p. 130)

In grounded theory, according to the participants we met, analysis by emergence requires a great deal of openness; this is how bias is avoided... as much as possible. With grounded theory, the danger of bias stems less from the actors involved than from the researcher, especially because of the latter's preconceptions and pre-established theories.

For participants to our study, in dealing with the traditional manner of scientific research, this point becomes contentious because researchers are required to conduct a survey of the literature before starting the actual research. In this perspective, a survey of the literature allows researchers to define the issues, the eventual hypotheses and the framework of analysis. As participants put it, grounded theorists systematically reject any survey of the literature prior to the actual research in an attempt to avoid the temptation to use *a priori* concepts for data analysis. Such temptation is best resisted by not reading these theories before starting the analysis. This is precisely the point of contention that almost all participants we met speak of or mention. According to them, project approval organizations demand a precise theoretical framework, and this type of theoretical framework is difficult to explain. More accurately, the problem lies in trying to explain that the lack of a theoretical framework for the analysis does not make the research "a-theoretical." Once again, the grounded theory researchers we met did not claim the existence of "non-theorized" data, unless in the sense they are given by the actors involved. On this point, in particular, some participants considered that Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967) position themselves within a post-positivist perspective, since they affirm that empirical data have already been interpreted and thus include theoretical components. Accordingly, the participants think that they must remain sensitive to the theoretical components that emerge from the data. This "theoretical sensitivity" calls for the very suspension we are discussing here. The point is to suspend recourse to a priori

explanatory theoretical frameworks in order to remain open to the theorization that emerges from the data as such. In other words, as Gibbs puts it:

Grounded theorists argue that initial data collection and preliminary analysis should take place before consulting and incorporating any research literature. This is to ensure that analysis is grounded in the data and that pre-existing constructs do not shape the analysis and subsequent theory formation. Existing theory is not completely omitted, its integration is only delayed, since it forms an important part of later theory development. (2002, p. 166)

This asks that one studies “an area without any preconceived theory that dictates, prior to the research, “relevancies” in concepts and hypotheses” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 33). According to Beck (1999): “By waiting to complete a literature review, the researcher avoids contaminating the data with preconceived concepts that may or may not be relevant” (p. 217). This involves waiting and, therefore, a temporary suspension. As Glaser wrote:

When the theory seems sufficiently grounded [...], then the researcher may begin to review the literature in the substantive field and relate the literature to his own work in many ways. Thus scholarship in the same area starts after the emerging theory is sufficiently developed, so the researcher is firm on his discovery and will not be forced or preconceived by pre-empting concepts. (1992, p. 32)

Thus, the question is not so much whether or not we will have recourse to scientific literature, but rather of “when?”, “how?”, and “in which purpose?” (Chenitz, 1986, p. 44). Of these questions, the first two are conditional upon the third, more fundamental one. It is therefore necessary to know the purpose of the scientific literature and existing theories when working in grounded theory research.

According to the participants to this study, this does not, however, imply that one can avoid referencing scientific literature. Grounded theory even offers several ways to reference this literature. In the next paragraphs, we present seven different ways to do this. They have been mentioned by participants, but we present them by referring to scientific texts that have been published on GT. This way of doing corresponds to the sixth way to reference literature: the literature is consulted for the purpose of finding “ideas” to compare with those that emerge.

First, the researcher must study the question to make sure his or her research project does not involve reinventing the wheel (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Chenitz, 1986; Morse, 1994).

Second, a survey of the literature can help one clarify the “perspective” from which to study the phenomena, with this perspective corresponding to the theoretical sensitivity provided by a certain discipline (Strauss, 1987), or “school” of that discipline (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). According to Strauss:

Researchers' general knowledge of the literature in their discipline and related ones gives a basic substratum of "the" discipline's perspective, which furthers thinking in characteristic disciplinary modes. This perspectival view provides a sensitivity (psychologists used to call this an apperception mass) to features of the phenomenon under study - or leads initially to study of it because you sense its relevance to the discipline itself. It also leads you to raise some of the kinds of questions that you do about your data. However, this generalized knowledge does not necessarily supply a specific theory from which you make specific deductions in order to depart from that theory. (p. 281)

Grounded theorists assume that professional researchers, unlike student initiates, already have a sound footing in their disciplines. That is why they recommend using disciplinary concepts and perspectives to *sensitize* the researcher to look for certain processes and topics, but not to blind them to other issues. (Charmaz, 1995, p. 49)

This type of disciplinary relationship involves a manner of asking questions that is based on the researcher's general knowledge or culture. Thus, surveying certain literature can be relevant for documenting the disciplinary perspective with which the phenomenon is studied, the understanding being that this elucidation also makes it possible to maintain one's distance *vis-à-vis* this perspective and so remain open to others (Dey, 1999).

Third, a survey of the literature can help define the terms used in describing the research issue (Cutcliffe, 2000). This way, the formulation of the main and secondary issues can benefit from other problematic identified by other researchers in their reports.

Fourth, it is possible – even necessary – to draw “sensitizing concepts” from literature (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2005). According to Schreiber (2001), “A sensitizing concept is an idea or understanding the researcher already has in her or his head about the phenomenon of study. A sensitizing concept may also be one identified from the research, popular, or practice literature that, in the researcher's mind, seems salient” (p. 59). Inherited from the Chicago School, the use of “sensitizing concepts” corresponds to grounded theory's “theoretical sensitivity.” “The researcher does not approach reality as a *tabula rasa*. He must have a perspective that will help him see relevant data and abstract significant categories from his scrutiny of the data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3). “There is a difference between an empty head and an open mind” (Dey, 1993, p. 63). Having an open mind means being curious and sensitive to what may emerge. In the terms of the participants to this research project, this sensitivity means using concepts that allow one to formulate that which emerges from the data. “The sociologist should also be sufficiently theoretically sensitive so that he can conceptualize and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 46). However, one must keep in mind that “the use of sensitizing concepts and perspectives provides a place to *start*, not to *end*” (Charmaz, 1995, p. 49). A survey of the literature can therefore “nourish” theoretical sensitivity (Annells, 1997) by providing the researcher with a relevant vocabulary (Gilgun, 2001). Thus, as the analysis progresses, the researcher selects from his pool of theoretical concepts those that correspond best to what emerges from the data, at the risk of adapting these concepts when they are placed in relation to

other concepts in his or her theory. The researcher does not “force” data to comply with existing theories. On the contrary, he or she uses concepts so theory can emerge from the field and be transformed into scientific discourse. According to Glaser (1978), “It is necessary for the grounded theorist to know many theoretical codes in order to be sensitive to rendering explicitly the subtleties of the relationships in his data” (p. 72). This operation must be performed with caution: “Although it might be advantageous at times for the analyst to use concepts from the literature, he or she should do so with care, always making certain that they are embodied in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 115). According to Schreiber: “Identification of sensitizing concepts should not be an excuse for superimposing one's favourite theory onto the data, however, and the researcher must remain vigilant against this possibility” (p. 59). Concepts, variables, and relationships identified in the literature may linger in the researcher's mind. It is important that he be careful not to close off further analysis by categorizing according to the literature (Chenitz, 1986).

Fifth, a survey of the literature can make it possible to collect data relevant to areas closely related to subjects of the study (Strauss, 1987). In monographs or research reports, we often find data (reproduced documents, segments of interviews, field notes, etc.) that can be analyzed anew, especially from the perspective of grounded theory, in which “all is data” (Glaser, 2001). According to Glaser (1998):

In order to prevent the preconceiving, grabbing effects of the literature search the researcher should turn his review into data collection to be constantly compared as the review is done. The attribute is data collection, not reverence for the authenticity and authority of the printed word and the published author. After all, that is all the literature is, just more data. However accurate or inaccurate the literature data might be, it will be constantly corrected, put in perspective and proportioned in relevance by the constant comparative method. (p. 72)

In other words, scientific literature can also involve data invoked for the same purpose as the documented data to be integrated into the analysis procedure (Chenitz, 1986; Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Sixth, as we did for this research, during the course of analysis – but after some conceptualization has been allowed to emerge – the literature may be consulted for the purpose of finding “ideas” to compare with those that emerge, and thereby enriching the analysis (Glaser, 1978; Morse, 2001; Strauss, 1987). As Glaser mentions: “When the theory seems sufficiently grounded and developed, then we review the literature in the field and relate the theory to it through integration of ideas” (1978, p. 31).

Seventh, a survey of the literature can enrich the discussion of research results. This involves comparing and challenging results with those of studies done in the same field with a view to shedding light on the contributions of the research and the critical challenges it can offer to other theories. Like other researchers, grounded theory researchers have an obligation to discuss their work with the scientific community.

After your theory has begun to integrate and densify to a considerable degree, then supplementary or complementary or conflicting analyses should be grappled with. They should be integrated into your theory if possible (including some of their categories,

conditions, etc.); or criticized in terms of what you are finding; or if their approaches to the phenomena are so different as to lead to quite different places (as when a sociologist reads a study by a political scientist), then that might be discussed also (Strauss, 1987).

Then, a literature review can provide a backdrop against which the findings can be evaluated or confronted (Dey, 1999; Smith & Biley, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This requires that we “examine what is similar, what is different, and why” (Miller & Fredericks, 1999, p. 546). As explained by Morse (1994):

The theory obtained from the literature is a template for comparison so that the researcher may recognize what is new and exciting when something new and exciting is discovered and may recognize instantly when he or she views something that is known. (p. 27)

Also,

Established theory may provide the context in which a researcher's model links the new findings with established knowledge. Established theory recontextualizes the new findings by providing a context in which to fit the new findings, and thus the discipline advances. Finally, established theory provides a mechanism with which to demonstrate the usefulness and implications of the findings. The goal is to be able to place the results in the context of established knowledge, to identify clearly findings that support established knowledge/theory, and to claim clearly new contributions. (p. 34)

Third Issue: Theoretical Sampling

According to the participants to this research project, theoretical sampling implies that the persons, places and situations sought by the researcher when collecting empirical data are chosen on the basis of their ability to promote the emergence and construction of the theory. A distinction therefore exists between theoretical and statistical sampling in which subjects are chosen based on representative criteria and statistical saturation, which is a saturation of statistical variation (the variation within the target population's demographic parameters). The goal of statistical sampling is to generalize results, while theoretical sampling aims to theorize. This difference implies that grounded theory does not work with population or subject samples, but rather with situation samples. As a participant pointed out, “the researcher collects theorizable data, or data that increase understanding of the phenomenon instead of simply documenting it.” Another key difference is that in statistical sampling, sampling identification is done prior to the actual research. In theoretical sampling, on the other hand, the researcher does not know what or how many samples will be needed during the research, or when the sampling will be completed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Schreiber, 2001). As with all other aspects of grounded theory procedure, theoretical sampling is constantly adjusted to what emerges during the research project.

In the terms used by the participants to this research project, and using the initial collection episode as an example, the researcher does theoretical sampling by choosing a

“field” on the basis of its theoretical components and within parameters defined by his or her research subject. These parameters are defined from a perspective that calls upon concepts – still very preliminary – that may guide the initial sampling, even if this means they will be replaced by emerging concepts. Next, the results of the progressive analysis continue to determine sample selection.

By the same principle of theoretical sampling – which promotes the approach by emergence – maximum openness is required for data collection instruments, particularly with respect to the way interviews are conducted. Furthermore, and still in keeping with the principle of theoretical sampling, the same situations may be observed several times from different angles (particularly when looking for similarities or contrasts), and the same person may be interviewed several times with different questions, these questions being shaped by the development of the analysis. In this perspective, interviews may vary in length and take on different forms, such as e-mail correspondence, all for the purpose of continuously adjusting questions and instruments to promote theoretical emergence and development.

The specific issue here is that in theoretical sampling, a sample can only be determined as the research evolves. According to several participants to this study, project evaluation committees often require details about samples, such as count, demographic characteristics, etc. The sample count, in particular, may be problematic as evaluation committees demand, in more or less explicit terms, that the sample be representative and probabilistic. Both requirements call for a high sample count. Furthermore, participants mentioned that committees often ask for details about the instruments used in data collection (interview procedures, for example). The grounded theory researcher cannot provide such details until his or her research is completed.

The principles of theoretical sampling are mentioned by all grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Starrin et al., 1997).

Conclusions

In conclusion we present the different solutions that have been proposed by participants to this study. According to participants to this study, the simplest way to solve these problems is to present the project after, or close to, its completion. Some of the researchers we met provide all the methodological details required and in the form of an estimate, like those often approved by evaluation committees.

Another way to reduce the risk of rejection from evaluation committees, mentioned by participants to our study, is to offer a few expected details, such as information about a plausible sample, while remaining aware that theoretical sampling may lead the researcher to a different sample during the course of the study. Some participants suggest that the researcher clearly writes that he/she is open to eventual additions in the sample during the research project without completely modifying the planned sampling. In such cases, sample changes must be justified in the research report. It should be noted that most researchers we met with make these types of changes before justifying them in their reports. This procedure, which consists of giving the evaluation committee what it wants, all the while conducting research without really taking the project presented into account, can extend to other aspects of the project as well, such as

the analysis procedure, main issue, etc. Once again, if methodological processes are thoroughly detailed in the report, demonstrating that such processes were implemented coherently and rigorously, evaluation committees will welcome the fact that changes were introduced into the initial project.

As we mentioned at the beginning of our text, the variety of research projects that claim to use GT without specifying in what way they are doing so or those who use the words *grounded* or *grounding* without engaging in grounded theory research at all (O'Connor et al., 2008) create a confusion on what grounded theory really is. Some participants to our interviews and focus groups mentioned that some academic or granting committees thought that grounded theory resembled the absence of methodology. These participants hence suggested that all GT users show, in their research project, what this approach really is. It should therefore be specified that data collection, theoretical sampling and data analysis – to the contrary of being absent – are constantly adapted all through the research project. The researcher can take the time to show that GT is firstly an epistemological posture and secondly a rigorous methodological tradition by mentioning what will be done with the data once it is collected. To compensate that fact that the sample, the hypothesis, and other methodological information can't be given beforehand, the research can describe more precisely what the methodological process of GT is. Openness and adaptability are important principles of GT and are very different from improvisation or “anything goes.” According to the researchers we interviewed, avenues of compromise exist; one such strategy falls under the heading “theoretical framework” and offers theoretical specifications on the concepts used to define the research issue as well as on the “theoretical sensitivity” with which the issue will be considered. One may also offer plausible details on the various procedures planned while remaining “flexible.”

Finally, we don't think the resistance to GT has much to do with the opposition between qualitative or quantitative methods or even between constructivist or positivist postures, because, as Nguyễn-Duy and Luckerhoff (2007) argue, evaluation of research projects and granting committee decisions don't support the claim that these polarities still exist when evaluating research articles or projects. However, there seems to be as many qualitative researchers as quantitative researchers who don't think it is possible to suspend references to theory. We therefore think that it is this very specific epistemological project of adopting an inductive approach, in particular the suspension of reference to theory that both quantitatively or qualitatively trained researchers juggle with when asked to evaluate research projects. It is because this epistemological project does not fit traditional “good” research criteria that researchers sometimes have difficulty evaluating GT research projects.

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