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Essentials, Accidents, and “Book-Trailers”: A Pragmatic Review of Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice

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Abstract

This review of *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice*, by Anthony Bryant (2017), aims to provide a perspective on the grounded theory method (GTM) from a pragmatic worldview. The book offers case examples of dissertations build on GTM. Bryant speaks about research in general, describes the development and an overview of GTM concepts, and provides step-by-step examples for practicing GTM. In this book review I, the reviewer, offer personal reflections as a novice researcher to GTM and pragmatism. I provide two “book-trailers” of the book that identify highlights of the book for me.

Keywords

Grounded Theory Method, GTM, Pragmatism, Anthony Bryant, Book Review, Qualitative Research

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Essentials, Accidents, and “Book-Trailers”: A Pragmatic Review of *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice*

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This review of Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice, by Anthony Bryant (2017), aims to provide a perspective on the grounded theory method (GTM) from a pragmatic worldview. The book offers case examples of dissertations build on GTM. Bryant speaks about research in general, describes the development and an overview of GTM concepts, and provides step-by-step examples for practicing GTM. In this book review I, the reviewer, offer personal reflections as a novice researcher to GTM and pragmatism. I provide two “book-trailers” of the book that identify highlights of the book for me. Keywords: Grounded Theory Method, GTM, Pragmatism, Anthony Bryant, Book Review, Qualitative Research

Choosing the Book

I am pursuing a Ph.D. in the field of marriage and family therapy. Before I began reading *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice* by Anthony Bryant (2017), I had one qualitative research course, in which I practiced conducting grounded theory research for the first time. I knew only the definitions of basic grounded theory concepts; hence, my knowledge about grounded theory was elementary. I was at the stage of exploring a method for my dissertation and I was considering using the grounded theory method (GTM). To educate myself, I looked at available literature that could help me understand GTM better. My options seem to be countless, which is great in one hand but challenging on the other. As a young researcher, I did not know where to start so I decided to narrow my approach by relying on two personal preferences. The book must provide an overview of the theory and the book must be available in electronic form as this is my preferred way to read the book (even though I read both electronic and paper versions in preparation for writing this book review). I then learned about an opportunity of writing this book review which helped me to settle on this book from few options remaining.

First Impressions

I found the design and style of the book enjoyable and convenient. The size of the book allowed me to place it comfortably in my purse and the book’s white pages and minimalistic design was pleasant to my eye. I appreciate that the book is available in both paperback and electric format (ibooks). Having an electronic version is my personal preference, as I can: use a variety of highlighting options; change to the font that would best serve in different lighting contexts; click on a link provided by the author to get into a website with information, rather than typing it from the paper version into the computer; make my computer read the text to me out loud; adjust the size of the text; use the “find” option when searching for something particular; and most importantly, access it on my phone, where it is more accessible.

Anthony Bryant does a great job of summarizing the content of his book in its title: *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice*. It is about

“grounded theory” concepts. The author describes “theorizing” as an ongoing research process, rather than something that can reach an end point, hence “theorizing” rather than “theory.” The author holds a “pragmatic” worldview and provides case examples of applying grounded theory in research practice. Bryant demonstrates the importance of being clear, direct, and concise, and at the same time, he provides a rich amount of information throughout the book. However, after reflecting on my experience of reading the book, I would name the book: *Pragmatism in Research Practice: Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing*. I would do so because the *Pragmatism in Research Practice* seems to me to be the main focus of the book, so this would give me a more honest interpretation of what the book is about.

The author educates the reader about complexities of the grounded theory method while maintaining simplicity and clarity in his ideas. He shares with the reader his thinking patterns and how he would describe something before he actually describes that something, which makes it easier to follow his train of thought. He speaks in an academic yet simple way, so that readers like me, for whom English is a second language, are able to follow the development of his ideas. What helped me the most is that Anthony Bryant provides a generous amount of helpful tables, boxes, figures, and bullet points in each chapter. Additionally, at the end of each chapter he summarizes key points from the chapter, which is sometimes supported by exercises that aim to help the reader learn from practice. All these tools help clarify the author’s messages. The author provides step-by-step instructions and how-to tips on applying GTM in practice with case examples, which I found valuable.

I read the book cover to cover and it worked for me. However, the book is designed in a way that the reader can begin reading this book from any chapter and not feel lost. This is especially beneficial to researchers who are more familiar with GTM ideas and are looking for particular information. It helps any reader that Anthony Bryant speaks from experience and poses both theoretical and practical knowledge. Yet he does not make this book about himself. Rather, as a true leader and mentor, he utilizes examples from around him and conveys the message that the reader is capable of doing it too. I think this book could be valuable to a wide range of audience, including as social workers, community workers, teachers, and other professionals.

Content Overview

Bryant divides the book into four parts. Within those four parts, the author provides information on how to begin, proceed, and complete a research project based on grounded theory method. In the first part, he speaks about research in general. He then describes the development and an overview of GTM concepts. In the third part, Bryant goes into details about applications of the method, such as process, procedures, and products. In the conclusion, the author explores variations of grounded theory method research, such as its relations with “Big Data,” alternative approaches to coding and modeling, a Pragmatist method, good research practices, experiences of his students in applying GTM, and evidence of “pre-Glaser and Strauss” applications of grounded theory method.

The author is ambitious that in one book, he aims to review GTM concepts, provide examples of GTM practice, and discuss GTM from the worldview of pragmatism. I both appreciated and was taken aback by the amount of information produced by that ambition. I found the rich amount of the information beneficial because I felt well equipped with a diversity of knowledge and I was guided to where I could find additional information if needed. I was also taken aback because sometimes I felt overwhelmed with the amount of information, and rather than growth, I felt intellectually stuck at times.

I view this book as a middle ground in a literature review of GTM. It provides in depth and general applications of GTM concepts, so it is more than introductory. Yet, in order to be

more informed researcher, I would read other books whose authors hold different epistemologies to be more informed on grounded theory method variations.

Throughout the book, Bryant describes GTM from a pragmatic worldview. He shares his epistemology, ideas, and biases. Based on those ideas, he provides tools for both novice researchers and evaluators/gatekeepers on how to present and evaluate research based on GTM. He describes challenges that researchers face at different levels of the research process and successfully demonstrates pragmatic applications of GTM in practice. In the same way, he encourages the reader to conceptualize GTM from the pragmatic worldview.

If I would read this book again as a novice reader, I would begin with chapters 3 and 4, as they helped me conceptualize GTM and gave me the foundation to continue exploring the GTM. Those chapters helped me understand GTM ideas and helped me understand the author's stance on GTM practice. In my opinion, chapters 1 and 2 are too theoretical. Bryant (2017) stated, "I wish to stress the actual process of *doing* research, rather than wrestling with the idea of research as an abstract" (p. 51). He urges researchers to be pragmatic and practical, rather than theoretical. Yet, paradoxically, Bryant begins the book by talking about broad theoretical ideas.

About the Author

Anthony Bryant is teaching undergraduate and post-graduate students in the U.S. and internationally. He shares his personal experience of collaborating, writing, and teaching on research methods. Bryant is well informed in both practice and theory. He shares his personal experience working with researchers interested in utilizing GTM and identifies challenges that researchers who plan to utilize GTM face.

The author recommends the novice researcher begin reading the book by familiarizing themselves with case examples of GTM, while more experienced readers might want to look into Pragmatist aspects of the book first. The author also recommends to supplement researchers' reading with other literature on GTM, particular *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006 & 2014) by Kathy Charmaz. While reflecting on that book's goals, Bryant (2017) expressed:

My intention in writing this book is to offer a series of chapters that deal with the background to the method, details of the techniques it encompasses, and some examples of how it has been used, drawing on the experiences of some of my successful and highly accomplished doctoral students who have used the method as part of their research. (p. xiii)

I think author was able to successfully accomplish this.

About the Reviewer

This book is about a topic that I decided to study, what I decided to pay attention to, what I decided to ignore, and my previous experiences. My review of this book is also based on my abilities to comprehend and process the information. This book review speaks about me as a researcher as much it speaks about the book itself. Therefore, I encourage the reader of this book review to be critical of my opinions and viewpoints and do not think of them as an ultimate truth.

Before I read this book, I identified my goals and biases for myself about grounded theory method that I was curious to strengthen or disapprove. For instance, when I began reading the book, I looked for convenience. I was not looking to spend too much time on this

project and I knew that I would judge the book based on how easy it would be for me, a person for whom English is a second language and an academic looking for tips and resources that would help me during my dissertation process.

I was reading this book with a hope that it will provide me with a fresh and critical view on current practice and theory, which I feel I received. I assumed that the GTM is highly respected in a variety of fields. Therefore, if I would decide to use this method, I would not experience many drawbacks from the academic community. I was surprised to learn about the amount of criticism of GTM. However, I also learned about ways to defend GTM, which helped me to sustain my confidence in the method. My last presupposition about GTM was that it prioritizes the worldview of the researcher over the population being studied, which was quickly disproved.

I did not know much about GTM before I began reading this book. I felt lost at the beginning, then felt pleasantly confused by the middle, and confidently informed by the end of the book. I wish I was more informed about some ideas and concepts before I begin reading this book as that would help me better understand the author from the start. I felt more prepared reading Bryant after I read an overview of GTM and pragmatic epistemology in the introductory textbook by John Creswell and Cheryl Poth (2017), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (4th Edition). I think other general textbooks on qualitative research could also be helpful. The main point is to have a brief overview of the grounded theory method and Pragmatic epistemology so that the reader can be freely immersed in the theoretical details on the method.

Book-Trailers

In the same way a movie blockbuster invites you to watch a movie trailer to help you make a decision about watching the whole movie or not, I created a book version of a trailer—a “book-trailer”—so you could make a decision whether you would like to read the whole book. Below are two book-trailers. In the first book-trailer, I took one sentence from each chapter (20 chapters total) that I found most appealing to me. In the second book-trailer, I offer a quick overview of a part from chapter 4 (pp. 103-111), in which the author encourages his readers to distinguish between *accidental* and *essential* properties of GTM. Remember, me pointing out those sentences from chapters, and points from a part in one chapter, speaks equally to what I pay attention to as to what Bryant tried to convey.

Book-Trailer 1

Chapter 1: “Research has to be understood as a social activity—*doing research*—with constant reminders that it is almost always something done by more than just one investigator” (p. 10).

Chapter 2: “More critically, [Popper] was arguing that the intellectual proof of a theory cannot be based on *verification* because it is far too easy to see confirmation if that is all one is looking for” (p. 49).

Chapter 3: “But in practice research is carried out for a number of reasons, which may include the necessity to earn a living and gain funding, to be linked to one’s employment, or to develop from a deeply felt commitment, or all three” (p. 64).

Chapter 4: “Novice researchers and those who perhaps lack confidence in some aspects of research practice can all too easily, and understandably, resort to following *what it says in the textbook*, disregarding or evading the complexities of the research itself” (p. 91).

Chapter 5: “The key innovation with coding in GTM is that it begins only after the initial phase of data gathering; the codes are derived from the data rather than being set up and used to direct the data gathering itself” (p. 131).

Chapter 6: “In much of the GTM literature it is implied that a lone researcher carries out the coding across the entire research project, but of course even in the original studies this was not the case” (p. 134).

Chapter 7: “In order to illustrate [GTM process], this chapter focuses on a highly condensed example of GTM modeling and conceptualizing” (p. 141).

Chapter 8: “Innovative insights arise precisely from someone seeing things differently, based on a different set of preconceptions, and not because they have no preconceptions” (p. 150).

Chapter 9: “Coding in GTM is far from a simple exercise in ‘extraction’; rather it is based on a systemic process of categorization, which as Charmaz points out is not a linear process but one that requires considerable thought, interpretation, and consideration on the part of the researcher” (p. 185).

Chapter 10: “To start with, compose the memos in any manner that seems useful and appropriate—they need only be accessible to you, although you may also find it useful to share them with your peers or advisors” (p. 209).

Chapter 11: “It is important to understand that codes should not be judged in terms of “correctness” but rather their “usefulness,” explanatory power, and conceptual reach” (p. 228).

Chapter 12: “Unfortunately the full import of [the term theoretical saturation] definition has been misunderstood so that it is often assumed that saturation centers on the *data* rather than the *properties* of categories” (p. 250).

Chapter 13: “Given the stress that Glaser and Strauss placed on GTM as a process of developing new theoretical insights, and also noting Strauss’s background in Pragmatism it is not surprising that there is now a growing recognition that although the process of induction certainly has a role in GTM, it is abduction that needs to be understood as a far more important—indeed *essential*—aspect” (p. 269).

Chapter 14: “In 2012 I decided to undertake a project to investigate GTM research papers using GTM as my method” (p. 283).

Chapter 15: “In building a theory, researcher can and should use their own experiences, the experience of others, and existing literature and theories” (p. 302).

Chapter 16: “In her paper for the *First Monday* issue centering on Big Data, Annett Markham offers a refreshing critique of the term, invoking the work of Geoff Bowker who argued that the term ‘raw data’ is an oxymoron, and Clifford Geertz who is quoted to the effect that ‘what we call our data are really *our own constructions of other people’s constructions* of what they and their compatriots are up to’ (2013, quoted section 4, emphasis added)” (p. 323).

Chapter 17: “Yet if we move away from ‘the metaphysics of the real,’ and instead adopt the Pragmatist view that theories and concepts are best considered in terms of their usefulness rather than their truthfulness, a whole host of features of GTM appear in a far clearer light” (p. 341).

Chapter 18: “Table 18.1 offers a summary of some of the criticisms of the method, and the ways in which they should be assessed and brought to bear on specific writings—aimed both at assisting researchers in presenting their proposals and their finding, and at evaluators/gatekeepers in assessing such submissions” (p. 353).

Chapter 19: “Taken together, [the four accounts of his former PhD students using the grounded theory method] demonstrate that there is no one correct way of using GTM,

but with developing methodological and theoretical sensitivity the GTM researcher can produce insightful and innovative findings” (p. 365).

Chapter 20: “But to what extent can Darwin himself be considered as a grounded theorist?” (p. 383).

Book-Trailer 2

Bryant does not prioritize one method of GTM over others. Rather, he speaks about grounded theory method as a family of methods, which includes: “pure” GTM (Glaser, 1992); coding paradigm (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); the constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006, 2014); and the pragmatist approach described by the author. This inclusion of the worldviews is one way the author conforms to his identified epistemology of pragmatism. He accepts all ideas that serve a useful function and rejects all that do not. Bryant shared that all his predecessors had great ideas and some of those ideas are still useful today (essential), while others he offers to disregard as no longer applicable (accidental). He points out that those “accidents” in the method should be addressed and corrected as they are small parts in the process. He believes that the method as a whole should not be discounted due to those accidents.

According to Bryant, the method should not be judged by its “purity” but rather fitted into practical contexts. He thinks that theoretical stagnation prevents practical progress. Hence, every method could benefit from reassessment of its essential and accidental variables. I think this is why the author found it significant to talk about the model through examples of the work of his students because their work represents practical rather than theoretical applications of the model. Those case examples of GTM applications demonstrate the diversity of topic, approaches, and areas where GTM is useful. In this way, the author emphasizes the flexibility and usefulness of the method in a large arena.

Here is the summary of the *accidental* and *essential* properties of the GTM in bullet points:

Accidents

1. “The method being seen as inductive” (p. 103).
2. “The injunction against engagement with the literature at the outset of the research” (p. 104).
3. “The researcher should shed all preconceptions” (p. 104).
4. The idea that “no existing research” in the area of study is possible (p. 105).
5. The use of an “emergence from the data” metaphor (p. 105).
6. “The positivist or objectivist stance” (p. 105).
7. “The lone researcher” (p. 110).

Essences

1. “Conducting data collection and data analysis simultaneously” (p. 108).
2. “Generating theory is a prime objective of GTM” (p. 108).
3. “Purposeful/convenience sampling followed by theoretical sampling” (p. 108).
4. Theoretical saturation is reached when further data does not add to the existing categories and concepts.
5. Familiarity with the existing literature.
6. The “fit,” “grab,” “work,” and “modifiability” criteria clarify ways in which the developing theory needs “to be validated against the context from which” it derived (p. 108).

7. "Open to serendipity" (p. 109).
8. "Pragmatism" (p. 109).

Additional Essential Points Identified by Charmaz (2006, 2014):

9. "Analyze actions and processes rather than themes and structure." (p. 109)
10. "Use comparative methods." (p. 109)
11. "Draw on data (e.g., narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories." (p. 109)
12. "Develop indistinctive abstract analytic categories through systemic data analysis." (p. 109)

Reflection

After reading this book, I feel confident in conceptualizing grounded theory method ideas, appreciating pragmatic epistemology, and feeling competent in what direction I should take if I end up using GTM in my dissertation. I feel that the author supplied me with a fresh literature review, helped me sort a large amount of literature, and kept me focused on what is significant to know to be familiar with the theory. I feel informed about GTM steps in conducting research. Reading this book provided me with knowledge about how to begin, proceed, and complete research based on GTM. I am familiar with overall goals of the GTM, its history, and practical applications. I appreciated examples of GTM provided by author, especially personal recommendations from his Ph.D. students. I understood and can relate to the author's position on criticism about GTM (e.g., essences and accidents of GTM), which means that he was able to convey his ideas to me so clearly that they eventually became my own. Although I am still uncertain about using GTM for my own dissertation, I feel that reading this book helped me clarify many questions related to my dissertation and provided guidance. I was also pleased to learn about pragmatism and could relate to its ideas. I would recommend this book for someone who is looking into applying GTM in their research practice, no matter what epistemology they hold.

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